EDINBURGH PHILOSOPHICAL GUIDES

Spinoza's Ethics

Beth Lord

Spinoza's *Ethics*

An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide

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Edinburgh University Press

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
22 George Square, Edinburgh

www.euppublishing.com

Typeset in 11/13pt Monotype Baskerville by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire, and
printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 3449 1 (hardback)
ISBN 978 0 7486 3450 7 (paperback)

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Series Editor's Preface

To us, the principle of this series of books is clear and simple: what readers new to philosophical classics need first and foremost is help with *reading* these key texts. That is to say, help with the often antique or artificial style, the twists and turns of arguments on the page, as well as the vocabulary found in many philosophical works. New readers also need help with those first few daunting and disorienting sections of these books, the point of which are not at all obvious. The books in this series take you through each text step-by-step, explaining complex key terms and difficult passages which help to illustrate the way a philosopher thinks in prose.

We have designed each volume in the series to correspond to the way the texts are actually taught at universities around the world, and have included helpful guidance on writing university-level essays or examination answers. Designed to be read alongside the text, our aim is to enable you to *read* philosophical texts with confidence and perception. This will enable you to make your own judgements on the texts, and on the variety of opinions to be found concerning them. We want you to feel able to join the great dialogue of philosophy, rather than remain a well-informed eavesdropper.

Douglas Burnham

Acknowledgements

I thank all my colleagues at the University of Dundee, who have given me the opportunity to teach Spinoza and much support in writing this book. Thanks are due to series editor, Douglas Burnham, and to the editorial staff at Edinburgh University Press, for helpful comments along the way. I thank my husband, Jim Tomlinson, for his help and support. Above all, I wish to thank the students to whom I have taught Spinoza over the past five years. Their ideas, questions and ways of understanding and failing to understand Spinoza gave this book its shape. I especially thank the class of 2008, on whom many of the ideas in this book were tested.

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For Jim, who is full of joy.

Introduction

Why Read this Book?

This is a guidebook to the *Ethics*, the major work of the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. This book differs from other introductory books on Spinoza in a number of ways. First, it does not assume that you have any philosophical background. I do not presume that you know (or remember) Descartes' theory of substance, that you understand what 'extension' means or that you already know what 'naturalism' is. As far as possible, I explain Spinoza in terms that any reader can understand. Second, this book is designed to be read alongside the *Ethics*, page by page. I imagine you have both books open in front of you, turning to this book for clarification after reading a few pages of Spinoza. You will find concepts explained in exactly the same order as they arise in the *Ethics*. You can work through the book systematically or turn to specific sections as you need them.

Most importantly, this is a guide to *reading* the *Ethics*. It is not a guide to the critical literature, scholarly disagreements or objections of other philosophers. There are plenty of good books that will introduce you to those things. The belief guiding *this* book is that you need to read the text for yourself before getting embroiled in analysis and critical discussion. This book focuses on the *Ethics* itself. As you will see, I hardly make reference to critics and commentators at all.[1] Nor do I spend much time on those problems in the *Ethics* that are

[1] That is not to say that I have not made use of other commentators. Hallett (1957), Hampshire (1987), Curley (1988), and Deleuze (1988) have particularly influenced my interpretation of Spinoza. For historical material I have drawn especially on Israel (2001), and Nadler (2001).

entrenched as major scholarly debates. Instead, I consider the questions and problems that you, the reader, are likely to come up with and that generally go unanswered in philosophy books. These are the kinds of questions that my students find most compelling: How does Spinoza account for disability? What does his ethics say about animals? Is anger always evil? Is every aspect of my future already determined?

In short, this book is an explication of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Any explication of a text involves interpretation: choices about which topics to emphasise, how to understand key terms and sometimes, which of a variety of 'traditions' of reading Spinoza to follow. In this book, I have tried as far as possible to leave those traditions to one side and to offer an original interpretation of Spinoza based on reading the text itself. As you gain confidence in reading, your interpretation may differ from mine. All the better: this is a workbook for reading and understanding the *Ethics*. It is also a prompt for raising your own philosophical questions about the text and about the world.

Why Read Spinoza's *Ethics*?

Why are *you* reading Spinoza's *Ethics*? Perhaps it is assigned reading on a university course. Maybe you are a philosopher who wants to brush up on a neglected area. Or perhaps you are led by curiosity about the nature of reality, the mind and human behaviour. If you fall into any of these categories, this book – and indeed, Spinoza's *Ethics* itself – was written for you.

