

*Jonathan Bennett*

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A  
Study of  
Spinoza's  
*Ethics*

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# Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	1
	<i>Abbreviations</i>	3
<b>1</b>	<b>A CHARACTER SKETCH OF THE <i>ETHICS</i></b>	7
	1. The place of the <i>Ethics</i> in Spinoza's corpus	7
	2. Why is it called 'Ethics'?	9
	3. How parts 1 and 2 fit in	13
	4. 'Demonstrated in geometrical order'	16
	5. The hypothetico-deductive method	20
	6. What are the data?	23
	7. The invalidity of the demonstrations	25
<b>2</b>	<b>THE CAST OF SPINOZA'S MIND</b>	29
	8. First aspect: rationalism	29
	9. Second aspect: theism	32
	10. Third aspect: naturalism about mankind	35
	11. Fourth aspect: conceptual minimalism	38
	12. What is dualism?	41
	13. Fifth aspect: dualism	47
	14. Psychology and logic	50
<b>3</b>	<b>THE ONE SUBSTANCE DOCTRINE (1)</b>	55
	15. Substance in the rationalists	55
	16. Attributes in Spinoza	60
	17. No shared attribute	66
	18. Spinoza's monism: the official argument	70
	19. Are there more than two attributes?	75

## CONTENTS

<b>4</b>	<b>EXTENDED SUBSTANCE (1)</b>	81
	20. The need for partless substances	81
	21. Why space has no parts	85
	22. Space as substance	88
	23. Bodies as modes	92
	24. Where does Spinoza say that space is substance?	97
	25. What good is the field metaphysic?	103
	26. Motion and rest	106
<b>5</b>	<b>NECESSITY (1)</b>	111
	27. The commitment to allowing contingent truths	111
	28. The commitment to ruling out contingent truths	114
	29. What does Spinoza think about contingency?	119
<b>6</b>	<b>THINKING SUBSTANCE (2)</b>	125
	30. The structure of Part 2	125
	31. Parallelism	127
	32. A better case for parallelism	131
	33. Panpsychism	135
	34. Spinoza's explanation of the parallelism	139
	35. A threat to dualism?	143
	36. The order of explanations	149
<b>7</b>	<b>COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY (2)</b>	153
	37. 'Idea of'	153
	38. Deciding what to believe	159
	39. Ideas as beliefs	162
	40. Error	167
	41. Error, ignorance, and truth-values	171

## Contents

42. Inadequate ideas	175
43. Reason, the senses, and error	182
44. Ideas of ideas	184
<b>8</b> TIME	193
45. Three clusters of temporal concepts	193
46. Number and measure	196
47. <i>Tempus</i> and duration	202
48. Eternity	204
49. The reality of change	207
<b>9</b> GOALS (3)	213
50. The denial of divine purpose	213
51. The denial of all purpose	215
52. Spinoza's substitute for purpose	221
53. A theory of teleology	226
<b>10</b> SELF-PRESERVATION (3)	231
54. Essence and destruction	231
55. The impossibility of self-destruction	234
56. Suicide	237
57. Deriving the self-preservation doctrine	240
58. Other arguments for egoism	246
<b>11</b> AFFECTS (3 and 4)	253
59. Pleasant and unpleasant affects	253
60. Desire as an affect	258
61. Spinoza's list of affects	262
62. Spinoza's account of emotions	267
63. Emotion and belief	271

## CONTENTS

64.	Some theory about how emotions work	276
65.	Strength of emotions	282
66.	Cognition of good and bad	284
<b>12</b>	<b>VALUE (4)</b>	<b>289</b>
67.	The common man's evaluations	289
68.	Spinoza's revisions of value concepts	292
69.	The case for community of interest	299
70.	The guidance of reason	307
71.	Bodily versatility	310
<b>13</b>	<b>FREEDOM (4)</b>	<b>315</b>
72.	Spinozistic freedom	315
73.	The psychology of the free man	317
74.	Spinozistic freedom: its incoherence	324
<b>14</b>	<b>PSYCHOTHERAPY (5)</b>	<b>329</b>
75.	The mind's power over the affects	329
76.	First technique: separating and joining	333
77.	Second technique: turning passions into actions	335
78.	Third technique: reflecting on determinism	337
79.	Reactive attitudes in the <i>Ethics</i>	342
80.	Love towards God	345
81.	Hampshire's Spinoza	347
<b>15</b>	<b>THE LAST THREE DOCTRINES (5)</b>	<b>357</b>
82.	The mind's eternity	357
83.	Intuitive knowledge	364
84.	The intellectual love of God	369
85.	A judgment on the last three doctrines	372

