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Elhanan Yakira

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Spinoza and the Case for Philosophy

This book analyzes three often-debated questions of Spinoza's legacy: Was Spinoza a religious thinker? How should we understand Spinoza's mind-body doctrine? What meaning can be given to Spinoza's notions – such as salvation, beatitude, and freedom – that are seemingly incompatible with his determinism, his secularism, and his critique of religion? Through a close reading of often-overlooked sections from Spinoza's *Ethics*, Elhanan Yakira argues that these seemingly conflicting elements are indeed compatible, despite Spinoza's iconoclastic meanings. Yakira argues that *Ethics* is an attempt at providing a purely philosophical – as opposed to theological – foundation for the theory of value and normativity.

Elhanan Yakira is Schulman Professor of Philosophy at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has previously taught at the Sorbonne, École Normale Supérieure in Paris, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Pennsylvania State University, and Indiana University. Yakira's previous publications include *Nécessité, Contrainte et Choix: la métaphysique de la liberté chez Spinoza et Leibniz* (1989), winner of the 1990 Charles Lambert Prize from Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, Institut de France; *La causalité de Galilée à Kant* (1994); *Leibniz's Theory of the Rational* (with Emily Grosholz, 1998); and *Post-Zionism, Post-Holocaust* (2010).

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To Daniella, Hagit, Osnat, and David

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The Hebrew University of Jerusalem



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Preface

This book is neither a general introduction to the philosophy of Spinoza nor a guide for its perplexed reader. My aim in writing was not a consistent reformulation of Spinoza's philosophy, and it is not based on the assumption that the philosophical value of a system of thought such as Spinoza's resides in its inner coherence. I did not conceive my role as a commentator to consist in uncovering an ever-eluding coherence or in overcoming real or apparent contradictions.¹ It is sometimes profitable to remain attentive to the paradoxical, counterintuitive, or even bizarre nature of some philosophical doctrines; there are cases in which one can get in this way a deeper perception of the underlying motivations beneath the surface of a philosophical discourse. Arguably, Spinoza's *Ethics* is one of these cases. As is often the case with the inner tensions or other difficulties of this kind, it is worth probing deeper into them not because we may find real or imaginary solutions to them, but rather because through the difficulties we may achieve a better understanding of the thought behind them, the philosophical discontent that led to formulating them or the stakes involved. This study of Spinoza's *Ethics* thus centers on two of its main and, undoubtedly, more difficult – even paradoxical – doctrines, offering a close reading of them; it also contains an attempt to insert these doctrines within a larger framework. This gives it what might seem a somewhat unusual structure. One reason for

¹ The great historian of philosophy, Marital Gueroult, is the author of one of the most authoritative studies of Spinoza; in two large volumes he offered a comprehensive interpretation of the first two parts of the *Ethics*, still unavoidable for any serious reading of Spinoza (there is a third, posthumous volume containing his unfinished study of the rest of the *Ethics*). In a number of other works (among them studies of Descartes, Leibniz, Shlomo Maimon, and more) he applied a general conception of the nature of philosophical writing and, based on it, of the work of the interpreter. He called this conception *Dianoématique*, and a number of posthumous volumes (see the Works Cited section) contain his hermeneutical theory, based on the idea that what makes a work or thought into a philosophy is mostly its inner coherence.

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this is the following: I have been writing this book, intermittently, over a long period of time. Leaving it periodically to do other things, I kept coming back to it, always changing, revising, and rewriting large portions. A few core positions and ideas remained more or less stable, but much of the rest – structure, scope, content, style, and so on – evolved and changed continually. As the material was accumulating, threatening to get out of hand, I made two, as it were, strategic decisions: to keep the book within reasonable size, and to limit myself to those matters on which I thought I had something to add to the abundant and often learned and insightful literature on Spinoza.

There is, however, more to it. Specifically, the book concentrates on two sections of the *Ethics*: the first thirteen propositions of the second part and the last twenty propositions of the fifth part. These are, respectively, the epicenter of Spinoza's so-called mind-body doctrine and the doctrine of salvation. I chose to concentrate on these rather short texts because I believe that the question of *salvation*, or of what Spinoza calls by this name (but also by the names *beatitude* and *freedom*), is what everything leads to and what his philosophy was in the last analysis all about; and obviously, the *soul* or mind (*mens*) is where the stakes of the search for freedom and salvation are played. The *Ethics*, and the entire Spinozistic corpus, contain of course various other things, many of which have been studied for their own sake, often with great philosophical gain. The doctrine of salvation and freedom, of salvation as freedom, and of freedom as salvation, however, has not always been one of them and is often seen as Spinoza's most enigmatic doctrine, at least by his more strictly philosophical readers. It may become perhaps less so if one takes into account the fact that these two groups of propositions – EIIp1–13 and EVp21–42 – are profoundly connected in many ways; in fact, they remain largely incomprehensible if the links – explicit or semi-implicit – that connect them are not analyzed in a systemic way. I would even venture to say that they add up to a kind of thematic axis, a theoretical scaffolding supporting the whole edifice of Spinoza's philosophy. Their conjoint study would thus hopefully afford a point of entry into the Spinozistic world and a clue to the Spinozistic conundrum.