It may surprise you to hear that Spinoza's *Ethics* was written just as much for a non-expert audience in the twenty-first century as for the philosophical world of the seventeenth. Spinoza anticipated that his book would be read largely by those steeped in the philosophical traditions of the time. (If you do have some philosophical background, you may hear echoes of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Descartes and Hobbes in his work, as well as anticipations of Nietzsche, Sartre, Foucault and Deleuze.) But Spinoza would be delighted to learn of non-experts reading his work more than 300 years later, for his aim is to help as many people as possible understand the truth. The *Ethics* is a workbook designed to enable the reader to develop his or her own understanding. Spinoza thinks that if more people read the *Ethics*,

then reason and virtue amongst human beings will increase, leading to more peaceful and tolerant societies.

That is not to say that the *Ethics* is a kind of early self-help manual. Spinoza's *Ethics* is a rich and complex work of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. Undoubtedly, it is one of the most difficult philosophical books you will ever read. You will grapple with language and concepts that are unfamiliar and encounter ideas with which you may disagree profoundly. But it is also one of the most exciting philosophy books ever written. Spinoza gives us a programme for being human beings in the best way possible – a programme based on a deep understanding of the nature of reality that anyone can attain. He leads us on a journey that reveals to us the truth about what we are and our place in the universe. Understanding the truth about ourselves is the basis for positive human relationships, true scientific knowledge and good political organisation.

Spinoza can lead you to think differently about yourself and your life, about nature, about God, about freedom and about ethics. So perhaps the best reason for reading Spinoza's *Ethics* is this: it is a book that may change your life.

Spinoza: Rationalist, Empiricist, Atheist, Radical?

Spinoza (1632–77) is a philosopher of the seventeenth century. If you are a philosophy student, you may already know something about seventeenth-century philosophy from reading Descartes or Hobbes. You may know about eighteenth-century philosophy from reading Hume, Kant or Rousseau. Philosophers of this era have certain interests in common:

- the necessary existence of God;
- the nature of experience;
- the nature of substances;
- the role of reason in knowledge;
- the relation between mind and body;
- the question of freedom.

According to their views on these subjects, philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are divided into categories. Are they

rationalists or empiricists about knowledge? Are they materialists or idealists about reality? Typically, Spinoza is cast as a rationalist and a materialist: someone who believes that reason is the main ingredient of our knowledge of a world that is exclusively material.

These distinctions are not very helpful. Spinoza is called a rationalist because of the centrality of rational knowledge to his system. But if we call him a rationalist, we lose sight of the enormous emphasis he places on the experience and capabilities of the body. While Spinoza believes that the truth is known through reason, he also believes that rational knowledge could not be attained without experience and experiments. It is one of the aims of this book to persuade you that Spinoza is just as much an empiricist as he is a rationalist.

Another label frequently applied to Spinoza is 'atheist'. This may surprise you when you start to read the *Ethics*, since its first part is dedicated to proving the existence and nature of God. Spinoza is indeed an 'atheist' insofar as he denies the existence of the God of theism – an anthropomorphic, intentional God to be feared, worshipped and obeyed. Spinoza's dismissal of the theistic idea of God as illusory led him to be castigated as one who denies God altogether. However, it is clear that Spinoza believes very strongly in God in a different sense: a God that is identical with nature. This has led him to be labelled a pantheist (someone who believes God is everywhere) and a panentheist (someone who believes God is in every being).

Categorising Spinoza along these lines is useful only to the extent that it reminds us of the uniqueness of his system. Spinoza is interested in the same questions that other philosophers of his era were writing about, but he approaches them in a very different way. Spinoza is radical in his metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. The word 'radical' refers both to Spinoza's distinctness from the philosophical mainstream and to his subversion of it. Spinoza actively undermined establishment views about philosophy, religion and politics, because he believed that his society had got all three badly wrong. Spinoza's philosophical radicalism therefore runs parallel to his religious and political radicalism, for which he would be punished with exile, censorship and vilification.

Who was Spinoza?

Spinoza was born in Amsterdam in 1632, in the midst of an explosion of scientific, artistic and intellectual discoveries. The same decade saw the birth of John Locke, Louis XIV and Isaac Newton. In Amsterdam in 1632–3, Rembrandt van Rijn was painting the works that would establish him as a great artist and René Descartes was preparing to write his first philosophical works. In London, William Harvey had recently published his discoveries on the circulation of the blood, while in Florence, Galileo Galilei was placed under house arrest for defending the view that the earth revolves around the sun.

