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## SPINOZA'S *ETHICS*

Spinoza's *Ethics* is one of the most remarkable, important, and difficult books in the history of philosophy: a treatise simultaneously on metaphysics, knowledge, philosophical psychology, moral philosophy, and political philosophy. It presents, in Spinoza's famous "geometric method," his radical views on God, Nature, the human being, and happiness. In this wide-ranging introduction to the work, Steven Nadler examines the philosophical background to Spinoza's thought and the dialogues in which Spinoza was engaged – with his contemporaries (including Descartes and Hobbes), with ancient thinkers (especially the Stoics), and with his Jewish rationalist forebears. He explains the doctrines and arguments of the *Ethics*, and shows why Spinoza's endlessly fascinating ideas may have been so troubling to his contemporaries, as well as why they are still so relevant today. His book is written for the student reader but will also be of interest to specialists in early modern philosophy.

STEVEN NADLER is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His books include *Spinoza: A Life* (1999) and *Spinoza's Heresy* (2002), as well as *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche* (2000). In 2004 he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction.

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*An Introduction*

STEVEN NADLER  
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*For Arch Nadler, z"l*

In loving memory

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## *Preface*

Philosophy, it has often been said, begins with wonder. For the first thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition, Thales and his early Greek colleagues, it was wonder about the world. It moved them to inquire into the origin and nature of things around them and to offer, instead of mytho-poetic accounts of phenomena that appealed to gods and mystifying powers, natural explanations drawn from experience. At a certain point, however – and this is true whether what is at issue is the historical development of philosophy as a discipline or the intellectual development of an individual philosopher – wonder turns inward and philosophy becomes a very personal affair. Questions about the heavens and the earth, about objects and forces in nature, both visible and hidden, give way to questions about the self and about the life one is leading. It was Socrates, we are told, who first turned philosophy from a search for nature's causes and ultimate constituents to an inquiry into how to be good and achieve well-being.

He did not discuss that topic so favored by other talkers, “the nature of the Universe,” and avoided speculation on the so-called “Cosmos” of the professors, how it works, and on the laws that govern the phenomena of the heavens. Indeed, he would argue that to trouble one's mind with such problems is sheer folly . . . Rather, his own conversation was always about human things. (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I.1. 11–16)

To Socrates, the most important questions were those not of science or metaphysics, but of ethics. What mattered was not understanding nature, but knowing how best to live one's life. More than a search for knowledge about the world, philosophy, for Socrates, was a quest for true happiness and human flourishing.

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The inward turn is usually inspired by a kind of disenchantment. A person, perhaps highly successful in mundane endeavors, may still, in the light of some lingering disappointment or lack of fulfillment, begin to question the value of the ends he or she has been pursuing. What initially seemed to be good and worthwhile goals – wealth, perhaps, or power or honor – have in fact left one feeling empty, either because their possession was uncertain or because the benefits they conferred were short-lived or unsatisfying. In a sufficiently reflective and self-critical person – someone given to what Socrates called “the examined life” – the result of this kind of realization could be a reordering of one’s priorities and a realignment of the direction of one’s life.

It was just this kind of disenchantment with the transitory goods of the world and with the values that had informed his life that led a young, intellectually gifted Dutch-Jewish merchant in the middle of the seventeenth century to make a radical break with his past and turn to philosophy as his vocation. Endowed with a deep sense of the *vanitas* of ordinary pursuits, he opted to divest himself of the materialistic commitments that had occupied him to that point and devote himself to the search for truth – not just scientific truths about nature but, more important, an understanding of the proper goods of a human life and the means to true happiness. As the fruit of his reflective labors, he would end up composing one of the greatest and boldest works of philosophy of all time.

Spinoza’s *Ethics* is a wide-ranging treatise that touches on almost every major area of philosophy: metaphysics, theory of knowledge, philosophy of mind, philosophical psychology, moral philosophy, political philosophy, and the philosophy of religion. There seem to be few philosophical problems of any importance that do not find some treatment within its five parts. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza discusses the existence and nature of God, the relationship of mind and body in a human being, freedom and determinism, truth, teleology, the laws of nature, passions, virtue and happiness, the grounds of political obligation, the status of good and evil, personal identity, eternity, immortality and – as if that were not enough – the meaning of life. I would venture to argue that the only other work



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in the history of philosophy that can match the *Ethics* in terms of sheer thematic scope and systematic presentation is Plato's *Republic*.

The *Ethics*, then, is a highly ambitious and multifaceted work. Furthermore, it is bold to the point of audacity. Spinoza attacks some of the most basic philosophical assumptions – about God, the human being, and the universe – that had long been defended by thinkers and taken for granted by laypersons, and offers nothing less than a systematic and unforgiving critique of the moral and theological beliefs grounded thereupon.