Hence the decision to concentrate on these two sections of the *Ethics*. But there was a price to pay for this decision and for the wish not to exceed the limits I set for myself regarding the book's eventual volume: I had to neglect almost everything else. I had to assume that what I did not address in this book is of secondary importance for my main purposes, but also that it was well known to most students of Spinoza and sufficiently studied in the secondary literature. I addressed these matters only to the extent that it seemed to me indispensable for making sense of what I considered essential.

Yet this book was not conceived as a monographic study of one or two local themes. It was meant to offer a more general outlook. Many of the students of Spinoza's philosophy share a strong sense that the *Ethics* in particular, and his *oeuvre* in general, revolve around a central and fundamental interest, some elusive and hard-to-define thematic *core*, that there is in it something that can

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be described as a *project*. Insofar as this study of the *Ethics* is, as has just been said, the outcome of long years of reading and reflecting on Spinoza's philosophy, indeed of struggling with it, it also expresses an attempt to come to terms with this philosophy in its entirety, to get to its core, to assess Spinoza's philosophy as a philosophical project. This core, or project, would be best described, I believe, as a fundamental grappling with religion, and its significance can be assessed only by contextualizing it, both thematically and historically, within the horizon of what Leo Strauss for one called the "Critique of Religion."

In itself, of course, there is nothing original in this observation.² Spinoza's place in the history of the *question of religion* has been very largely studied, and more so nowadays than ever before. But it is usually dealt with from historical or theological-political perspectives – that is, either from the perspective of the study of the advent of modernity and of secularism, or from that of philosophical discussion of the claims of religion (or of what is taken to be the claims of religion) for having a moral, and even more so political, saying. My perspective is different. The *Ethics*, unlike the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, is not concerned directly with the question of religion as a historical, civilizational, or theological-political question. It can be said, however, that it presupposes the critique of religion consummate and the religious prejudice demolished, and that this had been the condition permitting the free philosophical inquiry, reflection, and search for salvation that the *Ethics* now purports to conduct. It begins thus where the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* ends. But the critique of religion and, consequently, the question of religion, and even religion itself, remain very much present in the *Ethics*, not always above the surface, but in a real and very pertinent manner all the same. What Spinoza was doing in it can perhaps be described as the transformation of the historical facticity of the *problem of religion* into a trans-historical philosophical reflection that can, and should, be discussed on its own philosophical and argumentative terms.

All these different and somewhat conflicting considerations – the wish to avoid excessive length, to concentrate on what is both central and less satisfactorily dealt with in the secondary literature, to read very closely only two relatively short sections of the *Ethics* but to use them in order to offer a general assessment of the project, to read them philosophically but to understand them within the context and historicity of the *critique of religion* – result in the perhaps somewhat unusual structure of this book. It comprises four parts, the two longer ones of exegetical nature, the other two more general. Although hope-

² Only when I was already applying the finishing touches to the manuscript of this book did I read Steven B. Smith's latest book on Spinoza. Although very different in approach and in understanding many of Spinoza's central doctrines, Smith's book has some similar aspects to the present study of Spinoza – it is also an attempt to give a kind of general assessment of Spinoza's philosophy (more political and less metaphysical than mine), and it is based on a similar assumption – more directly Straussian than mine again – about the place of the critique of religion in shaping Spinoza's fundamental philosophical worldview; see especially Smith (2003), chapter 7.

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fully adding up to one coherent whole, each of the four parts can be considered as a relatively independent essay and even read without the others.

Part I contains an attempt, more thematic than historical, to inscribe the ensuing reading of Spinoza within the context of the critique of religion. It deals, in a rather general way, with the essentially polemic nature of Spinoza's philosophy, with the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, and with Spinoza's position vis-à-vis his Jewish background, notably Maimonides. It then raises, again in a general way, the question of Spinoza's religiosity and discusses it in relation to two famous attempts to define the specific nature of "the religious," namely Rudolf Otto's and William James's.

Part II is a study of Spinoza's conception of the unity that holds between the body and its soul (or mind). It comprises three chapters. The first (Chapter 2) is an attempt to refute the famous parallelism interpretative paradigm; the second (Chapter 3) examines the thematic, and to some extent historical, background against which the discussion contained in the first thirteen propositions of *Ethics* II has to be read; in the third (Chapter 4) I offer my interpretation of Spinoza's mind-body doctrine. It is not based on the parallelism paradigm but on the double contention that the soul is an idea (EIIp11) and that its object is the body (EIIp13).

