A Spinoza Reader

THE *ETHICS* AND OTHER WORKS

Benedict de Spinoza

EDITED AND
TRANSLATED BY
Edwin Curley

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press,
Chichester, West Sussex

Libraby of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Spinoza, Benedictus de, 1632–1677.
[Selections. English. 1994]
A Spinoza reader : the Ethics and other works / Benedict de
Spinoza ; edited and translated by Edwin Curley.
p. cm.
Includes index
ISBN 0-691-03363-3 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-691-00067-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Philosophy—Early works to 1800. 2. Ethics—Early works to 1800
I. Spinoza, Benedictus de, 1632–1677. Ethica. English. 1994.
II. Curley, E. M. (Edwin M.), 1937– . III. Title.
B3958.C87 1994
199′.492—dc20 93-1628

This book has been composed in Adobe Janson

Princeton University Press books are printed on
acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence
and durability of the Committee on Production
Guidelines for Book Longevity of the
Council on Library Resources

Printed in the United States of America

15 17 19 20 18 16

ISBN-10: 0-691-00067-0 (pbk.)

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I. Spinoza's Life and Philosophy

Most philosophers lead lives of quiet contemplation, and for the most part Spinoza's life was no exception. He read, he thought, he wrote, and the only moments of high drama in his life occurred when what he thought and wrote brought him into conflict with the society in which he lived. In the early years his radical ideas about religion led to his expulsion from the Dutch Jewish community in which he had been brought up, and (according to his early biographers) led one of its members to make an attempt on his life. The widespread perception that his work was atheistic made it impossible, in his lifetime, to publish the definitive expression of his religious ideas, his *Ethics*. Later his commitment to the tolerant, republican politics of the De Witt brothers led him to write and speak out on behalf of their program, again at some danger to his life. This volume will try to tell the first half of that story, focusing on Spinoza the revolutionary religious thinker, and leaving the story of Spinoza the political thinker for another day.

Benedict[1] de Spinoza was born on 24 November 1632 to Michael de Spinoza, a prosperous member of the Amsterdam Jewish community, and to Deborah, his second wife. Like many Jews of the time, the Spinozas had originally come to Holland as a refuge from religious persecution in Spain and Portugal. Toward the end of the fifteenth century Ferdinand and Isabella had given Spanish Jews an unpleasant choice: either convert to Christianity or go into exile (leaving their gold and silver behind, to become the crown's). Since most of the major European countries of the time either barred the Jews completely or imposed severe restrictions on them, many chose to make at least a nominal conversion.

But life as a *converso* (or "new Christian" or "Marrano") was not easy. Quite apart from the internal conflicts generated by having to practice a religion in which they did not believe, and by being false to the religion in which they did believe, they had to live under the surveillance of an Inquisition suspicious of the sincerity of these conversions. It was

[1] Before his excommunication Spinoza was known either as "Baruch" (which means *blessed* in Hebrew) or as "Bento" (the Portuguese equivalent). After his excommunication he adopted the Latin version of that name.

difficult to maintain, even in secret, the traditions and faith so important to their conception of themselves as Jews. When it seemed safe to do so, they began to emigrate. Many went first to Portugal, where they found conditions little better. Most ultimately wound up in the Netherlands, which had been under the political control of Spain, but which was, by the end of the sixteenth century, engaged in a war of independence against its former master, and had a tradition of relative religious toleration. There the Jews were allowed, at least informally, to practice their religion.[2]

Spinoza's mother died just before he turned six. When he was nine, his father married again, this time to a spinster of forty. This stepmother died when Spinoza was nineteen and his father followed a year and a half later when Spinoza was twenty-one. In addition, his childhood saw the deaths of a half-brother, when he was sixteen, and a sister, when he was eighteen. Later Spinoza was to write that the "free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death" (E IVP67). If Spinoza attained such freedom, it was not without having had considerable experience with death.

All indications are that he had the kind of education normal for a young Jew of that time and place. He would have begun attending the Talmud Torah school at about age seven, learning first to read the traditional prayers, then the Hebrew Bible. At about age thirteen or fourteen he would have been introduced to the study of the Talmud and of medieval Jewish philosophy. Entrance into these higher studies did not imply an intention to become a rabbi; most were there simply to learn more of the Holy Law. This religious education was all the more precious to the members of the community because it had been denied them during their years as *conversos* in the Iberian peninsula. It was this kind of education the editor of Spinoza's *Opera posthuma* was referring to when he wrote that

> from his childhood on the author was trained in letters, and in his youth for many years he was occupied principally with theology; but when he reached the age at which the intellect is mature and capable of investigating the nature of things, he gave himself up entirely to philosophy. He was driven by a burning desire for knowledge; but because he did not get full satisfaction either from his teachers or from those writing about these sciences, he decided

[2] Official permission for public worship did not come until 1619, and full citizenship was granted only in 1657, by which time Spinoza was no longer a member of the community.

> to see what he himself could do in these areas. For that purpose he found the writings of the famous René Descartes, which he came upon at that time, very useful.[3]

This passage is as interesting for the questions it raises as for those it answers. Why, for instance, did the young Spinoza find the instruction he received from his teachers unsatisfactory? And what was it about the writings of Descartes which attracted him?

The answer to the first of these questions seems to be that the close study of Scripture, and of the traditional commentaries on Scripture, is apt to raise many doubts in a mind as acute as Spinoza's. How are we to take the anthropomorphic conception of God we often find in Scripture? How are we to reconcile the conception of a God subject to human limitations, a God often presented as having a corporeal form, a God apt to be angry with his creatures, and to repent of having created them, with the philosophic conception of God as a perfect being? Can we reconcile the philosophic conception of God with the Scriptural conception of him as intervening miraculously in natural processes which seem to be thought of as manifesting a power distinct from God's? Is there any basis in Scripture (i.e., in what Christians would call the Old Testament) for the belief in an afterlife in which the soul survives the body, the good are rewarded, and the evil punished? How are we to understand the traditional belief that the Jews are God's chosen people? Why would God not communicate knowledge of his existence, nature, and commandments to all men? And if the Jews are God's chosen people, how could he permit their terrible suffering at the hands of the Inquisition and other persecutors? What attitude should a reasonable man take to a system of law whose complexity is matched only by the apparent arbitrariness of many of its requirements? How are we to reconcile the chronology of the world implied in Scripture with the existence of civilizations which go back many thousands of years before the supposed date of the creation? Or the traditional view that Scripture is God's revelation of himself to man with the internal evidence which shows it to be "full of faults, mutilated, tampered with, and inconsistent," the work of many fallible human hands over many generations, often writing many years after the events they recorded? To judge from what Spinoza later wrote,[4] and from the ideas circulating among the

[3] From Jarig Jelles' preface to Spinoza's *Nagelate Schriften* (*Posthumous Works*), given in F. Akkerman, *Studies in the Posthumous Works of Spinoza* (Krips Repro Meppel, 1980), pp. 216–217.