The *Ethics* is also an extraordinarily difficult book. While the issues that Spinoza addresses are perennial philosophical ones, and thus familiar to anyone who has done some elementary study in philosophy, the book may appear, on first approach, highly forbidding. (And I am sorry to report that, like most great works of philosophy, it only gets harder on each subsequent reading.) To the modern reader, its mode of presentation will seem opaque, its vocabulary strange, and its themes extremely complicated, even impenetrable. My aim in this volume is to dispel some of that opacity and impenetrability and provide an accessible introduction to the philosophy in the *Ethics* – to its theses, arguments, methods, and more generally to its broad philosophical project.

Here, to begin with, is a brief synopsis of the work.

Spinoza's ultimate goal in the *Ethics* is to demonstrate the way to human happiness in a deterministic world filled with obstacles to our well-being, obstacles to which we are naturally prone to react in not entirely beneficial ways. Before he attempts to answer that ethical question, though, it is necessary for Spinoza to reveal the nature of the world itself, as well as the nature of ourselves as human beings and our place as knowers and agents in that world. Thus, before it enters the terrain of moral philosophy (in Parts Four and Five), the *Ethics* begins with metaphysics (Part One), a philosophical anthropology and a theory of human knowledge (Part Two), and a philosophical psychology (Part Three).

Part One, "On God," argues that the universe is a single, infinite, eternal, necessarily existing substance. This is "God or Nature." Everything else that is, is a part of Nature. All things within Nature – that is, everything – are invariably and necessarily determined by

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Nature. There is nothing that escapes Nature's laws; there are no exceptions to Nature's ways. Whatever follows with an absolute necessity from Nature's necessary universal principles. There are thus no purposes for Nature or within Nature. Nothing happens for any ultimate reason or to serve any goal or overarching plan. Whatever takes place does so only because it is brought about by the ordinary causal order of Nature. And because God is identical with the universal, active causal principles of Nature – the substance of it all – it follows that all of the anthropomorphic conceptions of God that characterize sectarian religions are nothing but superstitious fictions.

In Part Two, "On the Nature and Origin of the Mind," Spinoza turns to the nature of the human being and his place in Nature. Nature has an infinite number of attributes or essences, each constituting a kind of universal nature of things. We know of only two of these attributes: Thought (or thinking essence) and Extension (material essence). The course of Nature is one, since Nature is one substance, a unity. But it proceeds under each attribute in parallel coordination with its unfolding in every other attribute. Any individual thing or event is only a "mode" of Nature, manifesting itself under the different attributes. One and the same thing or event, then, manifests itself in Thought (as a mental or spiritual thing or event), in Extension (as a material thing or event), and so on through the other attributes. Thus, the human mind and the human body are one and the same thing in Nature, manifesting itself under Thought and Extension, respectively. Their union in a human being and the correlation of their states is a function of their ultimate metaphysical identity in Nature. The human being is therefore as much a part of Nature as any other thing, and is subject to the same causal determinism that governs all of Nature.

Now many readers never get past the first two parts of the *Ethics* – it is not uncommon for students in college courses on early modern philosophy to be asked to read only those propositions touching on metaphysics and epistemology, since it makes for a tidy pedagogical package with Descartes and Leibniz ("The Rationalists") – and are thus left wondering why the work has the title that it does. But historically and philosophically important as the opening parts are,

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they also lay the foundations for the moral conclusions that follow in the subsequent propositions.

Part Three, “On the Origin and Nature of the Affects,” demonstrates the various ways in which the human being is affected by the world around him, and investigates the striving to persevere in existence in the face of these external forces that characterizes his (and any being’s) essence. The human psychological life is made up of various passions and actions. The former are our affective responses to the ways in which objects causally impinge upon us; the latter derive from our own inner resources. Both represent ways in which our powers are increased or decreased by the causal nexuses within which we exist. The picture of human life that emerges from Spinoza’s catalogue of the passions is a tormented one, where a person is emotionally tossed about and at the mercy of things and forces beyond his control.

In Part Four, “On Human Bondage, or the Power of the Affects,” Spinoza continues his investigation of the life governed by the passions, but also seeks its remedy in virtue, that is, in knowledge and understanding. The human being can never be entirely free from the passions, since he is necessarily a part of Nature and subject to external influences. He can, however, achieve some degree of autonomy and freedom from their turmoil to the extent that he is active and guided by reason. The ideal of the free individual provides a model for a virtuous human life and a guide for seeking what is good and avoiding what is evil. In this way, the power of the passive affects is diminished.

“The Power of the Intellect, or On Human Freedom” is the title of Part Five. Spinoza here turns to the ultimate benefits of the highest form of knowledge. This is a thorough understanding of Nature and its ways and an intellectual intuition of how the essence of anything follows from Nature’s most universal elements – or, since God and Nature are one and the same, how the essence of anything relates to God. In this final part of the work, Spinoza takes on the issue of immortality, and demonstrates how the true rewards of virtue lie not in some otherworldly recompense but in the happiness, well-being, and blessedness that understanding confers upon us in this life.