## Contents

<i>Bibliography</i>	377
<i>Index of Persons</i>	383
<i>Index of Topics</i>	386
<i>Index of References</i>	392



## Preface

This book expounds and argues with Spinoza's *Ethics*, in the hope of drawing into the argument philosophers who have not previously brought Spinoza into their work as an energetic collaborator or antagonist. My aim is to tell them what some of his main doctrines and arguments are, and to help them read his text for themselves and use it for their own purposes.

I taught a course on Spinoza in 1952, studied him in a seminar of Stuart Hampshire's in about 1954, and since then have taught at least two courses on him at each of three universities. I have been working towards the present work for a quarter of a century. In a project stretching across such a long period one accumulates too many debts to be fully remembered or properly acknowledged; but I can say that while at Cambridge I was richly helped in my Spinoza work by Michael Tanner, and that at the University of British Columbia Peter Remnant's influence stands out. Although my philosophical education at Syracuse University is in the charge of all my colleagues, the Spinoza work owes most to Bill Alston, Larry Hardin and José Benardete. I have also learned from Syracuse graduate students: I make acknowledgments in the text, but there are doubtless some borrowed ideas in the book which I liked so immediately that I forgot their provenance. I do not attempt to acknowledge the intellectual debts that I know I have to students at Cambridge and UBC.

The work was finally revised during a 1982 Summer Seminar for College Teachers which I directed at Syracuse under the auspices of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am indebted to the NEH for that opportunity, and to the members of the seminar for all they did to encourage, challenge and improve my thinking and writing about Spinoza. The few mentions in the body of the book do not do justice to my debt to Harold Zellner, Roderick Stewart, Jonathan Schonsheck, Stanley Riukas, Anthony Murphy, Phyllis Morris, Richard Miller, Ronald Messerich, Robert Carnes, William Brenner, Jonathan Bordo, and Jesse Bohl. I am also grateful to George Bealer, Edwin Curley, Harry Parkinson and Margaret Wilson for reading and commenting on parts or all of the work.

Although I don't know much Latin, I have not had to rely on earlier translations of the *Ethics* because for about five years I have worked with successive drafts of Edwin Curley's forthcoming English version of Spinoza's works. My greatest single debt is to Curley for giving me access to his translation (see my note on it in the Bibliography) and annotations.

## PREFACE

When I depart from one of his renderings, as I quite often do, it is usually on the basis of an understanding of the text which I got from him in the first place; and it often involves my taking some slight liberty which is permissible in a commentator but not in a translator.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Senate Research Committee of Syracuse University, helped to defray secretarial expenses in producing certain drafts of the book; I am grateful to both. I am also glad to acknowledge that parts of the book have appeared in different form in *The Journal of Philosophy*, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, and *Syracuse Scholar*.

Readers who find slips and inaccuracies of the sort that might be set right on reprinting are asked to tell me about them.

A few dozen small corrections have been made in the second printing.

Syracuse, N.Y.  
November, 1987

J.F.B.

## Abbreviations

In the text I use what is becoming the standard method of referring to items in the *Ethics*—the method according to which '2p7s' names Part 2, Proposition 7, Scholium, and according to which 4d2 names Part 4, definition 2. In a context where there is no possible ambiguity, I sometimes drop initial numerals from references, putting 'p7s' instead of '2p7s'. In these references a comma means 'and'. Thus the expression '5p23,d' refers to Part 5, Proposition 23, *and* its demonstration.

References to passages within long scholia, prefaces, appendixes, et cetera are given through page and line in the Gebhardt edition of Spinoza's works. Thus '1 Appendix 80/9' refers to the passage in the Appendix to Part 1 which *begins* at line 9 on p. 80 of the Gebhardt edition, volume II. Where a reference of this kind is to any work but the *Ethics*, it is given with the volume number first—e.g., 'Letter 4 at IV/14/15'. This system is at last widely usable because Curley's forthcoming edition of the works in English will, happily, provide Gebhardt's page and line numbers in the margin.