Part III (Chapter 5) tries to put Spinoza's mind-body doctrine, discussed in Part II, in the perspective of a few later-day philosophical discussions of questions related to this topic, thus hopefully gaining better understanding both of Spinoza's stance and of the larger philosophical stakes involved in his positions.³

Part IV (Chapters 6 and 7) is a discussion of the doctrine of *salus, sive beatitudo, sive libertas* as it is expounded in the second half of EV. At its center is the contention, which can also be regarded as the conclusion of this study of Spinoza's *Ethics*, that this final moment of the *Ethics* is incomprehensible if it is not understood as fundamentally a theory of the irreducible value of being and of human existence in general and of philosophical life in particular.

An anonymous early reviewer of this book for Cambridge University Press suspected that it was written in an overly emphasized "French scholarly idiom." Following the reviewer's remarks, I made a few adjustments in the original manuscript. I hope it is now more comfortably situated in an English idiom. But the question of the book's French background merits perhaps a few words of explanation. I spent, in fact, many years in France, and one of the main things I was doing there was studying Spinoza. This took place largely at a

³ The discipline called "The History of Philosophy" is a peculiar occupation. It is not exactly history, and whether it is philosophy or not – and if it is, in what way – is a matter of much controversy. Leibniz once said that the best way to gain philosophical understanding is to use the comparative method. Following his advice, and in order to transcend the philological attitude, I thus tried to put my reading of Spinoza's text in perspective and "compare" it, in some Leibnizian way, to a few later-day philosophical enquiries. This was the rationale behind adding Chapter 5 immediately after the section devoted to an analysis of Spinoza's mind-body doctrine.

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time when Paris was the undisputed capital of Spinoza scholarship, and when in the English-speaking philosophical world there was only a trickle of writings continuing an always-present but relatively marginal Spinozistic tradition. Like their colleagues from other places, some of the few American – there were even fewer British – scholars who were interested in those years in Spinoza were much involved with French Spinoza scholarship. In later years the trickle has turned, as someone has put it to me, into a tsunami, and nowadays there are probably more publications on Spinoza in English than in any other language, perhaps in all languages combined. Becoming more self-sufficient and self-confident, the young American community of Spinoza scholars has perhaps become also less open to French – or other – idioms than it used to be.

It is indeed undeniable that my own writing on Spinoza echoes the years I spent in France and my ongoing interest in what has been written and done there since. But this is only part of the story. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was not only a vibrant community of older and younger scholars united by a common interest in the philosophy of Spinoza, a common philosophical culture, and – as is often the case in France – a great deal of first-rate erudition (all this is still the case today), but also a sense of breaking new ground: discovering the importance of Spinoza as a political thinker.⁴ There had been a widespread and philosophically significant presence of Spinoza in French thought and scholarship beforehand and indeed from the time of Spinoza himself, but now a *New Spinoza* would have emerged, as announces the title of a book published in the late 1990s⁵ that purports to introduce the new French Spinoza scholarship to the English-speaking audience. The “New” here refers, however, not just to a new theoretical or historical-philosophical understanding of Spinoza himself, but rather to an allegedly new general materialist philosophy, or ideological-political understanding of human reality as essentially carnal, political, and social, and of which Spinoza would be a quasi-prophetic announcer.

It looks sometimes – in any case, it looked so to me in those years in Paris – that with the decline of Marxism and the fading of the figure of Marx,⁶ a new

⁴ As Moreau (2005, p. 5) notes, citing Alexandre Matheron – both, belonging to two different generations, important contributors to this discovery – before the 1960s, Spinoza’s political thought was more or less ignored in France.

⁵ See Montag and Stolze (1997). For the history of the earlier reception of Spinoza in France, see Vernière (1954); see also Montag for the ideological stakes involved in the kind of scholarship he expounds both in his own book on Spinoza (1999) and in the collection of essays he edited with T. Stolze (1997).

⁶ Much has been written on this chapter of the cultural-political-intellectual French history. A captivating and compelling story of a philosophical and political itinerary, from the École Normale Supérieure, via the resistance, to the Communist Party and to an eventual disenchantment, is told in Desanti (2001). Jean-Tossaint Desanti was my instructor during the years I studied in Paris, and I have nothing but good things to say about him, both as a person and as a philosopher. He wrote a number of things on Spinoza, some of them very interesting. Among other things, he wrote a “materialistic” book when he was regarded as the “official intellectual” of the Communist Party, which he wished, as he once told me many years later, he had never written.