Bento, Baruch or Benedict de Spinoza was the son of Portuguese Jews who had fled religious persecution in Portugal at the end of the 1500s. (Bento, Spinoza's Portuguese name, was translated as Baruch in Hebrew – meaning 'blessed' – and Benedict in Latin.) Jews were persecuted throughout Europe at this time. Those countries that would accept them did not grant them full citizenship or rights to participate in the local economy, and often did not allow them to practise their religion. They were subject to prejudice, hatred and violence from the Christian authorities. In countries such as Spain and Portugal, Jews were obliged to convert (outwardly, at least) to Catholicism in order to avoid expulsion. These converts were known as marranos, and they lived as refugees even in the countries in which they were born.

When the Spinoza family emigrated to Amsterdam, it was to a comparatively tolerant society. Although Jews were not granted full rights of citizenship, they were allowed to run businesses, and made a major contribution to the economic success of the city. They were also allowed to practise Judaism openly, as long as the community regulated itself closely and did not interfere with the Christian majority. It was in this community of settled refugees that the Spinoza family ran a merchant business, importing wine, olive oil and other goods from Portugal.

The Dutch Republic in the 1650s and 1660s was economically very powerful. It was the wealthiest nation in Europe, largely due to its control of trade networks between Europe and Asia. A republic since the late sixteenth century, it was one of the first 'modern' states, for its strength lay in capitalism rather than the absolute

power of a monarch or the wealth of an aristocracy. Its governance, however, was highly unstable. For much of Spinoza's adult life, the Republic was led by a liberal republican, Jan de Witt, and governed and administered by wealthy merchants and their companies. But a major political faction, aligned with the Calvinist Church, supported the return of quasi-monarchical power to the House of Orange, and eventually seized power and assassinated de Witt in 1672. Throughout these decades, members of liberal and radical factions who publicly called for greater democracy and religious and economic reform risked censorship, imprisonment and exile. Meanwhile, the Dutch Republic was embroiled in a succession of wars with England and France.

Spinoza attended a Jewish school, learning Hebrew, theology, and commerce, to prepare him to work in his father's business, which he did until the age of 23. But his interests lay elsewhere, and he sought help from Franciscus van den Enden, a former Jesuit who taught Spinoza Latin and introduced him to the philosophy of Descartes. He very likely introduced Spinoza to radical politics as well. Beyond this, Spinoza had no formal philosophical training.

At the age of 23, in 1656, Spinoza was expelled from the Jewish community. Nobody is entirely certain why. The proclamation of expulsion refers to 'evil opinions and acts' and 'abominable heresies which he practised and taught'. Spinoza may have circulated unorthodox views about God or established an unsanctioned theological discussion group. It is certain that he had ties with political liberals outside the Jewish community. The Jewish authorities knew that toleration of Jews in Amsterdam rested on the contribution of Jewish merchants to the city's economy. They knew, too, that the rights they enjoyed could easily be taken away. If any individual Jew criticised the Dutch political or religious establishment, or questioned the way the Jewish community regulated itself, he put the entire community at risk. Expulsion was the most extreme sanction the Jewish religious authorities could impose on such a person. And unlike most other expulsions of the time, Spinoza's was permanent. Whatever danger Spinoza posed, exclusion was perceived to be the only way of dispelling it.

Spinoza's expulsion is not to be understood as an 'excommunication' in the way that term is used in the Catholic Church. For the Jewish community, which lacked the power of statehood, expulsion

was one of a limited number of ways of maintaining discipline. Individuals who did not conform to the religious, social or ethical norms of the community could be punished only by withholding rights to take part in certain community activities. These activities were deeply embedded in the Jewish way of life and their deprivation was life-diminishing (Nadler 2001: 4).

Whether or not Spinoza's offence did strike at the economic, political and religious stability of the community, his punishment deprived him of political, economic and religious status. He was banished from the Amsterdam community and from the family business, and was instead forced to live elsewhere and had to make his own way in the world. Despite its difficulties, this must have been just what Spinoza wanted: he was free to turn his back on the mercantile life and focus on philosophy, and now found a new community amongst the intellectuals, political radicals and religious dissenters of Leiden and the Hague. He learned the craft of lens-making, and was able to make a modest living grinding lenses for spectacles and microscopes until he died of lung disease (probably as a result of inhaling glass filaments) at the age of 45. Lens-making was a particularly appropriate activity for a philosopher who sought to enable people to see reality with greater clarity and distinctness.

In some ways, Spinoza had the archetypal existence of the reclusive philosopher: he lived alone, never married, never owned property and distanced himself from everyday material concerns. But Spinoza believed strongly in the power of communities, and maintained contact with local and international circles of philosophers and freethinkers. His life was exactly the striving for greater rationality and virtue that his philosophy recommends to others.

