

SPINOZA  
ETHICS

哲学

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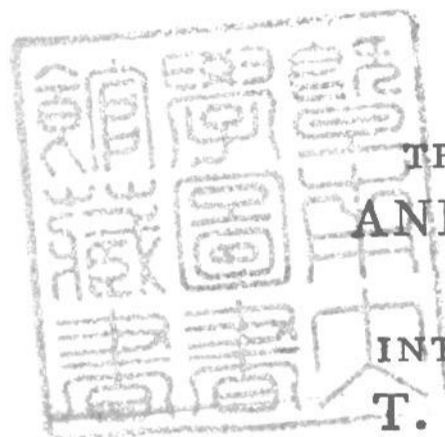
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# Spinoza's Ethics

AND

ON THE CORRECTION  
OF THE UNDERSTANDING

哲学



TRANSLATED BY  
ANDREW BOYLE

INTRODUCTION BY  
T. S. GREGORY



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*EVERYMAN, I will go with thee,*

*and be thy guide,*

*In thy most need to go by thy side*

## BARUCH SPINOZA

Born at Amsterdam in 1632 of an Iberian-Jewish family and naturalized as a Dutchman. Excommunicated for heresy on expressing sympathy with Descartes in 1656, and changed his name to Benedictus de Spinoza. Earned his living grinding optical lenses. Died at Amsterdam in 1677.

## INTRODUCTION

'THE popular philosophy starts from creatures: Descartes starts from mind: I start from God.' These were Spinoza's words reported to Leibniz. Baruch Spinoza was a Jew. His mother's name was Hannah Deborah. He was educated at the Jewish College in Amsterdam where he was born. Excommunicated from the synagogue, he settled among a sect of Anabaptist mystics, who like himself were victims of persecution and students of Descartes. A Jew, an exile, a mystic, and a philosopher, he ground and polished lenses for a living, refused a fortune, and declined a dignified appointment as professor of Heidelberg: he had some devoted friends and many distinguished correspondents and acquaintances. He died of consumption at the age of forty-four.

First and last and always he is a Jew. The Englishman's most accessible introduction to the *Ethics*, his confession of faith, is the Old Testament, in which it is written as follows:

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth: And the earth was without form and void: and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said . . . and there was.

. . . And Moses said unto God, Behold when I come unto the children of Israel and shall say unto them, the God of your fathers hath sent me unto you, and they shall say unto me, What is his name? What shall I say unto them?

And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.

. . . Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

. . . Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me: it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from

thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there. If I make my bed in hell, behold thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me and thy right hand shall hold me.

This last is the song of an exile, such as Spinoza was, not only as excommunicate from the synagogue, but first as a member of it and a child of Abram whose vocation had been, Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house. Spinoza was a Marrano, born of a sect of Spanish Jews, who, forced into Christian baptism, had maintained their faith and practice in secret among the Gentiles. Exiled from his exiled people, Spinoza learned Gentile speech and expounded Descartes, but he was not a Cartesian. His reason for 'demonstrating ethics in geometric order' was profound and theological. It was also derived from his experience. He had pitched and struck his tent in many places and was not contained in any. He was not, like Leibniz, a local resident surveying the universe with domestic prudence. He had no domicile but God. The things he had to say were not idiomatic but universal, and universal by force not merely of logic and method, but of inheritance and circumstance. 'I affirm with Paul,' he said, 'that all things are in God, herein agreeing . . . with all the ancient philosophers and perhaps even with all the ancient Hebrews. Those who think that the argument of the Tractatus rests on the identification of God with nature, taking nature in the sense of a certain mass of corporeal matter, are entirely wrong.'

