

# Introduction

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In many ways, Benedict (or Benedictus, or Baruch) de Spinoza appears to be a contradictory figure in the history of philosophy. From the beginning, he has been notorious as an “atheist” who seeks to substitute Nature for a personal deity; yet he was also, in Novalis’s famous description, “the God-intoxicated man.” He was an uncompromising necessitarian and causal determinist; yet his ethical ideal was to become a “free man.” He maintained that the human mind and the human body are identical; yet he also insisted that the human mind can achieve a kind of eternity that transcends the death of the body. He has been adopted by Marxists as a precursor of historical materialism, and by Hegelians as a precursor of absolute idealism. He was a psychological egoist, proclaiming that all individuals necessarily seek their own advantage and implying that other individuals were of value to him only insofar as they were useful to him; yet his writings aimed to promote human community based on love and friendship, he had many devoted friends, and even his critics were obliged to acknowledge that his personal conduct was above reproach. He held that the state has the right to do whatever it has the power to do, while at the same time he defended democracy and freedom of speech. He denied supernatural revelation and criticized popular religion as a grave danger to the peace and stability of the state; yet he devoted himself to the careful interpretation of Scripture and argued for toleration and freedom of religion. Rarely employing figures of speech or rhetorical flourishes of any kind, his works are nevertheless among the most magisterial and uplifting of all philosophical writings, and they have inspired more poets and novelists than those of any other philosopher of the early modern period. Providing explicit definitions of his terms and formal demonstrations of his doctrines, he sought to clarify his meaning and reasons more diligently than has perhaps any other philosopher; yet few philosophers have proven more difficult to interpret.

To understand how all of these things can be true of one person and his philosophy is to do more than merely resolve some fascinating interpretive puzzles. It is more, even, than to gain insight into the seventeenth-century intellectual world that produced him and the

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subsequent eras that have tried to understand him. It is both of those things, of course; but it is also to see into one of the deepest philosophical minds of the modern or any other era, and thereby to see deeply into philosophy itself.

The seventeenth century was a period of scientific, political, and religious turmoil that gave rise to many philosophical “systems.” Of these, it is Spinoza’s monistic and naturalistic system, so initially forbidding in language and presentation, that ultimately speaks most cogently and persuasively to the twentieth century. As Alan Donagan has written:

Most philosophies, whatever their superficial attractions, are incoherent, and so impossible. Others, while not impossible, either gratuitously assume what there is no reason to believe, or deny what there is good reason to believe . . . [T]he number of possibly true philosophies there is some reason to believe is very small indeed, and the philosophical interest of every one of them is correspondingly great. Spinoza’s is of that number. (Donagan 1989: xiv)

Born and educated in the Jewish community of Amsterdam and strongly influenced by his study of Descartes, Spinoza was excommunicated in his early twenties, changed his name from “Baruch” (“blessed”) to its Latin equivalent “Benedict,” and lived out the remaining two decades of his life quietly as a lens-grinder in and near Leiden and the Hague. His personal insignia bore the motto “*Caute*” (“caution”), and he was indeed a cautious intellectual revolutionary, often expressing new and even radical doctrines in traditional terminology and formulae. Always careful about sharing his views with others, he published his *Theological-Political Treatise* – examining the relation between religion and the state through the interpretation of Scripture and the history of the Hebrew nation – anonymously under a false imprint; and he declined to publish his masterwork, the *Ethics*, during his own lifetime. He was not, however, a solitary individual working in personal or intellectual isolation. On the contrary, he influenced and was influenced by many of his contemporaries and was part of an active Dutch intellectual community. In Chapter 1, Piet Steenbakkers provides a lively, rich, and authoritative new narrative of Spinoza’s life and work in context, drawn from exacting research into all available resources. It will be of enormous value to students and scholars alike.

The bold, complete title of Spinoza’s mature presentation of his philosophical system is *Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*.