Spinoza's Works

During his lifetime, Spinoza published just two works: *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy and Metaphysical Thoughts* (1663) and the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670). His other texts, *The Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Wellbeing*, the *Hebrew Grammar* and the unfinished *Political Treatise* were published, along with the *Ethics*, by Spinoza's followers after his death.

The reason for the delayed publication of the *Ethics* was the

reputation Spinoza had acquired as a result of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. This work is a religious and political critique directly responsive to the Dutch Republic in the 1660s. It combines a critical study of the Bible with a critique of religious authority and a defence of liberal democracy, tolerance and freedom of expression. To say that the *Theological-Political Treatise* is radical is an understatement. Spinoza set out to demolish the whole system of established beliefs about political and religious authority, provoking condemnation and violent opposition. As one historian puts it:

> In the entire history of modern thought, only Marx and Nietzsche have so openly and provocatively repudiated almost the entire belief-system of the society around them, as Spinoza does here. (Israel 2001: 220)

To understand why Spinoza caused such outrage, read the following passage from his Preface to the *Theological-Political Treatise*:

> I have often wondered that men who make a boast of professing the Christian religion, which is a religion of love, joy, peace, temperance and honest dealing with all men, should quarrel so fiercely and display the bitterest hatred towards one another day by day . . .. I am quite certain that it stems from a widespread popular attitude of mind which looks on the ministries of the Church as dignities, its offices as posts of emolument and its pastors as eminent personages. For as soon as the Church's true function began to be thus distorted, every worthless fellow felt an intense desire to enter holy orders . . .. Little wonder then, . . . that faith has become identical with credulity and biased dogma. But what dogma! Degrading rational man to beast, completely inhibiting man's free judgment and his capacity to distinguish true from false, and apparently devised with the set purpose of utterly extinguishing the light of reason. Piety and religion . . . take the form of ridiculous mysteries, and men who utterly despise reason, who reject and turn away from the intellect as naturally corrupt – these are the men (and this is of all things the most iniquitous) who are believed to possess the divine light! (TPT Pref., CW 390–1)

Spinoza's criticism is breathtaking, even today. He accuses the Church of appointing self-aggrandising, anti-intellectual fools to positions of authority and of guiding people through lies and deceit. Religious dogma prevents people from using their reason, while faith is nothing more than superstition that inhibits enlightenment.

Organised religion is anti-rational and leads to hatred, violence and war.

Spinoza wants to diagnose *why* people irrationally follow such systems. Why, he wonders, are people distracted from Christianity's message of joy and love towards hatred and resentment? Why do they put up with a government that leads them into endless wars? And why do the majority long for *less* freedom and tolerance by fighting for the return of a monarch? Spinoza's answer is that both Church and State encourage the masses to remain irrational and powerless, thus ensuring the continuance of their own power. The result is a society of people discouraged from using their reason, who not only tolerate their own enslavement but actively fight for it.

Enlightenment involves enabling people to make use of their own reason. But Spinoza recognises that increased rationality depends on a change in political and social conditions. A liberal democracy, freedom of expression and the rejection of superstition are necessary conditions for the free use of reason. Spinoza argues that the Bible is not the word of God revealing metaphysical truths, but a human text, subject to critical interpretation like any other work of literature. A miracle is not a divine intervention, but a natural event whose causes are unknown to us. Theology is therefore distinct from philosophy and the sciences, and total freedom of expression should be allowed in the latter. The civil state can flourish and fulfil its purpose – greater freedom – only if people are free to exercise their reason.

The *Theological-Political Treatise* was published anonymously, but Spinoza quickly became known as its author. The result was explosive: he was charged with atheism, sacrilege and denial of the soul, and was attacked by all sides of the religious and philosophical spectrum. Spinoza became known throughout Europe as the dangerous and subversive author of a book that was universally banned.

This led to the widespread vilification of Spinoza's thought, but also to underground currents of interest from free-thinkers all over Europe. 'Spinozist' became a term of derision and shorthand for a variety of anti-establishment positions; it was used as an insult and threat to anyone propounding ideas even slightly related to Spinoza's. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the accusation of 'Spinozism' led philosophers to be dismissed from their posts and their books to be banned. So feared was this accusation

that it became commonplace for philosophers to publish denunciations of Spinoza – in most cases, without ever having read his work! It was not until the 1780s that it became acceptable to read his works, and even then, it was not without a *frisson* of danger.

The public outcry against the *Theological-Political Treatise* made it impossible for Spinoza to publish his major work, the *Ethics*, during his lifetime. When it was published after his death in 1677, it too was banned. However, Spinoza was able to send drafts to his friends and followers. The 'Spinozist circle' was in regular correspondence with Spinoza and wrote to him often, seeking clarification of some of his more obscure points. We have them to thank for some of Spinoza's clearest explanations and for giving us some indication of Spinoza's personality. Like any teacher, Spinoza is happy to offer his help – but only to students who genuinely make the effort to learn.