In footnotes and Bibliography, I use the following abbreviated names for certain works which are mentioned a number of times:

- |                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Alquié:                | Ferdinand Alquié (ed.), <i>Oeuvres philosophiques de Descartes</i> , vol. 1 (Paris, 1963), vol. 2 (1967), vol. 3 (1973).      |
| Descartes's Principles | Benedict Spinoza, <i>Parts 1 and 2 of René Descartes's Principles of Philosophy, Demonstrated in the Geometrical Manner</i> . |
| Edwards                | Paul Edwards (ed.), <i>The Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> (New York, 1967).   |
| Emendation             | Benedict Spinoza, <i>A Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</i> . I have used Curley's forthcoming translation         |

## ABBREVIATIONS

of this work, and my references are based on his section numbering.

- Essay John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.
- Ethics Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*.
- Grene Marjorie Grene (ed.), *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1973).
- Gueroult Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1968), vol. 2 (1974).
- Hessing Siegfried Hessing (ed.), *Speculum Spinozanum 1677–1977* (London, 1977).
- Kashap S. Paul Kashap (ed.), *Studies in Spinoza: Critical and Interpretive Essays* (Berkeley, 1972).
- Kennington Richard Kennington (ed.), *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza* (Washington, D.C., 1980).
- Linguistic Behaviour Jonathan Bennett, *Linguistic Behaviour* (Cambridge, 1976).
- Loemker Leroy E. Loemker (ed.), *G. W. Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, second edition, (Dordrecht, 1969).
- Mandelbaum Maurice Mandelbaum and Eugene Freeman (eds.), *Spinoza: Essays in Interpretation* (La Salle, Illinois, 1975).
- New Essays G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, translated and

## ABBREVIATIONS

edited by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge, 1981).

Principles

René Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*.

Shahan

Robert W. Shahan and J. Biro (eds.), *Spinoza: New Perspectives* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1978).

Treatise

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford).



# 1

## A Character Sketch of the Ethics

The central topic of this book is Spinoza's one indisputable masterpiece, the *Ethics*. In my first chapter I shall say what sort of work the *Ethics* is, what sort Spinoza took it to be, how it relates to the rest of his work, and in what spirit I intend to approach it.

### §1. *The place of the Ethics in Spinoza's corpus*

1. Setting aside Spinoza's grammar of the Hebrew language and his two works on politics, which I do not find helpful in understanding the *Ethics*, we are left with six substantial items. Four of these were finished or abandoned by the time Spinoza was 31 years old, and the other two occupied him intermittently between then and his death in 1677 at the age of 44.

2. Of the four earlier works, I shall not attend much to the *Short Treatise*. The manuscript of this, written in Dutch by a hand other than Spinoza's, came to light only in the nineteenth century. It seems clear that it stems from Spinoza somehow; but its status is dubious, its content confused, its fit with the rest of his work uncomfortable. These factors and its probable early date make this work a feeble aid to understanding Spinoza's mature thought.

The *Emendation of the Intellect*, a treatise about ways of acquiring knowledge, avoiding error, and vanquishing scepticism, is largely epistemological, although its announced purpose is practical:

After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fears had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as the mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was something which . . . , once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest pleasure.

The discrepancy is explained by the fact that *Emendation* is an unfinished work, presumably abandoned in favour of the fresh start that Spinoza was making at about that time in the *Ethics*, to show that durable happiness may be reached through the cultivation of intellectual virtues—the emendation of the intellect.

Spinoza's practical or ethical aims in the *Emendation* contrast strikingly with the project that launched Descartes into his *Meditations*:

## (1) A CHARACTER SKETCH OF THE *ETHICS*

It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must . . . commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences.

Leon Roth's observation that 'Descartes' ultimate interest was in the "true"; Spinoza's, in the "good" ',<sup>1</sup> captures accurately the contrast between their ultimate targets. But we shall see that on the way to his practical conclusions in the *Ethics* Spinoza traverses oceans and continents of theory—metaphysics, biology, philosophy of mind and of matter—not only because they project into territory that lies directly between him and his practical conclusions, but also because he loved the philosophical problems and his own solutions to them. Much of the present work will be devoted to those discussions, which are some of the most instructive and nourishing things in early modern philosophy.