This “geometrical order,” modeled on Euclid’s *Elements*, evidently corresponds to what Descartes had called the “synthetic” method of demonstration:

As for the method of demonstration, this divides into two varieties: the first proceeds by analysis and the second by synthesis. Analysis shows the true way by means of which the thing in question was discovered methodically. . . .

Synthesis, by contrast, employs a directly opposite method . . . It demonstrates the conclusion clearly and employs a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems, and problems, so that if anyone denies one of the conclusions it can be shown at once that it is contained in what has gone before, and hence the reader, however argumentative or stubborn he may be, is compelled to give his assent. (CSM II: 110–11)<sup>1</sup>

Spinoza had already used this synthetic method, or geometrical order, as an expositor of Descartes in the only work that he published under his own name during his lifetime, *Descartes’s “Principles of Philosophy.”*

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza sought to demonstrate his ethical doctrines in proper order from the metaphysical principles on which he believed they depend and through which he believed they must be understood. His metaphysical ontology, like Descartes’s, comprises substance, attributes (what Descartes called “principal attributes”), and modes. According to Spinoza, a substance is that which is “in itself and conceived through itself” (E 1d3); an attribute is that which “the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence” (E 1d4); and modes are “the affections of substance, or that which is in another through which also it is conceived” (E 1d5).

Because he maintained that all other things are causally dependent on God for their creation and conservation, Descartes had recognized a strict sense of the term “substance” in which God is the only substance (CSM I: PP I.49–52). In a looser and more everyday sense of the term, however, he recognized two kinds of created substances, each with its own principal attribute: bodies, whose principal attribute is extension (i.e., spatial dimensionality); and minds, whose principal attribute is thought. From definitions and axioms seemingly acceptable to Cartesians – with the main exception of an essential Aristotelian axiom requiring that things be understood through their causes (E 1a4) – Spinoza’s *Ethics* aimed to demonstrate that the only substance is an

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“absolutely infinite” being, God (E 1d6). In Chapter 2, Yitzhak Y. Melamed carefully explains how Spinoza understood his definitions of “substance” and “God” in the context of the philosophies of Descartes and Aristotle, examines the nature of the three key relations of priority in which Spinoza’s God is said to stand to other things (inherence, conception, and causation), and clarifies what Spinoza meant by “absolutely infinite.” He then explores the nature of Spinoza’s “monism” about substance, including the significance of his references early in the *Ethics* to “substances of one attribute” and the propriety of describing God as “One.” Finally, he explains the nature, reality, and manner of existence of the “modes” – including human beings and all other particular things – that inhere in, are conceived through, and are caused by God

Whereas Descartes held that the body and the mind of a human being are two different substances, Spinoza sought to show that a human being’s body and mind are “one and the same” mode of God expressed and conceived through extension and thought, respectively, as two of the infinite array of divine attributes. Whereas Descartes held that the body and the mind of a human being causally interact with each other, Spinoza states that there cannot be any causation between bodies and minds, or indeed, between the modes of any two attributes of God. In Chapter 3, Martin Lin astutely sets out many of the interpretative difficulties regarding Spinoza’s notion of an attribute in general and describes Spinoza’s conception of the attributes of extension and thought in particular, giving special attention to his argument for the structural similarity between the mental and physical realms and for mind-body identity. While granting that “there are as many different ways of interpreting Spinoza’s views on psychophysical causation as there are ways of reading his philosophy of mind more generally,” Lin then goes on to propose and defend a strikingly new interpretation of the relation between attributes, according to which they are fundamentally merely different *conceptual languages* for referring to the same things.