Writing and Reading the *Ethics*

One reason for the difficulty of reading the *Ethics* is that Spinoza wrote it using 'the geometrical method'. The *Ethics* is not written in paragraphs of fluent prose, but in definitions, axioms, propositions and demonstrations.

Why does Spinoza use the geometrical method, which he himself admits is 'cumbersome'? Setting out propositions geometrically was not a wholly uncommon mode of philosophical presentation at the time. It enables the philosopher to construct a grid of cross-references, each proposition demonstrable by reference to earlier ones, building up to a complex network of interrelated truths. Many students, once they get used to it, actually prefer Spinoza's geometrical method to the florid prose of Hume or the awkward textual constructions of Kant. Every proposition is fully explained, right there and then. If you cannot understand how a proposition is justified, Spinoza tells you exactly which earlier propositions you need to return to in order to demonstrate it. It is a remarkably clear and efficient method of writing.

Spinoza has another good reason for using the geometrical method, namely, that it has an important relation to the way the reader's understanding develops. Earlier, I called the *Ethics* a workbook designed to help the reader develop his or her own reasoning.

The *Ethics* is therefore not like philosophical texts written in prose. It is not a commentary on reality that explains the truth. Rather, it is an exercise in *unfolding* the truth through the *active thinking* of the reader. The *Ethics* is philosophy as activity and performance. As we read it, we are meant to be caught up in a certain movement of thought and to understand the truth through the activity that Spinoza draws us into. The reader is displaced from her usual position of externality to the text and made to be part of its workings. This is one reason why the *Ethics* is so difficult to read, but also why it is so intoxicating.

The revelation of truth through the reader's thinking activity reflects Spinoza's belief (which we will discuss further in Part II) that a true idea is an activity of thought. A true idea is not a picture in the mind and it cannot adequately be expressed using representational means, such as language or pictures. That means that a text – any text – will be inadequate with respect to true ideas. A text can symbolically *represent* those true ideas, and the best texts will prompt us to *actively think* true ideas. Spinoza's text, then, does not tell you the truth as a narrative. It aims to engage you in active thinking, to know the truth for yourself and thus to build your own rational understanding (Deleuze 1988: 83). This is best achieved through the geometrical method, which requires the reader to understand ideas as they follow logically from other ideas. For Spinoza, this logical order is the order of true understanding, as we shall see in Part I. As we perform each demonstration, our own thinking latches on to that order of true understanding.

In the *Ethics*, you will encounter the following elements:

- **Definitions** which set out the meanings of key terms.
- **Axioms** which set out basic, self-evident truths. (More will be said about definitions and axioms in Part I.)
- **Propositions** – the points that Spinoza argues for – and their **demonstrations**.
- **Corollaries**, which are propositions that follow directly from the propositions they are appended to.
- **Lemma**: propositions specifically related to physical bodies (these appear only in Part II).
- **Postulates**: assumptions about the human body that are drawn from (and apparently, justified by) common experience.

- **Scholia**: explanatory remarks on the propositions. In the scholia, Spinoza comments on his demonstrations, gives examples, raises and replies to objections and makes piquant observations about people's beliefs and practices. The scholia are some of the most interesting and enjoyable passages of the *Ethics*.

Before we begin, here are a few tips for reading the *Ethics*:

- It is important to read the book sequentially. Because the later propositions depend on earlier ones, this is not a book in which you can easily skip back and forth.
- If time allows, read the whole of the *Ethics*. If your university course treats only some sections of the text, read the whole Part in which those sections occur.
- Read slowly and carefully. Try to understand what Spinoza is trying to prove and to work through Spinoza's demonstration.
- Sometimes it is helpful to read over a few propositions quickly, to get a gist of where Spinoza is going, before returning to read the demonstrations and scholia in detail.
- You may need to read some demonstrations multiple times (and even then, they may not make sense).
- You will encounter a lot of terms that are unfamiliar or that don't mean what you think they mean. Don't panic – this book is here to help.

Make use of this *Philosophical Guide* to whatever extent you find helpful. It can be read concurrently with the *Ethics* or referred to afterwards. I clarify Spinoza's meaning as I understand it, based on my extensive work with his text and commentaries on it. I offer relevant examples as often as possible. I have developed a series of figures which illustrate some of Spinoza's most difficult points. My concern throughout has been with the experience of you, the reader, as you encounter the difficulties of the *Ethics*, and as you discover its fascination.