The *Emendation* is a risky guide to the thought in the *Ethics*—not because it is merely a start, but because it is a false start. Let us remember that Spinoza dropped it and started afresh. Still, the work is not entirely negligible by us: although Spinoza left it unfinished, he did, late in his life, include it with the works he wanted published posthumously.

3. The remaining two early works, unlike any others described in this section, were published during Spinoza's lifetime. They are *Descartes's Principles* and, tacked on as an 'appendix' to that, *Metaphysical Thoughts*. The former work claims to present in Spinoza's way the main content of the first two Parts of Descartes's *Principles*. It throws helpful light on Spinoza's own thinking; but because much of its content is Cartesian doctrine which Spinoza confessedly does not accept, it must be handled warily. So, too, must the *Metaphysical Thoughts* which, although it has Spinoza more often speaking for himself, carries in its Preface a claim to 'express the opinions of Descartes' which are not always Spinoza's. These two works were published only at the urging of friends, one of whom wrote the Preface; most of their content was written originally to help a pupil whom Spinoza would trust with Descartes's ideas but not with his own. Nevertheless, just once in the *Ethics* Spinoza obliquely refers to something in his *Descartes's Principles*, and in §24 I shall show that this reference is brilliantly illuminating.

4. Of the two works that stretch out to the end of Spinoza's life, one is his *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*, a product of labours which extended, albeit with interruptions, across sixteen years. We have no early drafts of the work—an astonishing fact, as versions of it were being read in Holland and in England many years before Spinoza's death. Still, a

1. Roth, *Spinoza*, p. 234.



## § 1 *The place of the Ethics in Spinoza's corpus*

book cannot go through as much revision as this one did without leaving traces of how it developed, and some of these will be mentioned in due course. Also, after Spinoza's death most of his works were published both in the original Latin and in Dutch translations; the Dutch version of the *Ethics* was probably based on an earlier Latin version,<sup>2</sup> and numerous small differences point to changes in Spinoza's thinking.

Further clues come from the other partly late body of work by Spinoza, namely his letters. We have about fifty of these (the numbering runs higher because the standard edition includes letters *to* Spinoza); they spread across the years when the *Ethics* was being written, often replying to questions from friends who were reading drafts of the work. In the first of them (Letter 2), written before *Descartes's Principles* was published, and at about the time of the *Emendation*, it is clear that Spinoza has already promulgated certain of the basic doctrines on which the *Ethics* is founded. So the letters can help us.

Often, however, they are disappointing. When a correspondent confronts Spinoza with a profound, central difficulty in his work, the response is seldom satisfactory. It is often an outright snub, especially towards the end of Spinoza's life; but even in the earlier years, before he became sick, his replies tended to be unsympathetic and evasive. The source of this behaviour is more intellectual than moral, I believe. Spinoza was not at his best in correspondence because his mind, although deep and powerful and tenacious, was rather slow; which may also explain why his best work is the one which occupied him for the longest time.

5. Although Spinoza had at an early stage some of the seminal ideas of the *Ethics*, I am sure it underwent steady changes, mostly of a deepening and broadening tendency, throughout the last third of his short life. We should take the chasm seriously: on the one hand, the works Spinoza finished before he was halfway through his philosophical lifetime; on the other, the great, baffling masterpiece which he had begun on the edge of the chasm, but which, in its present form, is the fruit of its author's maturity.

### §2. *Why is it called 'Ethics'?*

1. The work contains three elements that belong to 'ethics' in some normal sense of that term.

One is a thesis in the metaphysics of morals: there are no properties of goodness and badness that states of affairs can inherently possess, and no properties of rightness or wrongness that can inhere in actions.

The second is an account of what is actually going on when the plain man judges things to be good or bad. Ordinary 'ignorant' people think

2. For a dissenting view see F. Akkerman, 'L'édition de Gebhardt de l'*Ethique* de Spinoza et ses sources', *Raison présente* no. 43 (1977), at p. 43.