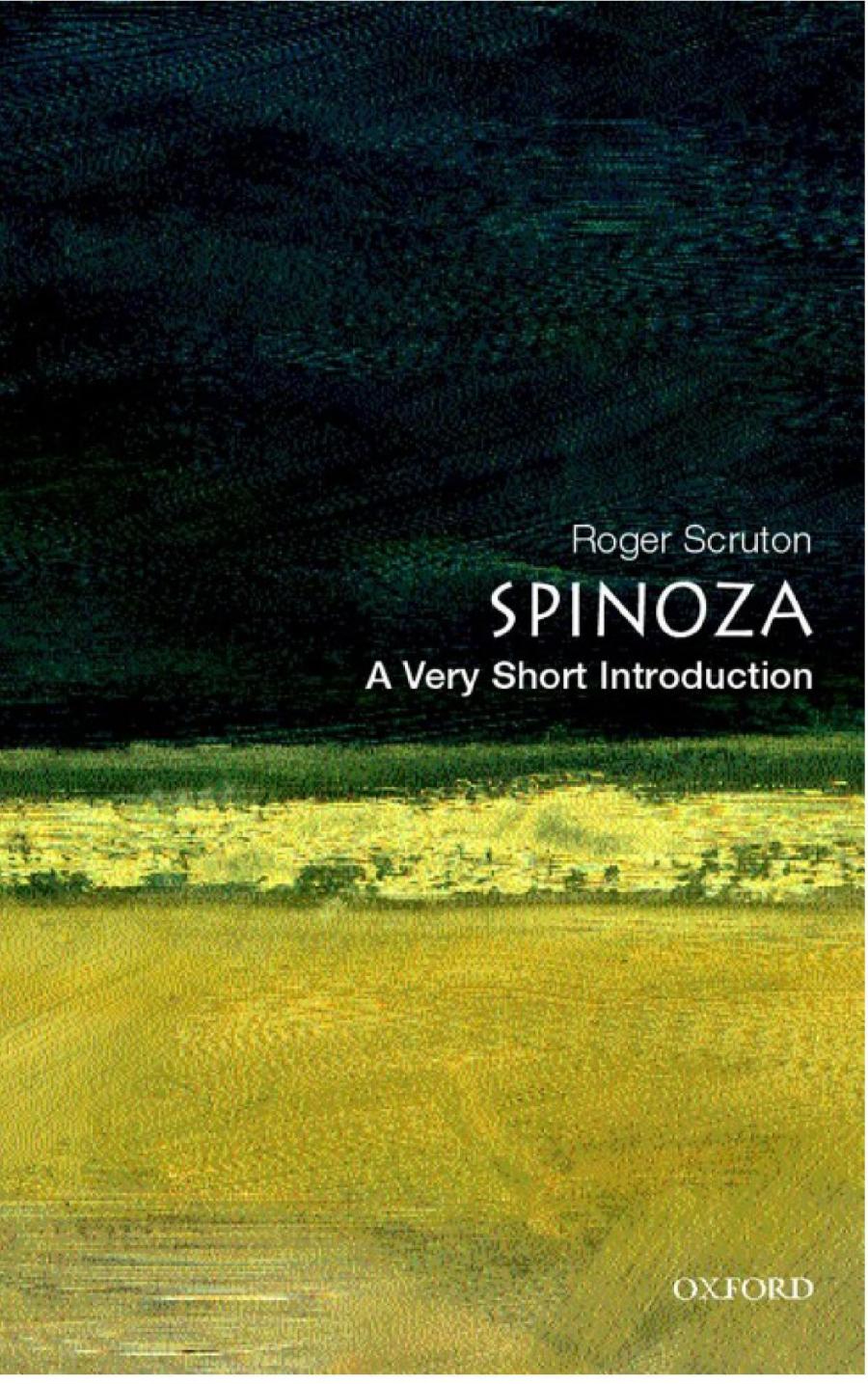

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SPINOZA

A Very Short Introduction

Roger Scruton

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Preface

This book was originally published in 1986. In revising it for the present edition I have made only small changes for the sake of clarity, and in order to correct errors of reasoning and scholarship. Spinoza's greatness and originality are hidden behind a remote, impassive, and often impenetrable style. Few have understood his arguments in their entirety; fewer still have recognized their continuing moral significance. I have presented no more than an outline, and am acutely aware of the injustice done, not only to Spinoza, but also to the patient scholars who have wrestled with his meaning. My primary object has been to describe, in simple language, the contours of a complex system of thought. Even so, I have been unable to make Spinoza's theory of substance fully accessible, and Chapter 3 must therefore be read twice if it is to be understood.

I have benefited from many students and friends, and in particular from David Murray, whose erudition saved me from several errors of interpretation. I have also benefited from Joanna North, whose unpublished work suggested ways of translating Spinoza's most awkward conceptions into terms that are intelligible and interesting to the modern reader – I am grateful to her, not only for the chance to read and discuss her work, but also for her detailed criticisms of my own. She has no part in the failings of this book, but a considerable part in its virtues, if it has any.