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figure – Spinoza – appeared as a surrogate materialist prophet. With it, however, emerged also a robust and authentically philosophical interest in Spinoza as a political and social thinker. Although often ideologically motivated, it is beyond doubt that some first-rate scholarly work has been done during those years and by the New Spinoza Spinozists. Some were good and some less so, but some fresh insights into the nature of Spinoza's philosophy were offered, and some previously largely neglected aspects of his thought were vigorously studied. I was a witness to these developments; I had the chance to know most of its protagonists, and quite a few of them became personal friends. But I was never completely absorbed by this scholarship, even less so by the dogmatics underlying it, and I never felt either the will or the ability to immerse myself fully in the French idiom.⁷ I never thought, for example, that Spinoza was a materialist any more than he was a mystic, and I have never had much sympathy for the attempts to appropriate an alleged Spinozism, savage or not, by one ideological school or another.

That all this echoes in my own writing on Spinoza is unavoidable. Being, however, partially inside and partially outside the French idiom – in fact, in the English idiom too – is not necessarily such a bad thing. I would add here, however, that what follows is imbued with yet another idiom: the Hebrew idiom. It may be less conspicuous to many readers, but it is perhaps more important than all the others. For despite being written in English, and despite the resonance of the French idiom in it, the vantage point from which it was written is that of Hebrew-speaking reader of and writer about Spinoza, and of the acute and special form the problem of religion assumes in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, or Haifa.⁸

⁷ The very instructive, and sometimes hilarious, Cusset (2008) depicts the emergence in America of at least partially fictional “French Theory.” A kind of suspicion of things French, mainly philosophical, that is not rare among English-speaking writers and readers is arguably just as exaggerated as the admiration of “French Theory,” “Critical Theory,” “New Materialism,” and so on that one finds in other quarters of American and British academe (and elsewhere).

⁸ I take this opportunity to pay tribute to a teacher and scholar practically unknown outside Israel, but who had been very instrumental in making Spinoza a central figure in the study and teaching of philosophy in Israel. He was also the teacher who first awakened my own interest in Spinoza. Yossef Ben Shlomo (1930–2007) was a professor of philosophy and later of Jewish thought at the Hebrew University and at Tel Aviv University. A charismatic teacher and a connoisseur of Spinoza, but also of the Jewish tradition, Jewish philosophy, and the Kabbalah, Ben Shlomo wrote relatively little, almost exclusively in Hebrew. Noteworthy are the very detailed notes – in fact comprehensive commentaries – he added to the Hebrew translations of the TIE and the *Short Treatise*. Shortly after the current book was ready to go to the Press, there appeared a posthumous volume containing, under the title *The Challenge of Spinozism* (in Hebrew), a number of studies on Spinoza and on the reception of his philosophy. Ben Shlomo, like me, saw this “challenge” as mainly a challenge to religious thought; unlike myself, however, he considered Spinoza's work as the expression of deep religiosity, which he interpreted as a kind of quasi-mystical sentiment of union with the “whole.”

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Acknowledgments

As this book has been written over a long period of time, I have had the opportunity to discuss it on many occasions – in class, at conferences, in more or less formal settings – and with many people. Quite a few friends and colleagues read parts of it or the whole manuscript or heard me talking about it – not always knowing that what they heard was parts of, as it is sometimes called, a “work in progress.” Many of them often made useful comments or raised pertinent, sometimes difficult and challenging questions. I would like to thank, in a general way, the diverse audiences that listened to me talking about Spinoza over the years, and in particular the many students who attended my classes, in Israel and elsewhere, which were often used by me as sounding boards for the ideas I had been trying to develop. In the course of these dialogues with friends, colleagues, unknown critics, and students, I discovered more than once that I was heading toward dead ends. I hope I avoided many traps thanks to these exchanges, although probably not all of them.

There are, however, a few people I would like to thank here in a more direct way. I have cooperated for many years with Yirmiyahu Yovel, first as his student at the Hebrew University, then assisting him in establishing and running the Spinoza Institute in Jerusalem, and finally as his colleague in the department of philosophy. Eli Zilbepfening, Yoash Meisler, and, in particular, Emily Grosholz with real friendship and in a very helpful way read the manuscript and discussed it with me. Yoram Navon was a demanding and challenging editor. His help in turning writing that was not always clear and coherent into a more respectable text was invaluable.

I was carrying this manuscript with me to many places. I worked on it in the gorgeous Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, during visits to the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and to the one in Lyon, to the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, also in Paris, and, more recently, at the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism of Indiana University in

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Acknowledgments

Bloomington, where I spent two long, pleasant, and fruitful sabbatical leaves and where I finished writing this book. I made many friends there, and I would like to thank all of them here, in particular my hosts, Professor Alvin Rosenfeld and his wife Erna.

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