[4] See, for example, the selections from the *Theological-Political Treatise*, in §II of the Preliminaries.

more heterodox members of the Amsterdam Jewish community, free thinkers with whom Spinoza is known to have associated, doubts like these must have been among those which led the young Spinoza to be dissatisfied with the education he had received from the rabbis.

By the time he was in his early twenties he was working in his father's import business, and learning Latin from an ex-Jesuit, Francis van den Enden. One of Spinoza's earliest biographers, a Lutheran minister in the Hague named Colerus, claimed that Van den Enden had taught his students more than Latin, that he sowed the seeds of atheism in their minds. Perhaps. But this much seems reasonably certain: through his instruction Van den Enden did enlarge Spinoza's cultural horizons, giving him not only a good acquaintance with classical authors like Terence, Ovid, Tacitus, Cicero, and Seneca, but also some familiarity with modern philosophers like Descartes and Hobbes. In both these authors Spinoza would have found much to encourage him to distrust tradition and authority, and to rely on his own intellectual abilities. He would also have found a method for investigating the truth which, to judge from the *Ethics*, he came to think provided the proper model: the mathematical method of beginning with simple, evident truths, axioms and definitions, and proceeding from them by careful deductive steps.

At some point during this process of doubt and discovery, the Jewish community excommunicated him. We know the date of this event (27 July 1656), but we do not know much, with any certainty, about the reasons for it. The sentence of excommunication refers vaguely to Spinoza's "evil opinions and acts," and it has been suggested that his acts (and omissions) weighed more heavily in the proceedings against him than his opinions did. Excommunication was a common method of discipline in the community, often imposed for comparatively trivial offenses and lifted after the offender mended his ways. Because the rabbis and elders of the community were engaged in a constant struggle to reintroduce the ex-Marranos into the religious traditions of Judaism, and to restore a pattern of Jewish life which had been disrupted by the period of Christian practice and education, "the issue of unity was . . . more crucial than any other . . . acts like Spinoza's, which challenged tradition in the name of freedom of thought and sabotaged the endeavor to repair the torn fabric of Jewish life, could not be tolerated."[5] If Spinoza had been content to keep his opinions to himself, and to maintain an external adherence to the requirements of Jewish law, he

[5] Yirmiahu Yovel, "Why Spinoza Was Excommunicated," *Commentary*, November 1977, p. 50.

might have escaped excommunication. There are credible reports that he was offered a pension if he would keep up his attendance at the synagogue. Whether we believe those reports or not, it is evident that by this time in his life Spinoza was unwilling to do what would have been necessary to remain in the community.

This was no light matter. The sentence of excommunication forbade members of the community to have anything to do with him: "None may communicate with him by word of mouth or writing, nor show him any charity whatsoever, nor stay with him under one roof, nor come into his company, nor read any composition made or written by him." This would have made it impossible for him to continue to run the family business, as he and a younger brother had been doing since their father's death. Faced with similar pressure, his friend Juan de Prado recanted and did everything he could to remain within the community (though in the end his efforts were unsuccessful). Spinoza, on the other hand, composed a defense of his opinions and acts, addressed to the elders of the synagogue, and resigned himself to a life outside the Jewish community.

The years immediately following Spinoza's excommunication have always been something of a mystery to Spinoza scholars, since the early biographies shed little light on them. But recently some intriguing evidence of Spinoza's activities and opinions during that period has turned up in a surprising place: the files of the Inquisition. In 1659 a South American monk, Tomas Solano, who had spent some time in Amsterdam during the preceding year, made a report to Madrid about some of the people of Iberian origin whom he had met during his stay there. Among them were Spinoza and Juan de Prado. According to Solano, Spinoza and Prado said they had been expelled from the synagogue because they believed that the Jewish law was not the true law, that the soul dies with the body, and that God only exists philosophically. He also reported that Spinoza had been a student at the University of Leiden and that he was a good philosopher.

It is difficult to know quite what to make of this report. What precisely does it mean to say that God only exists philosophically? Solano equates this with atheism. Is this fair? Again, in one of the earliest writings we have from Spinoza we find him arguing *for* the immortality of the soul, not against it. But the account given by one early biographer suggests that Spinoza did indeed have doubts on this score. Jean Lucas reports that shortly before Spinoza's excommunication two young men from the synagogue, professing to be his friends, came to quiz him about the Biblical teaching on three issues: the corporeality of God, the

existence of angels, and the immortality of the soul. According to Lucas, Spinoza replied that "wherever Scripture speaks of it, the word 'soul' is used simply to express life, or anything that is living. It would be useless to search for any passage in support of its immortality. As for the contrary view, it may be seen in a hundred places, and nothing is so easy as to prove it."[6] These early reports should be kept in mind when we try to decide what the teaching of Spinoza's writings actually is on the issue of the immortality of the soul.

However we ultimately resolve these matters, Solano's report that Spinoza had studied at the University of Leiden seems credible. That university was a center of Dutch Cartesianism, so a period of studying philosophy there would fit in well with what we know independently of Spinoza's interests. In the earliest correspondence we have from Spinoza, we find him living in Rijnsburg, a small town near Leiden. And among his closest friends were men who we know studied there during that period.

The first selection presented in this volume, under the heading "A Portrait of the Philosopher as a Young Man," consists of the opening passages of a work on method, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, which probably dates from the period between 1656 and 1661. Spinoza was never able to finish this work in a way which satisfied him, and it was published only posthumously, in the fragmentary state in which he left it when he died. But readers have always been moved by Spinoza's description of the spiritual quest which led him to philosophy, his dissatisfaction with the things people ordinarily strive for—wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure—and his hope that the pursuit of knowledge would lead him to discover the true good: "the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of nature." Exactly what this union consists in Spinoza does not say. This passage is one which encourages the interpretation of Spinoza as a mystic, but I would suggest

[6] *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza*, pp. 45–46. In 1632 Spinoza's teacher, Manasseh ben Israel, published his *Conciliator*, a systematic attempt to identify and resolve every apparent contradiction in Scripture. Among the passages he is anxious to explain are those apparently denying immortality. See, for example, his comments on Job 7:9, Eccl. 3:19, or Eccl. 9:10 (vol. II, pp. 40–41 and 309–315 of the English translation of this work, published by E. H. Lindo, London, 1842).