Spinoza, like Descartes, drew a fundamental distinction between the intellect and the imagination. He regarded the former as comprising nonimagistic adequate ideas and the latter as comprising imagistic inadequate ideas. As the title of his early and unfinished *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* suggests, part of his philosophical project was to improve and strengthen the former. In Part 2 of the *Ethics*, he proposed to demonstrate – as consequences of his metaphysics – the character of the human mind as the “idea” of the human body, the

nature of sense perception, the relation between true and false ideas, and the way in which all ideas (including human minds) are contained in the infinite intellect of God. He also distinguished three kinds of “knowledge” or cognition (*cognitio*): the first kind, *opinion* or *imagination*, includes random or indeterminate experience and hearsay or knowledge from mere signs; the second kind, *reason*, depends on “common notions” (shared features of things that are “equally in the part and in the whole”) and on adequate knowledge of “properties” (rather than essences) of things; the third kind, *intuitive knowledge*, “proceeds from an adequate knowledge of the essence or attributes of God to knowledge of the essence of things,” in proper order, from causes to effects. Both the second and the third kinds of cognition are true and adequate, but the third kind provides the greater understanding and insight into the essences of things. In Chapter 4, Ursula Renz traces the development of Spinoza’s epistemology from the early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* to the *Ethics*; explains the meaning and significance of his technical epistemic vocabulary of “ideas,” “truth,” and “adequacy”; demonstrates how the distinction of three kinds of knowledge or cognition is intended to address a wide range of epistemological issues; and analyzes the doctrine that human ideas and minds are literally contained in “the infinite intellect of God.”

The theory of knowledge, on the one hand, and what we now call natural science, on the other, were closely related for Spinoza. In his view, the former serves as the basis from which the methods of natural science, like those of any inquiry, must be derived and through which they must be understood. In addition, however, it follows, from the parallelism of the two attributes of thought and extension and the identity of their corresponding modes, that the power of logical entailment itself – by which adequate ideas produce or give rise to other adequate ideas under the attribute of thought – is literally one and the same as the causal power by which modes of extension produce or give rise to other modes of extension. That is, logical power and physical power are the very same power, expressed in two different ways, under two different attributes. The *Ethics* itself devotes somewhat less discussion to the sciences of extended bodies, or what we would now call “physics,” than it does to the sciences of thinking things, or what we would call “psychology.” Nevertheless, Spinoza’s concern with both the methods and the content of natural science is evident throughout his writings, from his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* to his geometrical presentation of Cartesian physics in *Descartes’s “Principles*

of *Philosophy*,” and from his so-called physical excursus following *Ethics* 2p13 to his correspondence with Henry Oldenburg (the first Secretary of the British Royal Society and a friend of Robert Boyle). In Chapter 5, Alan Gabbey locates Spinoza’s scientific interests in the context of the disciplinary categories of the seventeenth century, investigates the authorship of two small treatises (on the rainbow, and on the calculation of chances) often attributed to him, describes his scientific correspondence, evaluates his strengths and weaknesses as an expositor of Cartesian physics, assesses the role of Cartesian physics in his own philosophy, and explores his conception of methodology in the natural sciences.

Spinoza’s doctrine that there is only one substance raises the question of how individual things can be distinguished from one another. Because different individuals are not different substances, they must be distinguished, within the one substance, in some other way. Within the attribute of extension, individual things are constituted by “fixed proportions of motion and rest” – that is, persisting patterns in the distribution of fundamental physical forces. Within the attribute of thought, individuals are constituted by the ideas of such actually persisting patterns. Individuals each have a definite nature or essence and are, to that extent, finite approximations to substances. Part 3 of the *Ethics* argues that a thing’s essence or nature must seek to exclude from itself what is incompatible with its own persistence, so that a thing can be understood as *active* – that is, as the adequate cause of effects – only to the extent that it endeavors, through its own nature, to persist. This striving or endeavor (*conatus*) to persevere in its own being is thus a consequence of the conditions for being an individual at all, and it constitutes each individual’s own distinctive power.

In this way, Spinoza’s solution to the problem of individuation entails a doctrine of necessary individual psychological egoism that applies throughout all of nature. He sought to derive the content of human psychology by adding to this general doctrine two further postulates about human beings in particular: (i) that they are affected in many ways that can increase or decrease their power of *acting* (in the sense of being an “adequate cause”); and (ii) that they are sufficiently complex to form and retain sensory images or traces of other things. On this basis, Spinoza defined three primary emotions or “affects”: (i) desire (*cupiditas*), which is “appetite [i.e., the endeavor for self-preservation] together with consciousness of the appetite”; joy (*laetitia*), which is an affect “by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection” or capacity for action;

and sadness (*tristitia*), which is an affect “by which the Mind passes to a lesser perfection” or capacity for action (E 3pp9–11). When an affect is produced by external causes, rather than through the agent’s own power, the affect is a *passion*. Part 3 of the *Ethics* goes on to analyze and define a large number of additional affects in terms of these three – by varying their combinations, their causes, and their objects – and deduces from these definitions a number of consequences for emotional and motivational phenomena.