Yes, indeed! Yet this was the common sense of the word nature, as an anthropomorphic image was a common interpretation of the word God. Even now, so clear an exponent as Mr Hampshire may be confused by Spinoza's simplicity. 'The notion of a Creator distinct from his creation,' says Mr Hampshire, 'contains an evident contradiction, involving as it must the conception of two substances, one the cause of the other.' And so it must if by Creator and creation we mean what these words meant in the 'vulgus philosophicum' and at the same time adopt Spinoza's definition of substance. But in the scholastic philosophy which spoke of a transcendent

creator there was no limit to the number of substances, and in Spinoza's doctrine where there is but one Substance the distinction between Substance and mode is as absolute as the distinction between God and creatures in Jewish or Christian orthodoxy. The 'evident contradiction' comes like most contradictions of confusing different languages.

Again it is by no means safe to translate Spinoza's doctrine as Professor Roth does into such forthright English as the following: 'Divine and natural forces are one. It follows that the order of nature of which man is a part is the order of God, and that its fixed and eternal decrees are the decrees of God. It is no use turning to God by way of appeal against Nature. God *is* Nature.' Amos or the author of the Book of Job would have understood these words, but in modern English their *prima facie* meaning is pantheism or atheism. Pantheism, to be sure, is a mere term of abuse, for a language trained like English in the service of the God of the Hebrews for a thousand years cannot find or make sense in the proposition that God is everything. But atheism, one of the most severe and subtle of world religions, has often used such language. 'A rumour gained currency,' wrote Spinoza, 'that I had in the press a book on God in which I was trying to prove that God does not exist. The story was generally believed.' The belief endured. 'The fundamental principle of the atheism of Spinoza,' said David Hume, 'is the doctrine of the simplicity of the universe and the unity of that substance in which he supposes both thought and matter to inhere.' Hume then summarizes what he takes to be Spinoza's one-substance theory as if Spinoza thought in eighteenth-century English of what an English empiricist would mean by such words as 'substance' and 'universe.' And indeed—*Deus sive Natura*—if God is Nature why not forget the tremendous word so often, so cruelly mishandled, and deal henceforth with Nature in which Homer and Aristotle, Shakespeare and Newton, and for that matter all our appetites and misfortunes have made us at home.

In fact, however, Spinoza's *Ethics* is the voice of a mystical devotion so relentless, a sanctity so pure, that such misconception of it serves only to reveal the scope of its *amor intellectualis Dei*, as if one should complain that the sky was empty because it was cloudless. Most Gentiles demand some



concession to the ancient gods, some particular eidolon or image. Their mixed and disillusioned humanity needs impressions and ideas of great variety and strength. They must be able to accuse their faith and to be accused by it, to feel that it is something odd and alien inciting them to conversion and reform. But to understand the *Ethics* it is necessary first to realize that Spinoza believed in God and loved God in unperturbed singleness of life, and that this book was written not as instruction or apology but as prayer. *Nihil in sensu quod non prius in Deo*. That is why the book is or seeks to be tautological. It is Spinoza's apprehension of the simple and simultaneous.

The key to his language is the formula, esse = agere, to be is to act. God is Pure Act. The actual is divine. Whereas in common speech, the word God ranks as a noun so that theologians will make Him the subject or object of quite ordinary predicates with astonishing facility, Spinoza thinks of God rather as a verb and of all existent things as modes of this activity. The world is not a collection of things but a conflagration of Act whose innumerable flames are but one fire. With this Actual theology we shall avoid the more persistent misjudgments of his ethical doctrine. To begin with, we shall recognize that it is ethics not metaphysics. We shall see that this ethical doctrine is religious, that it is concerned with purification and with what it means to be pure in heart. It is of the essence of such a work not to describe this purity but to be pure: its method and matter are one and the same. Spinoza's doctrine of God and ethical intention imply his 'geometric order' and equally refuse empirical description. They give no hostages to what St Paul called the 'mind of the flesh'; they abhor nouns and nominal thinking. The strength of an ethical geometry lies not in its cogency of reason but in the integrity of its liturgical pattern. Spinoza does not set himself like Aquinas to meet and answer objections; he expresses without distraction a whole insight, an absolute certainty, so whole and absolute that they are not his own or any man's. We must begin at the beginning. In the beginning is God.