With respect to the corporeality of God, Lucas reports Spinoza as saying that "since nothing is to be found in the Bible about the non-material or incorporeal, there is nothing objectionable in believing that God is a body. All the more so since, as the Prophet says, God is great, and it is impossible to comprehend greatness without extension and, therefore, without body." The problem of Scriptural evidence for the corporeality of God and the angels is a major issue in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, i–xlix. In the *Theological-Political Treatise* (vii, 75–87) Spinoza is highly critical of Maimonides for his rejection of this evidence, which Spinoza thinks violates the proper principles of textual interpretation.

that we understand him to be referring, not to a special experience of the kind which seems to be central to philosophers like Plotinus, but to the fact that the human mind is a part of nature, subject to the same universal laws which govern the rest of nature. This would contrast with the Cartesian view of man's relation to nature, which conceives man (to use a phrase of Spinoza's from the preface to Part III of the *Ethics*) as a dominion within a dominion, that is, as insulated from the causal processes to which other things in nature are subject.

Following that short first selection, I present, under the heading "A Critique of Traditional Religion," selections from a work Spinoza published in 1670, the *Theological-Political Treatise*, which became a seminal work in the developing science of Biblical criticism. By the time Spinoza began this work in 1665, he was already well-advanced in the composition of his best-known work, the *Ethics*, a systematic attempt to work out, in geometric fashion, his views on the nature of God, the relation between mind and body, human psychology, and the best way to live. But he interrupted work on the *Ethics* to write the *Theological-Political Treatise*, whose main purpose is to provide a defense of freedom of thought and expression. Why did he do this? One reason, clearly, was that the project of defending freedom of thought gave him an ideal opportunity to deal with those theological issues which had led to his expulsion from the Jewish community, problems about prophecy, the divine law, miracles, and the interpretation and historicity of Scripture. Contemporaries who knew the now-lost defense of his opinions, written on leaving the synagogue, say that much of its content resurfaced in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. So some of the ideas of the TPT were ones Spinoza had been working out in the earliest stages of his development as a philosopher. Another motive, I think, was that he felt he needed to attack the claim of revelation to provide a basis for religious knowledge, and to criticize the usual conception of God in a nongeometric argument, before he could expect to find a receptive audience for his own austere, geometric defense of a radically different conception. He wanted, I suggest, to prepare readers for the positive ideas of the *Ethics* by presenting some of them in a nontechnical form, for example, the idea that everything which occurs in nature is an instance of an eternal and immutable law, or that God cannot coherently be conceived as a giver of laws which men can break.

The next section presents excerpts from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* which illuminate his theory of knowledge, focusing on his account of the four kinds of knowledge and the theory of definition. According to Spinoza, the right method of discovery is "to form thoughts from some given definition," and the better the definition

from which we proceed the greater will be our success. So it is very important to understand what the requirements for a good definition are.

This passage is also important for the hints it gives toward the interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics, in those sections which contrast the fixed and eternal things with the singular changeable things which depend on them and are to be understood through them. The fixed and eternal things are characterized as being present everywhere and as having laws "inscribed in them, as in their true codes." If we may identify these fixed and eternal things with the attributes and infinite modes of the *Ethics*, and the singular changeable things with the finite modes of that work, then we have a clue to the nature of the dependence of the finite on the infinite: we understand how a finite thing depends on the infinite when we understand how to deduce its existence from the eternal laws of nature. This interpretation is encouraged by the emphasis in the *Theological-Political Treatise* on the immutability of the laws of nature and its notion that God's action in the world consists in the operation of those laws.

The *Treatise on the Intellect* was clearly written as an introduction to a systematic presentation of Spinoza's philosophy, probably the work which has come down to us under the title of the *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*, a first draft of the *Ethics*, not written in geometric style, and composed in the first instance for private circulation among Spinoza's friends, not for publication. (For nearly two centuries after Spinoza's death it was not known that a manuscript of this work had survived; it was first published only in the mid-nineteenth century.) In a letter probably written early in 1662 Spinoza gives a brief description of this work, and of his reasons for hesitating to publish it:

> As for your . . . question how things have begun to be, and by what connection they depend on the first cause, I have composed a whole short work devoted to this matter. . . . I am engaged in transcribing and emending it, but sometimes I put it to one side because I do not yet have any definite plan regarding its publication. I fear, of course, that the theologians of our time may be offended and with their usual hatred attack me, who absolutely dread quarrels.
>
> I shall look for your advice regarding this matter, and to let you know what is contained in this work of mine which might offend the preachers, I say that I regard as creatures many 'attributes' which they (and everyone, so far as I know) attribute to God. Conversely, other things, which they, because of their prejudices, re-

> gard as creatures, I contend are attributes of God, which they have misunderstood. Also, I do not separate God from nature, as everyone known to me has done. (Letter 6, IV/36)

In making selections from this work I have been guided by this description of its contents and problems, choosing three chapters from the first part of the work, dealing with the problem of identifying the attributes which in Spinoza's view really do pertain to God, and explaining what the infinite modes are which Spinoza contends depend immediately on the attributes (a matter the *Ethics* leaves very obscure). These chapters also amplify the discussion of definition begun in the *Treatise on the Intellect* and shed light on the sense in which it is true that Spinoza does not separate God from nature: he identifies God with what he calls *natura naturans*, which is another name for the attributes, those self-existing beings which he had called (in §75 of the *Treatise on the Intellect*) "the first elements of the whole of nature." The selections from the *Short Treatise* include also passages dealing with the nature of the soul and its immortality, interesting (among other things) for their recognition of the existence of souls corresponding to the modes of the unknown attributes. These selections conclude with a dialogue on various problems about God's causality, such as how an eternal being can be the cause of things which perish.

