

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF SPINOZA

Aimed at those new to studying Spinoza, this book provides a comprehensive introduction to his thought, placing it in its historical and philosophical contexts, and assessing its critical reception. In addition to providing an analysis of Spinoza's metaphysical, epistemological, psychological, and ethical views in the *Ethics*, Henry Allison also explores his political theory and revolutionary views on the Bible, as well as his account of Judaism, which led to the excommunication of the young Spinoza from the Jewish community in Amsterdam. Although the book's main focus is on the analysis of Spinoza's views, including a close reading of the central arguments of the *Ethics*, it also considers many of the standard objections to these arguments as well as possible responses to them. This completely revised and updated new edition of Allison's classic book, with two new chapters, will help a new generation of students to understand and value Spinoza's work.

Henry E. Allison is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of California, San Diego and Boston University. He has published fourteen books, most recently *Kant's Conception of Freedom: A Developmental and Critical Analysis* (Cambridge, 2020). He is a former President of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, winner of the International Kant Prize (2005), and De Gruyter Kant Prize Lecturer (2014).

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Preface

This is the third version of my introduction to the thought of Spinoza. The first, titled simply *Benedict de Spinoza*, was published by Twayne in 1975. The second, titled *Benedict de Spinoza: An Introduction*, was significantly revised in light of the intervening literature and was published by Yale University Press in 1987. In addition to the change of title, the present version has yet again been significantly revised and expanded in an endeavor to deal with the veritable explosion in the literature on Spinoza in the past thirty-odd years. While there has continued to be important work on Spinoza produced in the more historically oriented European or, as it is commonly called, “continental” philosophical community, particularly in France and the Netherlands, the place of Spinoza’s birth, there has also been a dramatic increase in such work in the Anglophone or “analytic” community. There are, I believe, two reasons for this. One is a renewed focus on the history of philosophy in this community, which marks a decisive break with the decidedly antihistorical views of logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy, which were the dominant trends in analytic philosophy for much of the twentieth century. This has also led to a *rapprochement* with much of continental thought, which, because of its Hegelian heritage, has retained its historical orientation. The other, which marks an even sharper break with its earlier concerns, is a renewed interest in metaphysics. And Spinoza’s thought, particularly as it is contained in the first two parts of the *Ethics*, with its focus on the nature and existence of God, the laws of nature, and the mind–body problem, became a natural subject of interest for metaphysically inclined philosophers working in the analytic tradition. The renewed interest in Spinoza is not limited, however, to his treatment of these core metaphysical topics, but extends to his psychological, ethical, and political theories, as well as his views on religion, his relation to the

views of his predecessors, and his subsequent influence; in short, it encompasses the whole range of Spinoza's thought.¹

This spate of new literature has provided me with an impetus to rethink my views on Spinoza. Although I cannot claim to have mastered all of the literature on the various aspects of his thought that has appeared since the previous version of this study, I have worked through a considerable portion of it. In some instances I have changed my views on essential points in interpretation and evaluation; in others I have attempted to defend my earlier views against some of the objections that have been raised in this literature; while in still others I have focused my attention on issues that I had either glossed over or treated only in a passing or superficial manner. There are, however, two changes to which I wish to call attention because they connect directly with my study of Kant, which has long been the central focus of my work. The first concerns my discussion of Spinoza's recast version of the classical ontological argument for the existence of God, which he identifies with nature. In light of recent work, which has refocused attention on the similarities between this argument and Kant's argument for the existence of God as the *ens realissimum*, which he defended in his earlier work, but criticized in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and later writings,² I have amended my earlier treatment of this argument to incorporate the Kantian critique and to illustrate its applicability to Spinoza's. The second and most substantive change concerns my discussion of Spinoza's naturalistic moral theory. This theory is grounded in the proposition that the fundamental endeavor of everything in nature, including human beings, is self-preservation (Spinoza's *conatus* doctrine), and my treatment of it has two aspects. On the one hand, in contrast to commentators who tend to see this theory as providing a proto-Nietzschean deconstruction of traditional morality,³ I regard it as an attempt to reestablish much of traditional morality – more particularly, a version of the so-called Golden Rule, namely: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” on this egoistic basis; while, on the other, wearing my Kantian hat, I question the viability of this project and

¹ This breadth of interest is reflected in the recent publications of Cambridge University Press, including, in addition to numerous monographs on Spinoza, *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (1996), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics* (2009), and *Critical Guides to Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise* (2010) and *Political Treatise* (2018), as well as *Spinoza and German Idealism* (2012) and *Spinoza and Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (2018).

² See Omri Boehm, *Kant's Critique of Spinoza*.

³ See Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*.

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challenge a recent attempt to defend Spinoza's position by way of a comparison with Kant's views.⁴

These changes have necessitated a partial change in the format of the work. While its content has been significantly revised and expanded, the organization of the first four chapters, which dealt respectively with Spinoza's biography, a sketch of the historical context and central themes of his thought, and the first and second parts of the *Ethics*, which are concerned respectively with God and the human mind, has been retained. The previous fifth chapter, however, which dealt with the final three parts of the *Ethics* and was concerned with Spinoza's account of the emotions, his moral theory, and his highly heterodox views on immortality, has been expanded into separate chapters. Although likewise rewritten and expanded in order to take account of the recent literature, Chapters 6 and 7 of the previous version, which dealt respectively with Spinoza's political philosophy and his views on the Bible, and more generally revealed religion, have become Chapters 8 and 9 in the present version.

Like the earlier versions, as an introduction to Spinoza's philosophy, this work is intended primarily for the general reader or student with some background in philosophy, though I hope that it will also be of interest to the more advanced student and perhaps even the specialist. As before, my aim is to provide a balanced and comprehensive account of Spinoza's thought that offers the reader a sense of its breadth, as well as its depth and historical importance. To this end, I have tried not only to provide an accurate account of Spinoza's doctrines and their historical context, but also to explain as clearly and concisely as possible the main arguments he provides in support of them. But while my main focus is on the exposition and explanation of Spinoza's views, I have also attempted to indicate the difficulties in and possible objections to many of these arguments and to present and evaluate to the best of my ability the major responses to them found in the literature.

⁴ See Matthew Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom*.

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I wish to thank Hilary Gaskin for her support of this project, the two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press for their constructive criticisms of the portions of the earlier versions of this work that they commented upon, Thomas Kiefer for preparation of the index, and Princeton University Press for permission to cite from their two-volume edition of Edwin Curley's translation of *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Throughout the book I have cited the pagination in Curley's translation as well as the pagination in the Gebhardt edition of *Spinoza Opera* for the benefit of those who wish to consult the Latin and Dutch texts.

Note on the Text

References to Spinoza's works are to *Spinoza Opera*, edited by Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925) (referred to as G) and the following translations: *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985) (referred to as C1) and *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016) (referred to as C2).

Abbreviations

a	axiom
app	appendix
C ₁	<i>The Collected Works of Spinoza</i> , vol. 1
C ₂	<i>The Collected Works of Spinoza</i> , vol. 2
c	corollary
d	definition [when not after proposition number]
d	demonstration [when after a proposition number]
da	definition of affects at the end of the third part of the <i>Ethics</i>
G	<i>Spinoza Opera</i>
L	correspondence
l	lemma
p	proposition
po	postulate
pr	preface
s	scholium
CM	<i>Metaphysical Thoughts</i>
DPP	<i>Descartes' Principles of Philosophy</i>
KV	<i>Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being</i>
TdIE	<i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</i>
TP	<i>Political Treatise</i>
TTP	<i>Theological-Political Treatise</i>