Normally we think with names, for a name is the eldest form of abstraction. It reduces thinking to a routine of classification and distinguishes one thing from another on

the basis of a pre-established harmony. Thus a nominal philosophy beholds a world of monads, of wholly objective objects, and as Leibniz says: 'C'est justement par ces Monades que le Spinozisme est détruit.' But there is no Spinozism. Spinoza refuses abstraction. It was his paradox. All meaning is what God means and God is actual. Now, the cosmic liturgy would be well enough as a spectacle to be watched at a distance, and the name-language of ordinary speech makes us spectators rather than players. It gives us 'extrinsic denominations, relations, and circumstances which are far removed from the inmost essences of things.' We can see from our enclosure without sharing the action. Thus in a mood of curious expectancy the spectator may picture his mind as a blank sheet of paper, or perhaps even as an empty warehouse waiting to be 'furnished,' as Locke puts it, with experience. 'The next thing to be considered,' says Locke, 'is how bodies produce ideas in us; and that is manifestly by impulse, the only way which we can conceive bodies to operate in,' and 'it is evident that some motion must be thence continued by our nerves or animal spirits, by some parts of our bodies, to the brain or the seat of sensation, there to produce in our minds the particular ideas we have of them.' Evident indeed! We watch the furniture carried into the warehouse. But what is evident? Why, that if you push things, they are pushed, that if you write on paper, there will be writing on it!

This naïve empiricism, however, served the purpose of its invention, to save the thinker's integrity by keeping him separate from his thoughts. It committed him to nothing, commanded him not at all, left him free to make such contract as he pleased, and gave him at least an illusion of being master of his soul and his property. He was greater than his thoughts, greater than the events that 'produced them in his mind.' Such was the profound conviction of liberal Calvinism which encouraged Locke to write his *Essay* and constrained Spinoza to withhold his *Ethics* from publication. And so, like the great houses of Amsterdam, God and the universe are built to the specification of my necessities, interests, and uses. Indeed the most significant name of Godhead is 'Author of my being.' 'From these premises it follows,' says Spinoza, 'that men think themselves free inas-

much as they are conscious of their volitions and desires and, as they are ignorant of the causes by which they are led to wish and desire, they do not even dream that these causes exist. It follows that men do all things with an end in view, that is they seek what is useful. . . . They are bound to conclude on the analogy of the means which they are in the habit of providing for themselves, that there exists some ruler or rulers of nature endowed with human liberty who provided everything for them and made all things for their especial benefit.'

This utilitarian structure Spinoza rejects as the prophets denounced idolatry. We are not names but acts, not spectators but part of the game, and we exist as we play it. We do not think from noun to noun forging a chain of logical or mechanical connections between each. Nor are we blank entities waiting to be furnished, nor self-contained objects that collide with one another. We are acts of God or modes of an eternal intellection whose activity knows no limit. We start from *Causa sui* whose definition is its existence—I AM THAT I AM—from Substance which is in itself and is conceived through itself from Free Being which exists because it exists and acts as it acts because it is what it is. Such definitions are obviously not the datum of a philosophical inquiry, but the terminus of a religious search. They mean God or nothing, and nothing but God. No philosopher can begin from the postulate that the matter of his inquiry cannot be conceived except through itself. If Spinoza does not start from creatures, neither does he start from mind. This is the language of the *via remotionis* travelled by mystics in faith which is 'darkness of the understanding,' for the absolute good, as Plotinus reminds us, cannot be spoken or written. 'Thou shalt not make unto thyself the likeness of any form,' says the God of Sinai.