Spinoza may have hesitated to publish the *Short Treatise*, not merely because of the hostile reaction he thought it would generate, but also because, by the time he finished the rough draft of the work which has come down to us, he had become dissatisfied with the form in which it was written. The earliest correspondence we have from him, written at a time when he was still working on the *Short Treatise*, shows him experimenting with the geometrical method. Though he had not yet published anything, by the latter half of 1661 Spinoza had acquired sufficient reputation as a philosopher that Henry Oldenburg, soon to become the first secretary of the Royal Society, sought him out in Rijnsburg. After Oldenburg's return to England, Spinoza sent him a paper in which he tried to prove geometrically (i.e., by demonstration from definitions and axioms) a number of propositions which would later be central to Part I of the *Ethics*, for example, that it is of the essence of a substance to exist, or that every substance must be infinite. This paper has been lost, but we can reconstruct some of its content from the correspondence (see the letters in §V of the Preliminaries). Part of the interest of this early geometrical sketch of Part I of the *Ethics* lies in what it tells us about Spinoza's undogmatic attitude toward his axioms. Oldenburg asks whether Spinoza regards them as principles

which neither need nor are capable of demonstration. Spinoza replies that he does not insist that they have that status. But he does insist that they are true. Later, in the *Ethics*, a number of these axioms will be treated as propositions, that is, as truths capable of being demonstrated from even more fundamental assumptions. Spinoza adopts a flexible attitude toward his axioms. If he puts a principle forward as an axiom and it meets with opposition, then he may later try to find an argument for it. Also of interest here is Spinoza's tendency to define "attribute" in the same terms he would later use for "substance."

By 1663 Spinoza seems to have committed himself to the project of developing his philosophy geometrically. An interesting exchange of letters between him and his friend Simon de Vries (presented in §VII) not only sheds further light on his view of definitions, but also shows that a draft of (the greater part, at least, of) Part I of the *Ethics* was by then circulating among Spinoza's friends, who had formed a study group in Amsterdam in which they debated its meaning. They would then write to Spinoza in Rijnsburg about any difficulties they had. It was these friends who in the same year encouraged Spinoza to publish his first work, a geometric exposition of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*. Spinoza had originally developed a portion of this exposition while tutoring a young student in theology from the University of Leiden. His friends found it so valuable that they requested him to expand what he had previously done and assisted him in getting it published. This work shows Spinoza to have a thorough grasp of the Cartesian philosophy. I have excerpted two brief passages from it here: one in which Spinoza criticizes Descartes' solution to the problem of the Cartesian circle (and offers his own alternative solution), and a second in which he criticizes a Cartesian argument for the existence of God in the Third Meditation. The latter selection is particularly important for its criticism of the apparent distinction Descartes makes in that argument between a substance and its principal attribute. Spinoza maintains that there is no real distinction between them, a view Descartes himself sometimes subscribed to (cf. his *Principles of Philosophy* I, 62). The identification of substance with its principal attribute is crucial to a central argument of Part I of the *Ethics*.

The preface to this work, written by Lodewijk Meyer at Spinoza's request, is also worth our attention here. Meyer calls Descartes "the brightest star of our age" for having introduced the mathematical method into philosophy and for having uncovered "firm foundations" for philosophy. The scholastic philosophy which preceded Descartes (and was still dominant in most universities at that time) had been futile, and had led only to strife and disagreement, because it relied on merely

probable arguments. But having praised Descartes generously for his innovations, Meyer goes on to acknowledge that Spinoza himself rejected many of Descartes' specific positions:

> Descartes only assumes, but does not prove, that the human mind is a substance thinking absolutely [i.e., unconditionally]. Though our author [i.e., Spinoza] admits, of course, that there is a thinking substance in nature, he nevertheless denies that it constitutes the essence of the human mind. Instead he believes that just as extension is determined by no limits, so also thought is determined by no limits. Therefore, just as the human body is not extension absolutely, but only an extension determined in a certain way, according to the laws of extended nature, by motion and rest, so also the human mind, or soul, is not thought absolutely, but only a thought determined in a certain way, according to the laws of thinking nature, by ideas, a thought which, one infers, must exist when the human body begins to exist. From this definition, he thinks, it is not difficult to demonstrate that the will is not distinct from the intellect, much less endowed with that liberty which Descartes ascribes to it. (I/132)

This brief passage foreshadows some of the central claims of the metaphysic Spinoza was in the process of developing in the *Ethics*: neither the human mind nor the human body is a substance, because each of these entities lacks the independence of other minds or bodies which would be required for it to be a substance; the mind's determination by other ideas parallels the body's determination by other bodies, each in accordance with unalterable laws. There is even a slight suggestion of the mind's ontological dependence on the body, in the observation that it begins to exist when the body does.

But Spinoza is not content to declare (through Meyer) his disagreement with Cartesian metaphysics. He also registers some reservations about Cartesian methodology. When faced with certain problems (such as the apparent contradiction between God's preordination of all things and human freedom), Descartes was willing to say that their solution surpassed the human understanding. Spinoza will have none of this. If rationalism consists in the conviction that everything is fundamentally intelligible, then Spinoza was a much more consistent rationalist than Descartes. So he had Meyer report his view that

> all those things, and even many others more sublime and subtle, can not only be conceived clearly and distinctly, but also explained very satisfactorily—provided that the human intellect is guided in

> the search for truth and knowledge of things along a different path from that which Descartes opened up and made smooth. The foundations of the sciences brought to light by Descartes, and the things he built on them, do not suffice to disentangle and solve all the very difficult problems which occur in metaphysics. Different foundations are required, if we wish our intellect to rise to that pinnacle of knowledge. (ibid.)

Much as Spinoza admired Descartes' use of the mathematical method, he did not think Descartes had started in the right place. To begin with a radical doubt about the existence of the external world and about the truth of those simple propositions whose evidence forces our assent is a mistake. As his critique of Descartes' answer to the accusation of circular reasoning had argued, if we start from a clear and distinct idea of God, we will not be able to coherently state the hypothesis which grounds such a doubt. So it is legitimate for us to take certain general propositions of metaphysics as axiomatic without needing first to establish the reliability of our reason. Using those axioms (and appropriate definitions) we can establish the existence and nature of God. And if we follow the proper order, we should establish these truths about God before we discuss the existence and nature of the human mind and its relationship to the body. That is why the *Ethics* begins in the way that it does.