In Chapter 6, Michael Della Rocca analyzes and evaluates in detail Spinoza’s argument for the metaphysical conclusion that “each thing, insofar as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being” (E 3p6); he describes and assesses Spinoza’s attempt to apply this metaphysical doctrine to human psychology; he critically examines Spinoza’s account of the particular laws governing human psychology; and offers new insights on the much-debated question of whether Spinoza recognized teleology or purposive explanation in nature. Throughout, he emphasizes both the importance to Spinoza of the Principle of Sufficient Reason – that is, the requirement that everything have a sufficient reason for being as it is – and the naturalistic character of Spinoza’s project, which requires Spinoza to regard human psychological states as subject to laws that are instances or applications of more general laws operative throughout nature.

Spinoza’s analysis of the emotions, or “affects,” and his doctrine that each person necessarily endeavors to persevere in being, provide, together with his metaphysics and his theory of knowledge, the basis for the ethical theory that he developed in Parts 4 and 5 of the *Ethics*. There he sought to explain human susceptibility to passions (i.e., affects of which the individual is not the adequate cause), the ways in which the understanding provides power to control those passions, and the elements of “the right way of living.” The “good,” as Spinoza defined it, is whatever we know to be useful for preserving our being. Since all human beings do necessarily endeavor to persevere in their being, all human beings will be motivated, at least to some extent, so far as their own power permits, to pursue the good as they conceive it. Ethics, as knowledge of the “right way of living,” is for Spinoza a kind of knowledge of nature that is at the same time knowledge that is necessarily motivating (to some extent) for human beings. He argues that the highest human good lies in adequate knowledge, which is itself eternal and thereby allows a part of the human mind to be eternal. Those who are most able to pursue their own advantage through adequate knowledge are “free

men," who are "guided by reason" and possess virtue. The existence of human freedom is compatible with necessitarianism because freedom involves, not chance or indeterminism, but rather action from the necessity of one's own self-preservatory nature, in contrast to necessitation by external causes. Accordingly, only those who are guided by reason, rather than passion, are truly free. Part 4 of the *Ethics* evaluates a variety of affects and behaviors from an ethical perspective, praising friendship and nobility (because nothing is more advantageous to a human being than other human beings who are guided by reason), but condemning such Christian virtues as humility, repentance, and pity (because they are kinds of sadness). In Chapter 7, I outline Spinoza's ethical theory and related doctrines and examine several crucial but often neglected or misunderstood aspects of that theory: (i) the meaning of ethical language, (ii) the nature of the good, (iii) the practicality of reason, (iv) the role of virtue, (v) the requirements for moral freedom and moral responsibility, and (vi) the possibility and moral significance of altruism. The chapter also addresses in new detail the meaning of Spinoza's claim that the ideal "free man" always acts "honestly" ("*cum fide*").

Spinoza's psychological egoism provides the basis not only for his ethical theory but for his political theory. Like his ethical theory, his political theory is a branch of the study of nature; but whereas his ethical theory primarily concerns the power and advantage of human individuals, his political theory, as detailed in his *Theological-Political Treatise* and his later unfinished *Political Treatise*, primarily concerns the power and advantage of the political collectives that human individuals compose. Fundamental to his political theory is his doctrine that "right" and "power" are coextensive. Like Machiavelli, he sought to understand relations of political power practically, scientifically, and dispassionately. Like Hobbes, he held that citizens are well-advised to give up their right and power to the state in return for the protection that it can provide to them in their pursuit of self-preservation. Unlike Hobbes, however, Spinoza emphasized the breadth of the practical limitations on the individual's concession of power to the state; and also unlike Hobbes, he located a human being's highest advantage not in mere continued life and the pursuit of pleasure, but in the achievement of adequate knowledge and its resulting peace of mind.