Abbreviations

I refer to Edwin Curley's translation of the *Ethics*. Quotes and other references are not to page number, but rather to proposition number

(and, where relevant, corollary number, scholium number, etc.). I make use of the following abbreviations.

D = Definition
A = Axiom
P = Proposition
Dem. = Demonstration
C = Corollary
S = Scholium
Exp. = Explanation
L = Lemma
Post. = Postulate
Pref. = Preface
App. = Appendix
Def. Aff. = 'Definitions of the Affects' at the end of Part III.

Each section of this book looks at one Part of the *Ethics*. When I refer to material from that Part within its designated section, I simply note the proposition number (for example: D3 = Definition 3; P33S = Proposition 33, Scholium; P16C2 = Proposition 16, Corollary 2). When I refer to material from another Part, the Part number is given in roman numerals (ID5 = Part I, Definition 5; IIL7 = Part II, Lemma 7; IVP37S2 = Part IV, Proposition 37, Scholium 2).

Occasionally I refer to Spinoza's other works:

TEI (followed by paragraph number) = *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*
TPT = *Theological-Political Treatise*

Letter (followed by letter number) = an item from Spinoza's correspondence
CW = Spinoza's *Complete Works*, translated by Samuel Shirley.

1. A Guide to the Text

Part I: Being, Substance, God, Nature

Probably the most difficult challenge you will face in reading the *Ethics* is getting through Part I. You are presented with strange terminology, difficult metaphysical concepts and a series of arguments that don't seem to be about anything real or concrete. These barriers can make reading this Part confusing, frustrating and boring. But with a little guidance, these initial sections will open up and become clearer. Once you have grasped the basic ideas Spinoza sets out, you will begin to understand his conception of reality, and that gives you the key to everything else in the book. The aim of this section is to help you to read this first Part and to clarify your own understanding – not only of Spinoza's text, but of reality itself.

One of the reasons for the difficulty of Part I is that it is concerned with ontology. Ontology is the theory of being: before we understand what *things* are, we need to understand what *being* is. What are we talking about when we say that things *are*? What is the source of the *being* of things? Even trying to think about these questions is difficult, let alone trying to answer them. You may wonder why it is important to answer these questions, given that our knowledge and experience is of concrete *things*, not of abstract *being as such*. Spinoza believes that we need to start with *being* because *being* is not a conceptual abstraction; it is the concrete ground of all of reality. Only once we understand what *being* is will we have the right basis for understanding objects, people, ideas and the universe.

Spinoza's basic idea is that *being is one*, that *being* is equivalent to God and that all the individual beings we experience are 'modes' of being and thus 'modes' of God. This is what Spinoza tries to convince you of in Part I.

The Seventeenth-century Common-sense View

One way in to the *Ethics* is to consider the readers for whom Spinoza was writing. Seventeenth-century readers came to Spinoza's text with a certain common-sense view of the world, a view which Spinoza hoped to convince them was misguided. Taking their perspective helps us to understand his purpose; at the same time, it makes us question the common-sense views that we too bring to the text. This helpful method of starting to read the *Ethics* I borrow from Curley (1988).

Spinoza knew that his readers would come to the *Ethics* with some ontological ideas already in mind. This is no less true today than it was in the seventeenth century. Even if you don't have a well worked-out theory of being, it is inevitable that you hold *some* conception of reality. It is likely, for instance, that you think of the things in the world around you as separate, individual objects. Probably you think of yourself as something that is independent of material things and different from them due to your subjectivity, consciousness or free will. Perhaps you think of your mind as a wholly material part of the body, or perhaps that your mind is a different, immaterial kind of entity. You may think of yourself as having a soul that will exist in another form after death.

Spinoza's seventeenth-century readership would have held a similar set of views, a combination of the Aristotelian principles that had been the basis of science and metaphysics for hundreds of years, and the philosophy of minds and bodies that had recently been proposed by Descartes. Spinoza's readers were thoroughly familiar with certain Aristotelian principles, the most basic of which is the idea that the universe is made up of substances and their attributes. For Aristotle, substances are the basic, independently existing 'things' of the universe, and attributes are their changeable properties. Whereas attributes depend on substances for their existence, substances do not *logically* depend on anything beyond themselves. The existence of a substance, such as a human body, does not *logically require* the existence of anything else to be what it is. By contrast, the property 'weight' cannot exist unless it is the weight of some body. 'Weight' does not exist independently; it *logically requires* the existence of a substance in order to exist.