The *Ethics* is not only Spinoza's masterwork, it is also his life's work. We know from the correspondence that he began writing it early in the 1660s, that a substantial draft of the work was in existence by 1665, and that he then put it aside to write his *Theological-Political Treatise*, which appeared in l670. He had published his exposition of Descartes' philosophy to pave the way for his *Ethics*. His hope was that by demonstrating his mastery of the new philosophy of Descartes, and by giving hints of his advances on Descartes, he would generate sufficient interest in his own writings that the leaders of his country would want to see them published, and would protect him against any adverse consequences of publication. I have suggested that the *Theological-Political Treatise* had a similar motivation. But if Spinoza did think of the TPT as preparing the way for the *Ethics*, he could not have been more mistaken. For his challenge to the theologians generated a storm of protest which made it impossible for him to publish the latter work during his lifetime. He continued to work on it during the years immediately following the publication of the TPT and no doubt made many changes, particularly in the latter part of the *Ethics*, which shows quite strongly the influence on him of the philosophy of Hobbes, whom he had studied closely in writing the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

In the fall of 1675 he evidently had the *Ethics* ready to go to the publishers, for he writes to his friend Oldenburg that he was about to leave for Amsterdam to see to its printing when

> a rumor was spread everywhere that a book of mine about God was in the press, and that in it I strove to show that there is no God. Many people believed this rumor. So certain theologians—who had, perhaps, started the rumor themselves—seized this opportunity to complain about me to the Prince and the magistrates. Moreover, the stupid Cartesians, who are thought to favor me, would not stop trying to remove this suspicion from themselves by denouncing my opinions and writings everywhere. When I learned this from certain trustworthy men, who also told me the theologians were everywhere plotting against me, I decided to put off the publication I was planning until I saw how the matter would turn out. (Letter 68, IV/299)

In the end Spinoza had to settle for posthumous publication. He died only about a year and a half after this, on 21 February 1677, of a lung disease probably aggravated by the dust of the lenses he had been grinding in order to support himself. A few months later his friends arranged for the publication of the *Ethics*, along with his correspondence and three other unfinished works: the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Political Treatise*, and a *Hebrew Grammar*.

What is the nature of the work to which Spinoza devoted so much of his adult life, the work on which his fame as a philosopher now primarily rests?[7] We have seen that his contemporaries frequently accused him of atheism, and that he had to defer publication of the *Ethics* because it was alleged to be an atheistic work. Spinoza deeply resented this accusation.[8] It is easy to see why he might think it unfair: the *Ethics* begins by constructing a geometric demonstration of the existence of God (IPll) and ends by claiming that our salvation consists in the intellectual love of God (VP36S). But the God whom Spinoza celebrates in this work has not always seemed to other men to be recognizable as God. Spinoza's contemporary, Pascal, wrote that "the God of the philosophers is not

[7] In what follows I sketch an interpretation of the *Ethics* developed at greater length in *Behind the Geometrical Method*. Readers should be aware that the account I offer here is a controversial one; many students of Spinoza would view these matters in a very different light. But the risk of error is the price we pay for trying to reformulate Spinoza's ideas in more illuminating and contemporary language.

[8] See, for example, Letter 30. Part of Spinoza's objection to the accusation lay in what he felt it implied about his way of life: "For atheists usually seek honors and riches immoderately; but all those who know me, know that I have always disdained these things" (Letter 43, IV/219/16–18).

the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Spinoza's God is very much the God of the philosophers, a principle of explanation, a first cause of everything which exists, itself neither needing nor susceptible of explanation by anything external to itself, an eternal, necessary being, standing in contrast with the temporal, contingent beings we find in our daily life, but not a personal being with thoughts, desires, and emotions, not a creator of the universe, not a being who acts for the sake of any purposes, and therefore not a being whose purposes might be manifested in the world it causes. If a being must be a personal, purposeful creator to rightly be called God, if anything other than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not God, then Spinoza's affirmation of the God of the philosophers (and implicit denial of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) is a form of atheism. On those assumptions, to say that God only exists philosophically, that is, that only the God of the philosophers exists, is to deny the existence of God. From his point of view Father Solano may have been right to characterize Spinoza's position as atheism. One of the questions Spinoza forces us to ask is whether it is legitimate to make those assumptions. If his argument in Part I of the *Ethics* is correct, then there is a first cause of all things, an ultimate principle of explanation, but that first cause cannot coherently be conceived as a personal creator of the universe. From Spinoza's point of view, if we cannot accept his God as God, we can have no God at all.

The argument for this conclusion is couched in the terminology and framed in the assumptions of seventeenth-century Cartesian metaphysics. It has force today just to the extent that we still find that terminology and those assumptions intelligible and plausible. Descartes had assumed a world consisting of a plurality of material and immaterial substances, most of them finite: bodies and minds, each possessing a principal attribute which constituted the essence of the substance in question. The essence of bodies consisted in their being extended things; the essence of minds, in their being thinking things. The nonessential properties of things, their modes, were particular specifications of these fundamental attributes. The whole world of finite minds and bodies, with their constantly changing modes, was created and continually sustained by the infinite mind, God, who was conceived as being both personal and supremely perfect.

One of the first controversial conclusions Spinoza tries to demonstrate in the *Ethics* is that there cannot be more than one substance having any given attribute (IP5). The argument for this proposition is difficult to grasp and has been the subject of much debate among Spinoza's commentators. But arguably it relies only on assumptions which would have been acceptable to any good Cartesian. Suppose we have

two entities with the same attribute, which are alleged to be distinct substances. What is it which makes them distinct from one another? Not their attribute, since that, by hypothesis, is the same. Not their modes, since modes, by definition, are inessential, transitory states of the substance to which they belong, which cannot be used to distinguish one substance from another. (This is an implication of Descartes' famous discussion of the piece of wax at the end of the Second Meditation.) But there is nothing else by which our 'two' substances might be distinguished, since whatever is, is either an attribute or a mode. This is a consequence of Spinoza's first axiom, plus the fact that Spinoza consistently does, what Descartes does only intermittently: identify substance with its attribute(s).

If this argument is successful, important consequences follow. For example, since a substance could only be produced by another substance of the same kind, if there cannot be two substances of the same kind, substances cannot be produced, but must exist in virtue of their own nature, which is to say that they must exist eternally (IPP6, 7, 19). Again, since a finite substance would have to be limited by another substance of the same kind, if there cannot be two substances of the same kind, no substance can be finite (IP8). Most important, since God is defined as a substance consisting of infinite attributes, he must exist (Pll), and his existence must exclude the existence of any other substance, since any other substance would have to share an attribute with him (P14D). So there is only one substance, God, and everything else is only a mode of God (IPP14, l5).