Roger Scruton
Malmesbury, December 2001

Abbreviations

I have used the following abbreviations in referring to Spinoza's principal works:

C *Correspondence*

E *Ethics*

I *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*Tractatus de Intellectu Emendatione*)

M *Metaphysical Thoughts* (Appendix to *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*)

P *Political Treatise* (*Tractatus Politicus*)

S *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-being*

T *Theologico-Political Treatise* (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*)

Where necessary I have used my own translations; otherwise, I have consulted the editions referred to at the end of this book, under Further reading. A glossary of Spinoza's principal terms, alerting the reader to variations in the standard translations of them, also occurs at the end of this work.

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Chapter 1
Life and character

Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza (1632–77) lived in the Netherlands at a time when scientific discovery, religious division, and profound political change had revolutionized the nature and application of philosophy. While he joined eagerly in the contemporary intellectual battles, philosophy was, for Spinoza, not a weapon but a way of life, a sacred order whose servants were transported to a supreme and certain blessedness. But every order requires a sacrifice, and that demanded by philosophy – the adoption of truth as one's master and one's goal – is neither easily undertaken, nor readily understood by those who refuse it. To the mass of mankind, therefore, the philosopher may appear as a spiritual saboteur, a subverter of things lawfully established, and an apologist for the devil. So Spinoza appeared to his contemporaries, and for many years after his death he was regarded as the greatest heretic of the 17th century.

Spinoza's ancestors were Spanish Jews who had settled during the 16th century on the borders of Spain and Portugal, there to maintain a flourishing trade. For several centuries such people had lived relatively securely in the Spanish peninsula, protected by the Muslim princes, and mingling openly with their Islamic neighbours. Their theologians and scholars had joined in the great revival of Aristotelian philosophy, and one of them – Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, 1135–1204) – had exerted a far-reaching influence, not only over Judaism but also over Islam and Christianity. It was Maimonides, indeed, who did most to set medieval theology upon its

Aristotelian path – a path that led, at last, to the strange stark theism, which many denounced as atheism, of Spinoza.

1. Portrait of Spinoza, *c.*1660.

When the kingdom of Granada was conquered by Ferdinand and Isabella, and the Arabs were finally expelled from the peninsula, an epoch of vengeance began. Christ's enemies

were now assiduously punished for crimes of which they had been hitherto unaware. To save themselves from the Inquisition, Jews were obliged either to convert or to emigrate, and the multitude of converted Jews – vulgarly known as *marranos* – led a miserable existence, under the vigilant eye of an Inquisition that could never quite believe in the sincerity of a conversion induced by itself. (The term *marrano* is sometimes thought to derive from the obscure sentence in 1 Corinthians 16: 22: 'If any man loveth not the Lord, let him be *anathema maranatha*'. It could also be a corruption of *morisco* –'moor'. However, its everyday meaning in Spanish is 'pig'.)

The Spanish monarchy's intolerable combination of spiritual tyranny and secular arrogance provoked at last the revolt which initiated its decline. From the desperate rising of a handful of subjects in the Netherlands there sprang a new commonwealth, and one which promised to be as free and tolerant as the Arabian princedoms of Spain. In the spring of 1593 a small body of *marranos* sailed secretly from Portugal, attracted by the decree of toleration which had been made in 1579 by the Union of Utrecht, when the seven northern provinces, combining against their Spanish sovereign, had sought the protection of the great William I of Orange (William the Silent). Calling at Emden the *marranos* were advised by the German Jews of East Friesland to make for Amsterdam, where they promptly reverted to their ancestral faith which the Inquisition, despite the most ingenious methods, had failed to eradicate.

2. Portrait of William of Orange, *c.*1560.

The causes of the revolt in the Netherlands were many, but principal among them was the advance made by the Reformation and the desire to establish sufficient freedom of worship to permit the Reformed churches to exist, and their congregations to live and prosper. The war with Spain continued spasmodically until the peace of Munster in 1648, and during this time the strange new commonwealth defined its borders and began to prosper within them. Known

The hidden assumption implies that relations of dependence in the world are all intelligible as logical relations between ideas. Thus something is independent if its properties follow from its idea: that is if you do not need to look outside the idea of the thing in order to explain it. B is dependent on A if the nature of B follows not from the idea of B but from the idea of A. All properties are in this sense dependent on, or caused by, the substances in which they inhere. And this is what Spinoza means by 'in': 'B is *in* A' is another way of saying that A is the explanation of B.

This odd use of the word 'in' can be explained by an example. Suppose a group of people join to form a club, which then does things, owns things, organizes things. When we say that the club bought a house, we really mean that the members did various things with a specific legal result. But none of the members bought a house. Hence it looks as though the club is an independent entity, doing things on its own account. In fact, however, it is dependent for its existence and nature on the activities of its members. It is only because *they* do things that the club does anything. In Spinoza's idiom, the club is 'in' its members. We, of course, would say that the members are in the club: the example therefore illustrates the way in which Spinoza's purified metaphysical idiom conflicts with 'the language of man'.

An empiricist would object strongly to Spinoza's way of understanding relations of dependence, arguing that Spinoza has detached causality from the world and attached it instead to our conceptions. Explanation, for Spinoza, does not involve the observation of regularities, but the deduction of one thing from another. In other words, a causal connection is discovered by showing a connection between concepts. But what guarantee do we have that the world *is* as we conceive