Like the tribes in the wilderness or exiles by the rivers of Babylon, like Job listening to the whirlwind or Elijah to the stillness or Jacob wrestling with the Unseen, Spinoza reached the quietus of empirical reason after experience had convinced him that common occurrences are vain and futile. 'I at length determined to search out whether there were not something truly good and communicable to man by which his spirit might be affected to the exclusion of all other things.'

A strange search it seems until we recognize that it is the aspiration of a religious:

Whom have I in heaven but thee?

And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.

This 'exclusion of all else' is the definition of his people's exodus and exile, for their God is a jealous God. 'Ye have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bare you on eagles' wings and brought you unto myself.' Experience of the Hebrew, vigil of the 'patient eremite,' but also grace of the martyr, and from his childhood Spinoza remembered how 'Juda, surnamed the Believer, in the midst of the flames, when he was thought already to be dead, began to sing the psalm, To thee O God, do I lift up my soul.'

Exile, martyrdom, oppression, the external circumstance of sacred history were also the present and aggressive condition of contemporary Europe. The Scriptures, as Spinoza translated them, commented on the visible world as present not past. 'Hear ye indeed but understand not. . . . Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant and the houses without man.' Prophetic denunciations of human stupidity are never out of date; they were never more apposite than in Spinoza's Europe, wasted as no civilization had ever been wasted by perverse and 'inadequate ideas.' Such remedies as found favour with the prudent appeared rather to fix a norm of war than to propose reconciliation. God had become a name of carnage, theology a permanent controversy, glory was arrogance, and faith persecution. Where every formula was a *casus belli*, every cause was a contention and every reform an injustice. The industrious optimism with which Leibniz prescribed for this state of things reads like the prattle of Job's friends. There is a bland and virtuous frivolity about his endeavour to turn this world into a conversation of enlightened and princely souls, the more frivolous as he was by no means unaware of the disorder. 'They love the present confusion,' he wrote of his countrymen, 'in which everyone is free to create factions, to impede his opponent, to elude judgment and the law, to fasten himself upon his friends, and to live irresponsibly in whatever manner he likes best. Common people fear oppression; the mighty fear curtailment of their limitless power, for in fact they recognize no sovereign.' A description without a diagnosis. The fault,

as Spinoza recognized, lay not in events or creatures, but in the mind, that is in the way people think or fail to think, and in their notion of what thinking is, when, for example, like Descartes, they separate will from intellect, and look at things as external causes. The whole perplexity of religious hate and dynastic ambition springs from this nominal trick of looking as spectators at things from the outside and seeing therefore only a succession of casual and unnecessary phenomena. Passions are a reaction to this 'external' circumstance; they are linked to the 'thought of some external cause' and supervene where judgment is suspended and 'necessity' and the 'mind which apprehends it' are obscured. We hate what we think need not happen; our wrath reacts to what seems a casual and contingent interruption of being. Disentangle emotion from this 'external cause' and 'unite it with other thoughts'; revive, in other words, the actual understanding and 'love and hatred towards the external cause as well as waverings of the mind which arise from these emotions are extinguished.'

This was an ancient wisdom. 'Wars, factions, and fighting,' said Socrates as he looked forward from his last hour, 'have no other origin than this same body and its lusts. . . . We must set the soul free from it; we must behold things as they are. And having thus got rid of the foolishness of the body, we shall be pure and hold converse with the pure, and shall in our own selves have complete knowledge of the Incorruptible which is, I take it, no other than very truth.' Spinoza's paradox, in the eyes of his fellows, was that we free the soul from the body, we get rid of the body's foolishness by accepting it, by understanding it. From the lowest level of awareness given by casual experience (*experientia vaga*) the active mind ascends to a rational understanding and then to intuitive science or insight not by despising and rejecting the casual experience but by integrating it and healing the casualty. 'Will is a general being or idea whereby we explain all individual volitions.' This doctrine challenged the accepted 'correspondence theory of truth' which defined truth not as 'complete knowledge of the Incorruptible,' or 'converse of the pure with the pure,' but as 'conformity and correspondence of thing and intellect.' A picture not a definition, and not intended as an answer to any search-