From Cartesian assumptions a most uncartesian conclusion has been drawn. What exactly is the import of this conclusion? What are we saying when we say that there is just one substance, and that everything else is a mode of that substance? Given the traditional association between the concept of substance and the concept of a logical subject of predication, there is a strong temptation to suppose that Spinoza's monism implies that there is only one subject of predication, of which everything else is somehow a predicate. In his famous *Dictionary* article on Spinoza, Pierre Bayle gave in to this temptation, and concluded, reasonably enough on that supposition, that Spinoza was talking nonsense, that God would have to be the subject of contradictory predicates and constant change. Clearly this was not Spinoza's intention.

But the traditional theory of substance also tended to identify the substantial with what has independent existence. In line with that strand in the traditional theory, I suggest that Spinoza identifies his one substance with those permanent and pervasive features of the world he sometimes calls fixed and eternal things, and sometimes calls the divine

attributes. The claim that the world does possess these permanent and pervasive features is, in effect, the claim that there is an ontological foundation for science, that when we organize science as a deductive system in which laws of greater generality are shown to entail laws of lesser generality, then (if we have our science right) those laws are descriptive of enduring and omnipresent features of reality. And the claim that everything else in the world is a mode of the one substance is the claim that every other feature of the world can be shown to follow from the most general of these permanent features (IP16). Some things follow from the attributes in such a way that they too are permanent and pervasive. That is to say that the most general of the permanent features of reality have less general consequences which are equally permanent and equally universal in their application. These are the infinite modes whose production Spinoza describes in PP21–23. The most general laws of science have as consequences less general laws, which, in spite of their lesser generality, are applicable at all times and places, and require their own ontological foundation. Other things follow from the attributes in such a way that they come into being and pass away at particular times and places. These are the particular events or states of affairs which follow from the laws of nature if (and only if) the appropriate antecedent conditions are present, the finite modes of P28, which Spinoza there speaks of as if they were generated solely by the infinite series of other finite modes preceding them in time, but which he surely thinks could not have been so generated were it not for the influence exerted at all times by the permanent features of reality. The world of finite changing things stretches back into the infinite past: there was no moment of creation. But the infinite series of finite things could not have produced the world we know if it had not been determined to exist and act in the way it does by a finite series of infinite causes, those permanent and pervasive features of reality described by the laws of nature. The explanation of any phenomenon in nature requires a knowledge both of its antecedent conditions and of the laws governing the operation of those conditions. The requirement that we know antecedent conditions means that no finite intellect can ever fully understand any event. But the explanation of the laws themselves is finite, and comprehensible, since lower level laws must be explained in terms of higher level, more general laws, and there is an inherent limit to the process of going from a less general to a more general law.

Spinoza's God is an ultimate principle of explanation. Itself the cause of all things other than itself, it is also its own cause in the sense that the permanent and pervasive features of reality described by the most general laws of nature have no explanation other than their own nature. Insofar as they are those features of reality described by the most gen-

eral laws of nature, and insofar as explanation must always be by deduction from more general principles, there is nothing else by which they could be explained. That is why they possess the independence required of substance.

Descartes too had given the laws of nature an extremely important role to play in his account of the nature of things, but he had tried to explain them in a way compatible with Judaeo-Christian theology. As one of the pioneers of the new science, he understood full well that scientific explanation consists in uncovering the laws in accordance with which things happen in nature. And he saw certain theological advantages in treating these laws as an intermediary between God and the world of finite things. Conceiving God as a perfect being, he recognized that this must imply God's immutability. But if God cannot change, how can he be the continuous cause of a constantly changing world? Descartes' solution was to claim that God caused change in the finite world by establishing the laws according to which change took place. God causes change indirectly, by causing laws of change which are themselves unchanging.

But what is the status of these laws? Descartes thought of them as eternal, that is, necessary, truths, which would hold in any world God might have created. When some of his contemporaries objected that it seemed an infringement of God's omnipotence to talk about the essences of things as being eternal and immutable, Descartes' reply was that he did not conceive of the eternal truths as being independent of God. Rather God had established them as a king might establish the laws of his kingdom. They depend on his will, and are eternal and immutable only because his will is eternal and immutable. But if the laws of nature are the result of a divine choice, how can they be eternal and immutable? Does not the very notion of choice imply that they could have been otherwise? And if they could have been otherwise, how can it be necessary now that they not be otherwise? For Spinoza, to introduce a personal creator at this point was to give up the hope of a rational explanation of things, to betray the sciences Descartes had hoped to found. Better to identify God himself with those most general principles of order described by the fundamental laws of nature. It is in this sense that Spinoza does not separate God from nature; he does not identify God with nature where nature is conceived simply as the totality of finite things (IP29S).

If Part I of the *Ethics* explains the sense in which it is true that God (only) exists philosophically, Part II addresses the vexed question of the nature of man and the relation of the human mind to the human body. For Descartes a human being was a composite substance, whose constituent substances were a mind and a body. Part of what was implied in

characterizing the mind and the body as substances was that each possessed sufficient capacity for independent existence to be capable of existing without the other. By arguing for this conclusion, Descartes was attempting to provide a metaphysical foundation for a belief in personal immortality. Though he was never able to demonstrate that in fact the mind does not die with the body, he did think he had demonstrated the possibility of the mind's separate existence, leaving it to the theologian to provide grounds from revelation for believing in the actuality of that separate existence.

Descartes, however, was not content to say merely that the mind and the body were two distinct substances. Ultimately he wanted to argue also that the human mind is not present in the body "as a sailor is present in his ship," but is very closely conjoined to it, so that together mind and body constitute one thing and are, as he put it, "substantially united." Descartes was never able to explain clearly what this substantial union consisted in, but he seems to have been led to affirm it by the very special relationship each mind has to the particular body to which it is united: it feels what happens in that body in a way it does not feel what happens in other bodies and it cares about what happens in that body in a way it does not care about what happens in other bodies.

From Spinoza's point of view, Descartes' talk of the substantial union of mind and body is an awkward way of expressing a truth more happily put by saying that the mind and body are one and the same thing, "conceived now under the attribute of Thought, now under the attribute of Extension." (IIP21S) If the talk of substantial union is meant to imply that the human mind and the human body, though each a substance in its own right, nevertheless combine to form yet a third substance, it cannot be right, of course. Part I has shown that there is only one substance. This squares with the teaching of experience, which shows that the mind cannot be a substance because of its dependence on the body (cf. E IIIP2S). Nevertheless, it is true that each human mind has a special relationship to some particular body: the essence of the human mind is to be the idea (in the attribute of thought) of the human body (in the attribute of extension) (IIPP11, 13). For Spinoza this relationship is only a special case of a parallelism existing throughout the attributes of thought and extension. For every mode of extension, there is in thought an idea of that mode, and for every mode of thought which has a mode of extension as its object, there is in extension a mode corresponding to that idea.