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There is much more to be said, of course. Untangling the ideas of the *Ethics* and drawing them out of the formal structure of propositions, demonstrations, corollaries, scholia, and appendices that make up the book will require a good deal of slow, careful work.

It will also demand some attention to Spinoza's various intellectual sources. Despite a dearth of explicit references to past thinkers, the *Ethics* exhibits enormous erudition, and quite a few philosophical traditions converge in its pages. Spinoza's knowledge of ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and modern authors – pagan, Christian, and Jewish – is quietly evident throughout. His most important philosophical mentor was, without question, Descartes. But Plato, Aristotle, and the ancient (and modern) Stoics all belong to the intellectual background of the work. It is also clear that he was impressed by his reading of contemporary political thinkers, especially the Englishman Thomas Hobbes, but also Dutch and French theorists; and by recent scientific developments (including those of Bacon, Galileo, and Boyle). And many of the central elements of the *Ethics* derive from Spinoza's study of medieval Jewish thought, particularly Maimonides and Gersonides.

None of this, however, should distract us from the sheer originality of the *Ethics*. It is a singular work in the history of philosophy. It is also, as I hope to show throughout this study, as relevant today as it was three and a half centuries ago.

This book has been written primarily for the reader who is approaching the *Ethics* for the first time and who desires a guide through its intimidating maze of propositions, demonstrations, scholia, and other elements. It does not provide an account of Spinoza's philosophy as a whole. His political philosophy and his account of the origins and interpretation of the Bible, as well as (to a lesser degree) his theory of religion, as important as these are, do not receive detailed and adequate treatment here; they are discussed only insofar as they are a part of the context of the *Ethics* and relevant to an understanding of its metaphysical, epistemological, psychological, and moral ideas. Nor am I concerned with Spinoza's intellectual development and the changes in his thought from his earliest writings through his mature treatises. Rather, my goal is simply to

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walk the reader slowly through the doctrines of the *Ethics* and to show how one can make sense of them. To this end, I pay a good deal of attention to the order and manner in which Spinoza himself addresses various topics. Instead of offering a breezy summary and paraphrase of Spinoza's ideas, I want to take the reader on a systematically ordered tour of Spinoza's theses and arguments. I therefore follow the lead of the propositions themselves and hew closely to the text, allowing the reader to trace Spinoza's own progress from the metaphysics of God to the conclusions about human happiness.

While aimed at the beginner, I hope that this study will also be of use and interest to more advanced students of Spinoza, including seasoned scholars, insofar as I address issues and questions that seem to be of perennial dispute. I have not devoted much space in these pages to discussions of secondary literature; but the experienced reader will often easily recognize, from the text and especially from the notes, the positions being taken on particularly thorny and controversial problems of interpretation and assessment. Nor have I pursued many important and complex exegetical and philosophical questions as deeply as they could be (and need to be) pursued. This would not have served well my primary audience. Indeed, it would have proven a distraction from the immediate project at hand: a basic understanding of what Spinoza is saying in one of the most important works of Western philosophy.

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I dedicate this book to the memory of my father, Arch (Aaron) Nadler, who passed away just as it neared completion. A son with a father whom he loves is fortunate; but a son with a father whom he also admires is truly blessed.

*Abbreviations*

References to the five-part *Ethics* are by the standard format of part and proposition; specific page numbers are provided only when necessary for ease in finding a passage in the text. The following abbreviations are used in citations:

A	Axiom
D	Definition
L	Lemma
Post.	Postulate
P	Proposition
c	corollary
d	demonstration
s	scholium

Thus, IIP<sub>32s</sub> is Part 3, proposition 32, scholium.

The following abbreviations are used in citations of Spinoza's texts:

CM	"Metaphysical Thoughts"
E	<i>Ethics</i>
KV	<i>Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being</i>
PPC	<i>Parts One and Two of the Principles of Philosophy of René Descartes Demonstrated According to the Geometric Method</i>
TIE	<i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</i>
TTP	<i>Theological-Political Treatise</i>

The following abbreviations are used for editions and translations of Spinoza's writings:

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*List of abbreviations*

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- C Edwin Curley (trans.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, vol. I: 1984; vol. II, in preparation)
- G Carl Gebhardt (ed.), *Spinoza Opera*, 5 vol. (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Verlag, 1972 [1925])
- NS *Nagelate Schriften* (1677)
- OP *Opera Posthuma* (1677)
- S Samuel Shirley (trans.), *Theological-Political Treatise*, 2nd edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998)
- SL Samuel Shirley (trans.), *Spinoza: The Letters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995)

The following abbreviations are used in citations of works by Descartes:

- AT *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 11 vols. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964–75)
- CSM *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (vols. I and II), trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)
- CSMK *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (vol. III, Correspondence), trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)