ing questions, this 'correspondence' merely stated the fact. It was a theory for painters like Vermeer, for poets and framers of poetic diction discovering 'obscured likenesses' and expressing human emotions in images and similitudes of an external world. It marked no difference, as Spinoza said, between experience of dreams and experience of reality. Granted the correspondence, the question is whether it merely happens to be so, to be described perceptually or has a reason inherent in the nature of things and in our awareness of them. And if there is a reason, it must be sought not in some *thing* called a 'universal,' accepted as objectively and externally as the things it purports to explain or defined as a mere abstraction from them, but in a lived and actual community or converse. Spinoza's universal is active: it involves the will in all ideation, idea in every volition. It recognizes that extension is inherent in the actual thinking which is God.

The 'correspondence' theory holds a 'mirror' up to nature without asking what the 'nature' or the mirror is. Its true setting was the absolute space and earth-centred cosmos such as natural philosophers in Spinoza's day no longer accepted. English vernacular grew up in this pictorial notion. English philosophers were slow to abandon it. English moralists like Butler believed in its educative virtue. Locke was unaware of its problems. Leibniz based his later philosophy upon it. Neither Berkeley nor Hume escaped its pervasive suggestion. Hume's individual is a monad bereft of 'pre-established harmony,' and the 'impressions' and 'ideas' of his *Treatise* present human understanding not as an act but in mechanical fashion, as a kind of camera facing the scene which is 'impressed' upon its sensitive plate and retained upon it as a memory or 'idea.' Hume indeed exposed the bankruptcy of the theory which he had inherited but retired from the consequence of his detection with the elegant excuse that philosophers ought to know when to stop. He was a historian and a librarian. Spinoza was not so happily confined.

More significant was the place of this naïve epistemology within the rational system in which Spinoza learned his rational art, significant because Descartes no less than the English philosophers accepted the 'mirror' theory though he had every reason to reject it. Cartesian 'ideas' are really

precepts, 'clear' as they are given to the mind which makes them 'distinct' by thinking about them. The mind is the 'substance in which thought resides.' The intellect and vision are passive in Descartes as in Aristotle. The active principle is the will. Above all 'the actions of the soul are *desires*, since we find in experience that they proceed directly from our soul and appear to depend upon it alone.' And so the European tragedy was launched, not indeed by Descartes, but by these direct actions of the soul, desires released from intellect and bereft of vision, and the process as it gathered momentum seemed to discover the power which Hobbes likened to the fall of heavy bodies, a huge impotence resembling power only from the bigness of its catastrophe. The subject-object relation might serve almost as a name of the increasing systems of estrangement and enmity, religious, political, economic devised in the service of 'our desires.' It is the fruitful source of epistemological confusion down to our own time. No wonder the mirror theory prevailed. It looks self-evident, for we cannot choose but see, nor can we resist an Euclidean demonstration, whereas our wills feel as if they were and are commonly said to be our selves in action.

But evident or not, this nice differentiation of faculties is a nominal and misleading trick. Desires are not acts of the soul but dreams that haunt the sleep of thought. Pure percepts would be truly (*re vera*) suspensions of judgment. And there can be no free will *in vacuo*: we do not will the unconceived. Even to be aware of frustration we must have some idea of what we want, and it is only when we suffer a measure of frustration, some weakness, distance, or difficulty between conceiving and realizing a purpose that we recognize an act of will. Unimpeded will, which simultaneously achieves its end, and infinitely possesses its object, we call not will but love (*amor*) and then as the will suffers no frustration we feel as if we were not exerting it at all but rather were instruments of the beloved object or 'modes' of its activity. Such is the 'dereliction of the will' in which St John of the Cross or the 'abjection' in which St Francis of Sales discerns charity, and such the *necessity* which is freedom in Spinoza's language. This is the freedom 'which exists by the mere necessity of its own nature and is determined in its

actions by itself alone.' 'He who loves God cannot endeavour to bring it about that God should love him in return.'