Spinoza's way of putting this in Part II is to say that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (IIP7). The argument he offers for this proposition is brief and not in itself convincing, but with a little imagination (and the help of some of

is trying to find a place in his system for a popular belief which he thinks cannot be true in the way in which it is ordinarily understood, but which he thinks can be reinterpreted in a way which will express a philosophical truth (cf. VP23S, P34S); it seems clear that what 'remains' after the destruction of the body is not, for Spinoza, a person continuous with the person who existed before the destruction of the body. For Spinoza emphasizes that the capacities for imagination and memory exist only as long as the body exists (VP21), and he seems to regard continuity of memory as essential to the continued existence of the same person (IVP39S). If the soul survives the death of the body, this is so "only philosophically," that is, in the sense that an idea of the essence of the body is contained eternally in God's infinite idea, which is an infinite mode of the attribute of thought (VP23D, IIP8C). This explanation itself, of course, would require much explanation in a comprehensive exposition of Spinoza's philosophy.

To say that the Jewish law is not the true law is to imply a knowledge of what the true law is. One way of looking at the latter part of Spinoza's *Ethics* is as an attempt to specify that true law. In the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza had argued that the law of Moses, with all of its ceremonial requirements, was not intended as a universal law, binding on all men, but only as a prescription for the Jewish people; that it was aimed at the preservation of the Jewish state, and was not binding even on the Jewish people after the destruction of their state. There Spinoza had summed up the true, universal law in the precept that we should love God as the supreme good, it being understood that this love of God entailed love of, and justice toward, one's neighbor. But his argument there for regarding the love of God as man's supreme good was very brief and sketchy. He left the provision of detail, the full discussion and rational defense of the way of life this end required, to the comprehensive treatise on ethics he already had under way, that is, to the work we know as his *Ethics*.

In a properly philosophical treatment of the right way of living, the true law will not be thought of as an arbitrary commandment, issued by a personal God, to a being capable either of obeying or of disobeying, and subject to extrinsic rewards and penalties, depending on whether he chooses obedience or disobedience.[9] Rather, the law will be thought of as a system of eternal truths, following from the nature of man in the same way the properties of a triangle follow from its definition, instructing us as to the necessary consequences of acting one way rather than another, and deriving whatever motivational force it has from the fact

[9] See the excerpt from the *Theological-Political Treatise* in Preliminaries II.D.

that, whether we are conscious of it or not, we necessarily desire certain ends. The first step toward a philosophical treatment of the true law, therefore, is to expand the theory of human nature whose metaphysical outlines were given in Part II by developing the systematic psychology of Part III.

In the seventeenth century developing a systematic psychology involved giving an account of the various passions to which man was liable. Descartes' last work, *The Passions of the Soul*, had been an attempt to define the principal human passions, with a view toward learning how to subject those passions to reason, as a means of reaching true peace of mind. Spinoza is engaged in a similar project: he will identify three primitive passions—desire, joy, and sadness—though he will prefer to call them affects, since sometimes we are active, and not passive, when we are in these states; he will attempt to explain how all other human affects—love and hate, hope and fear, self-esteem and humility, and the like—are particular complications of these basic three, usually because they involve the combination of a purely affective state (like joy) with some kind of cognitive state (such as a belief about an external object that it is the cause of the joy); and he will do all this with a view to determining which affects are good, or in accordance with reason, and which are evil, or contrary to reason. Psychology is in the service of ethics here. Ultimately we want to know how to control, as far as possible, those affects which are contrary to reason.

But Spinoza's psychology, unlike Descartes', is not primarily classificatory. Conceiving man as a part of nature, rather than as a dominion within a dominion, he is convinced that human behavior exemplifies laws as strict as any in physics, laws which can be organized into a deductive system in which the less general laws (those, say, which explain the behavior of people in the grip of some particular affect, like hate or envy or jealousy) are derived from more fundamental principles. Part of the task of psychology is to systematize those laws.[10] Chief among them is the law Spinoza enunciates in IIIP6: "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being." As Spinoza interprets this principle, sometimes referred to as the *conatus* doctrine (from the Latin word here translated as "striving"), it requires not merely that things strive for self-preservation, but also that they strive to increase their power of action (IIIP12). From this basic principle (together, sometimes, with assumptions from Part II about how man's cognitive powers function), Spinoza undertakes to deduce a great many principles which

[10] That Spinoza does conceive this to be the task of psychology seems a strong confirmation of the interpretation I advanced above of his theory of causality and explanation.

he thinks will be helpful in constructing a rational plan of life: for example, that hate is increased by being returned, but can be destroyed by love (IIIP43), or that hate is destroyed if the sadness it involves is attached to the idea of another cause (IIIP48).

The *conatus* doctrine functions not only as a foundation for psychology, but also as a foundation for ethics, insofar as it gives content to the notion of a rational plan of life. Spinoza defines the good as "what we certainly know to be useful to us" (IVD1) and evil as "what we certainly know prevents us from being masters of some good" (IVD2). We can identify what is truly useful to us with what helps us to persevere in our being and increase our power of action, for these are ends we necessarily have. Insofar as our actions can be explained by our striving for these things, we act in accordance with reason and we act virtuously (IVP18S). Insofar as our lives are dominated by affects which express this striving, we possess the good. So, for example, when the body's overall power of acting is increased (and hence the mind's overall power of thinking is increased), we experience that special kind of joy Spinoza calls cheerfulness, and this is always good (IVP42). On the other hand, when our overall power of acting and thinking is decreased, we experience melancholy, which is always evil. Other affects require more complex judgments. Sometimes we may feel a pleasure which in itself is good, but overall is evil because it interferes with the total functioning of mind and body (IVP43). And sometimes affects like pity, humility, and repentance, which in themselves involve sadness and to that extent are evil, may, because of their consequences, be more useful than harmful (IVPP50, 53, 54). But hate, and related affects, like envy, mockery, anger, and vengeance, can never be good (IVP45, 45C). The feelings and behavior which the *Ethics* recommends as good, it recommends as necessary means to a necessary end; those which it condemns as evil, it condemns as necessarily frustrating that end.