Descartes heavily revised this Aristotelian picture in his 1644 work *Principles of Philosophy* and in his earlier *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The ideas in these texts shook up the Aristotelian world-view which

had held sway for centuries. Descartes agreed with Aristotle that the universe is made up of innumerable substances with changeable properties. But he believed that underlying those changeable properties, every substance has one fundamental property that is essential to it. Substances which are bodies have the property of *extension*. 'Extension' is a term philosophers use to refer to the way things take up space, or their physicality (imagine a point 'extending' itself in space to become a line, then a two-dimensional figure, then a three-dimensional figure). Although the particular extent of a body is subject to change, the property of *extension as such* is not removable or changeable. Descartes also believed there were non-physical substances, minds, which have the essential property of *thinking*. Just as extension is essential to what it is to be a body, thinking is essential to what it is to be a mind. These essential properties, extension and thinking, Descartes called 'principal attributes', whereas he called changeable properties 'modes' of those attributes. Substances, for Descartes, are either 'extended substances' (bodies) or 'thinking substances' (minds), and these two kinds of substance are fundamentally different. Descartes posited, and attempted to demonstrate, a necessarily existing infinite thinking substance, God, who creates and sustains the existence of all these substances.

A seventeenth-century Cartesian, then, believed that the world is made up of an enormous number of substances, some of them minds and others bodies, whose existence is made possible by a necessarily existing God. Figure 1.1 represents this common-sense view of multiple substances with their principal attributes.

Spinoza's objective in Part I is to convince readers that their common-sense, Aristotelian–Cartesian view of a world of multiple, individual substances is wrong. He does this by letting readers discover that if they start with *good definitions* of terms like substance, attribute and God, they will *not* arrive at the conception of reality described by Descartes or Aristotle. They will, instead, work through Spinoza's propositions and arguments to arrive at the *true* conception of reality: a single substance equivalent to God.

Definitions

This is why Spinoza begins Part I with *definitions*. If we are going to make use of terms like substance and attribute in order to understand

	nature. It necessarily does what its essence determines to be good for its being.
Mediate infinite mode	The infinite expression of God's essence, the existence of which follows from the nature of an immediate infinite mode (IP22).
Mind	The true idea of a body, comprised of multiple true ideas of the parts and activities of that body. In its essence, those ideas are clear and distinct, and unfold according to a determinate order. In durational existence, those ideas are partial and confused with ideas of other things, and they unfold according to its encounters with those things.
Motion and rest	*See* infinite motion and rest.
Nature	This term is used in three senses. (a) When capitalised ('God or Nature'), it refers to God or substance, i.e. being as such. (b) As an uncapitalised noun, it refers to the world of finite beings. (c) When it modifies another noun ('the nature of a horse', 'laws of its nature'), it means the essence of a thing, or the essential aspects that a thing shares with others of the same kind ('human nature').
Notion	Usually means the same as concept or idea.
Objective being	The being of something in God's idea, but not in actual existence. This meaning is contrary to our contemporary usage of 'objective', leading to potential confusion; fortunately, Spinoza uses it rarely (e.g. at IIP8C).
'Order and connection'	The order according to which ideas (and, in parallel, actions) follow from one another. In the infinite intellect, and in adequate understanding, ideas are

	connected in logical order. In the world of finite things, and in inadequate understanding, ideas (i.e. images) are connected according to the order of experience. Our goal is to isolate our ideas and activities from our experience, and to connect them according to the order of the intellect (see VP10).
Perceive	The thinking activity that the mind is determined to do by something else. Perceiving indicates that something else acts on the mind and body, and that the mind and body are affected by it (sensing is a variant of perceiving).
Perfection	The being, or essence, of a thing, and the completeness with which that thing's being, or essence, is actualised. (a) God is absolutely perfect because its essence is infinite and its essence entails the necessity of its complete actualisation. A finite mode is never absolutely perfect, but can become more perfect as it actualises its essence to a greater extent through increasing its power (see IIIP11S). (b) We judge things more or less perfect in relation to one another insofar as, from our perspective, they have more or less being (IVPref.).
Possibility	There is no possibility in Spinoza's system; all real things are necessary, and all non-real things are impossible. Finite modes use the term 'possibility' in reference to something which is contingent and whose determinate cause is uncertain (IVD4).
Power	The essence of a thing; its ability to actualise itself. Also a finite mode's capacity for mental and bodily activity.
Reality	See Perfection, above ('By reality and