This 'marvellous saying' kindled Goethe's imagination, who seems, nevertheless, in his comment upon it to have understood but imperfectly what Spinoza was saying. 'To be unselfish in everything, most of all in love and friendship,' says Goethe, 'was my highest pleasure, my rule of life, my exercise.' That is much. But in the last part of the *Ethics* treating of 'the way which leads to liberty' Spinoza seems to have ascended beyond this village of affections to the level where *amor* and *intellectus* are one act. Here 'the human mind knows itself and its body under the species of eternity, and thus far necessarily has knowledge of God and knows that it exists in God and is conceived through God.' In that stupendous moment which other mystics have described, God is apprehended by love in such unanimity as leaves no spectator in the soul to discern or assess or even clearly remember what takes place, but that the lover is nothing but a flame of the eternal. But Spinoza does not describe an event. He states a necessity demonstrated in geometric order. There is no heat, there is only light and transparency. The philosopher is not a maker of mirrors but a grinder and polisher of lenses, and his business is not to catch and reflect an image but to transmit unimpeded vision. There is no refraction, no conflict between willing and thinking nor any conscious reconciliation between them. 'Intellect and will are the same.'

And so we are at the central question. Why did Spinoza set such store by 'the freedom of the mind we have in mathematics'? Why did he seek not experience but tautology? Why was his method all deduction so as to incur the charge, so plausible and so false, of determinism?

The most obvious answer is that Spinoza thinks in the present tense, and the present offers no alternative. It is necessary as it is real, the one because the other, and it is not an object or subject, but the moment of their identity. The self-evident fact is that there is no such thing as a 'might-have-been-present,' and it is not determinism but freedom to accept without reserve what only delusion could half refuse. When Spinoza says that 'substance is prior in its nature to its modifications' or that it is 'that which is in



itself and is conceived through itself' he defines the only substantial reality, the inevitable present. The Christian's *locus classicus* of this ethical realism is the sixth chapter of St Matthew's Gospel. Spinoza's simple and secluded life, his regular habits, and refusal of acquisitive distraction extinguished the temptation to think prudentially or split his attention between what was, what is, and what may be, and the force of utilitarian morality trained upon future happiness here or hereafter was nothing to him. He has no doctrine of progress, and his lack of narrative sense gives his ethics an appearance of ontology. He does not naturally think of conduct in terms of doing, having, seeking, resisting, and the rest, of praising or blaming or earning, but simply of being. All thinking is where the thinker is. I AM, whatever those words may mean, is the primal and ultimate expression of reality available in human speech. Though they may refer only to Baruch Spinoza they are equally the nearest verbal notation of 'that which is in itself and is conceived through itself.' 'The idea or knowledge of the human mind is granted in God.' Spinoza is a mode of the divine act. 'The idea of an individual thing actually existing has God for its cause.' 'The essence of man is constituted by certain modes or attributes of God, that is by certain modes of thinking.'

For, secondly, this present and actual thinking is all the thinking there is. If I recall a proposition or system of philosophy from the past, I do not revive an image but think the proposition or system again as actively and critically as at my first acquaintance with it. I cannot properly remember thinking as past, I can only think it as present. As thinking in this sense has no history, so neither is it a possession. Men do not own thoughts; they think. They are not furnished with sensations; they feel. The verb not the noun signifies what really happens. The notion, therefore, that we derive our thinking from some perceptual datum is illusion. 'An idea is a concept of the mind which the mind forms because it is a *res cogitans*. I say concept rather than percept, because perception seems to indicate that the mind is passive, but concept seems to express an *act* of the mind.' But the mind itself is act. It is not the subject, possibility, or continuum of thought but thinking-in-itself. Spinoza's