Of the various things which are useful to man, none, according to Spinoza, is more useful than his fellow man (IVP18S). So one of the first requirements of reason is that people should seek "to form associations, to bind themselves by those bonds most apt to make one people of them, and absolutely, to do those things which serve to strengthen friendships" (IVApp12). The central association which people rationally pursuing their self-interest must form is the state (IVP37S2). For only if individual human beings come together to create an entity with the power to prescribe a common rule of life, to make laws, and to enforce them with the threat of punishment for violation, will they have any reasonable level of security against the possibility of harm from their fellows. Spinoza accepts this Hobbesian conclusion, not on the

Hobbesian ground that the rational pursuit of self-interest in the state of nature would lead to preemptive violence of each individual against every other individual, but on the Spinozistic ground that people are not reliably rational. Instead they are regularly subject to passions which are capable of overpowering their rational desires. If they lived according to the guidance of reason, they would be able to possess their natural right to pursue their own interest without injury to anyone else. Because they do not, the state is necessary to prevent outbreaks of violence which would be disadvantageous to all concerned.

This difference between Hobbes and Spinoza comes partly from a difference of opinion about what is truly good, or about what would be desired by someone who was thinking clearly about her own interests. Hobbes sees people as necessarily competing for such things as honor, riches, and power over others, goods which cannot be shared without at least one of those who shares having less than she would have had otherwise. Spinoza, on the other hand, thinks that the highest good is the knowledge of God (IVP28)—understood as a knowledge of nature (VP24)—and this is a good which can be shared by many without anyone's portion being thereby diminished. In fact, I think Spinoza attaches the importance he does to friendship because he sees that as friends share their knowledge with each other, each finds that his own portion of knowledge is increased. The state is necessary not only as a device for preventing violence, but also as providing the only environment in which people will be able to cultivate their highest capacity, the capacity for knowledge.

Part III of the Ethics undertakes to explain the causes and consequences of the ways people commonly act. Part IV attempts to turn these descriptive laws into a set of prescriptions, dictates of reason, the free man's substitute for the law of Moses. Given people's fundamental desires, and given the necessary consequences of acting one way rather than another, a man of reason, a free man, would love even his enemies (IVP46), would always act honestly and not deceptively (IVP72), would strive to bind other men to him in friendship (IVAppl2), and so on. But men are not free; they do not, for the most part, act according to the dictates of reason. On the contrary, nothing is clearer than that they often see the better course and follow the worse (IVPref, P17S). One of Spinoza's purposes in Parts III and IV has been to explain why this is so, why our passions exercise such great power over us.

In Part V one of his purposes is to explain how we can, in some measure, bring those passions under the power of reason. His most promising strategies for doing this rely on the fact that many affects involve a cognitive element. Hate, for example, is defined as sadness accompanied by the idea of an external cause, that is, by a belief about some

person or thing that it is the cause of my sadness. If that belief is false or ill-founded, as may often be the case, I may be able to rid myself of my hate by coming to recognize the inadequacy of the belief it involved (VP2). I may, of course, still be sad, but sadness is, in general, a less harmful emotion than hate, since it does not perpetuate a vicious cycle of attempts to harm and to retaliate for harm. Similarly, Spinoza argues that if we come to understand the actions of others as a necessary effect of the circumstances in which they were placed, this will tend to diminish the negative emotions we feel toward them, redirecting them at other, possibly less harmful targets. For example (to use the jargon of contemporary psychotherapy), if I come to understand your actions as the product of low self-esteem, caused long ago by negative lessons learned from parents and teachers, the anger I feel toward them may be less dangerous to my well-being, since I may not have to deal with them in any direct way. Spinozistic therapy may require favorable circumstances to be effective, but that, unfortunately, is true of any therapy.

Since the *Ethics* was published only after Spinoza's death, he was unable to respond to the criticisms its publication provoked. But his work did circulate in manuscript form before it was published and received some very illuminating criticism from a young German nobleman, Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, who carried on an extended correspondence with Spinoza, sometimes through their mutual friend, George Hermann Schuller. Both Tschirnhaus and Schuller had been students at the University of Leiden. This correspondence ranged over a variety of subjects: freedom, the relation among the attributes, the nature of the infinite modes, and the deduction of bodies from the nature of extension. Our selections conclude with highlights from that correspondence.

II. Bibliographical Note

Most of the translations in this volume come from Volume I of *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton University Press, 1985), and incorporate numerous corrections suggested to me by readers of that volume. (Thanks are due to Jonathan Bennett, Peter Ghiringelli, Timothy O'Hagan, and especially Samuel Shirley.) The translations of excerpts from the *Theological-Political Treatise* and of letters with a number greater than 29 foreshadow the appearance of Volume II. Where materials in this volume appeared in Volume I of *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, the work of translation was done largely with the research support of the Australian National University. Where they foreshadow material which will appear in Volume II, I have had support from the National

A SPINOZA READER

Preliminaries

I. A Portrait of the Philosopher as a Young Man[1]

[1] 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 fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected—whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity. II/5

[2] I say that *I resolved at last*—for at first glance it seemed ill-advised to be willing to lose something certain for something then uncertain. I saw, of course, the advantages that honor and wealth bring, and that I would be forced to abstain from seeking them, if I wished to devote myself seriously to something new and different; and if by chance the greatest happiness lay in them, I saw that I should have to do without it. But if it did not lie in them, and I devoted my energies only to acquiring them, then I would equally go without it.

[3] So I wondered whether perhaps it would be possible to reach my new goal—or at least the certainty of attaining it—without changing the conduct and plan of life which I shared with other men. Often I tried this, but in vain. For most things which present themselves in life, and which, to judge from their actions, men think to be the highest good, may be reduced to these three: wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure. The mind is so distracted by these three that it cannot give the slightest thought to any other good. II/6

[4] For as far as sensual pleasure is concerned, the mind is so caught up in it, as if at peace in a [true] good, that it is quite prevented from thinking of anything else. But after the enjoyment of sensual pleasure is past, the greatest sadness follows. If this does not completely engross, still it thoroughly confuses and dulls the mind.

The mind is also distracted not a little by the pursuit of honors and wealth, particularly when the latter is sought only for its own sake, because it is assumed to be the highest good. [5] But the mind is far more distracted by honor. For this is always assumed to be good through itself and the ultimate end toward which everything is directed.

[1] From the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Bruder §§1–17.


image
not
available


image
not
available