	perfection I understand the same thing'; IID6). 'Reality' is not equivalent to 'Actuality'. Anything that has being, or essence, is *real;* some real things are actual (i.e. those that exist durationally), and some real things are not actual (those that no longer, or do not yet, exist durationally). In this book, when I use 'reality' in the conventional sense to mean 'everything that is', I mean what exists actually *and* what exists 'virtually', in God's idea.
Reason	The second kind of knowledge, in which certain aspects of the body are adequately (and therefore truly and certainly) understood. NB, there is no 'faculty of reason'. Reasoning is the activity of the finite mind when it conceives eternal truths.
Transcendent	External. 'X is transcendent to Y' means that X stands outside of Y, and may be different in kind from it. Strictly speaking, there is nothing transcendent, and there are no transcendent causes, in Spinoza's universe. See its opposite, 'immanent'.
'Unconfuse'	To clarify; to transform an inadequate idea into an adequate one.
Unfold	(a) To actualise one's essence. (b) From one adequate idea of some aspect of the body, to deduce a sequence of other adequate ideas.
Universal	A term that the human mind invents to group together many images sharing certain superficial features, e.g. 'animal', 'thing', 'Italian'. All universals are imaginary, based on what appears to the senses, not on the common notions that are truly shared by individuals (IIP40S1).

Further Reading

1. The history of Spinoza's life and thought

If you are interested in Spinoza's life, Nadler (1999) is the place to start. Nadler (2001) explicitly investigates Spinoza's exclusion from the Jewish community. The radical nature of Spinoza's work, its impact on succeeding generations of thinkers, dissenters, and censors throughout Europe, and Spinoza's importance to the Enlightenment, is masterfully treated by Israel (2001). A popular account of Spinoza's encounter with the philosopher G.W. Leibniz is offered in Stewart (2006).

2. Other introductory guides to Spinoza and the *Ethics*

Two books written at introductory level which will introduce you to contemporary debates in Spinoza interpretation and scholarship are Lloyd (1996) and Nadler (2006). Curley (1988) is written for undergraduates and foregrounds scientific questions in the *Ethics*. Deleuze (1988) is an extremely accessible and engaging interpretation of the *Ethics* as practical philosophy. Deleuze focuses on the *Ethics* as a guide for living and thinking, and provides a useful glossary of concepts.

3. Scholarly commentaries and analyses of Spinoza's *Ethics*

As mentioned above, Deleuze (1988) is highly recommended, particularly if you are interested in ethical questions in the *Ethics*. (Deleuze (1990) is a longer and much more challenging text.) If you want to immerse yourself immediately in critical debate, to arm yourself with critical objections to Spinoza, or simply to read an enjoyably devastating philosophical analysis, you cannot do better than Bennett (1984). Older studies often focus on important metaphysical questions that contemporary philosophers no longer find interesting; two that are worth a look are Hallett (1957) and Wolfson (1934). Perhaps the most measured and careful analysis of Spinoza, accessible to the beginner, is Hampshire (1987) (recently republished in Hampshire (2005)). An excellent and wide-ranging collection is the four-volume Lloyd (ed.) (2001). This collection includes essays on law, desire, suicide and the environment, as well as familiar topics in Spinoza's metaphysics, epistemology and ethics.

4. Spinoza beyond philosophy

Recently, a number of books have linked Spinoza's *Ethics* to questions outside philosophy. Damasio (2004) explores how Parts III and IV of the *Ethics* anticipate contemporary developments in neuroscience and the science of the emotions. Gatens and Lloyd (1999), Balibar (1998) and Negri (1991) all consider the applicability of Spinoza's philosophy to contemporary political problems and questions of national identity. De Jonge (2004) is an extended study of Spinoza's relevance to environmental ethics. Goldstein (2006) assesses Spinoza's importance for contemporary Jewish studies. Norris (1991) considers Spinoza's influence on a number of forms of literary and critical theory, including Marxism and deconstruction.

Types of Question You Will Encounter

There are three broad 'genres' of essay question that you are likely to encounter when studying Spinoza at university.

- **Historical**: these questions concern Spinoza's work in its historical or philosophical context. For instance: 'Why does Spinoza appeal to the "state of nature" in Part IV?' 'Compare Spinoza's account of the mind–body relation to that of Descartes'. Answering these questions requires you to consider how Spinoza's arguments, in the *Ethics* and other texts, relate to religious, political and philosophical movements of the seventeenth century (or other times). You may need to refer to historical studies and the work of other philosophers, as well as critical commentaries on Spinoza.
- **Textual**: in these questions you are asked to explain, discuss and/or assess a passage, argument or problem internal to the *Ethics*. For example: 'Explain and assess Spinoza's argument for the existence of God'; 'Are modes the effects of substance, or properties inhering in substance?' 'How is evil related to falsity, on Spinoza's account?' Your answers to these questions should be based largely on your understanding, explanation and critical consideration of Spinoza's *Ethics* itself. You may choose to consult secondary literature to gain additional critical perspectives.

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