For Spinoza, the state is itself an "individual," with its own endeavor for self-preservation. However, it is usually in greater danger from its own citizens than it is from external enemies; and in order to preserve itself, it must take care how it seeks to exercise its power over



them. The wisest and most stable state, he maintained, is a limited constitutional democracy that allows freedom of expression and religious toleration. A free state is thus “free” in three different but related senses, for Spinoza: It places no restrictions on speech or religion; it is conducive to the development of “free men,” in the sense of Spinoza’s ethical ideal; and it is *itself* a free individual, because it acts through its own nature to achieve its own self-preservation. In Chapter 8, Edwin Curley explains Spinoza’s relation to Machiavelli, to Hobbes, and to the concept of a social contract, and he critically assesses Spinoza’s subordination of the concept of political right to that of political power.

Although he was a naturalist – in the sense of holding that nothing exists outside of or beyond Nature – Spinoza was more than a simple atheist hiding impiety in conciliatory or ironic theistic terminology. Rather, by reconceiving Nature as active and self-causing, and at the same time reconceiving God as nonpurposive and extended, he was able to conceive of God as identical with, rather than as the transcendent creator of, Nature. His God, like the God of many theologians, is perfect and infinite, is the self-caused cause of all, has an essence identical with its existence, and is the object of an eternal contemplative love and blessedness. Unlike the God of many theologians, however, the essence of Spinoza’s God is directly intelligible to the intellect through the divine attributes of thought and extension. Indeed, since Spinoza’s God is the only substance, in which everything is and through which everything must be conceived, *all* knowledge is knowledge of God, for Spinoza, just as all effects are effects of God’s power. Spinoza’s naturalistic and intellectual understanding of God as the absolutely infinite substance is largely coextensive with his metaphysics as presented in Part 1 of the *Ethics*. However, Spinoza sought not only to provide a philosophical understanding of God in the *Ethics*, but also to describe in the *Theological-Political Treatise* the kind of imaginative theology – that is, theology as grasped by the faculty of imagination – that could serve as the basis of a universal popular religion. In Chapter 9, Susan James shows how Spinoza’s sharp distinction in that work between “theology” and “philosophy,” as two separate realms with entirely different standards for belief, is compatible with his view that philosophy as well as imaginative theology can constitute a genuine kind of *religion*.

Spinoza saw the Bible as a work of great importance, capable of exacerbating social conflict and motivating persecution, but also capable of exercising a beneficial influence on the unphilosophical multitude, depending on the manner in which it was interpreted. In consequence,

he himself sought to interpret it with great care, as a historical product of nature, on the basis of careful attention to the meaning of its authors, philological understanding of its language, and historical knowledge of its composition and transmission. In addition to writing a *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*, he devoted considerable attention to the interpretation of Scripture in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. He concluded, from the content of Scripture itself, that prophets are distinguished not by the strength of their intellects but by the vividness of their imaginations, that revelations were accommodated to the minds of the prophets who received them, and that Scripture itself teaches nothing as essential to salvation except justice (i.e., obedience to the laws of the state) and charity toward one's neighbor. In Chapter 10, Edwin Curley provides the most accurate and thorough account to date of Spinoza's specific contributions to biblical scholarship on a variety of questions, while emphasizing that his most important contribution lay in developing a systematic method of interpreting the Bible that came to set the norm for the entire field.

Spinoza and his philosophy have meant many things to many people. Most of his own contemporaries regarded his philosophy as a thinly disguised form of atheism, while Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) served to reinforce the image of an absurd and heretical metaphysician who nonetheless lived an exemplary life, even as Spinoza exerted a powerful appeal on freethinkers and radicals. He has exerted a powerful influence on both German and French philosophy from the time of the Enlightenment to the present. Succeeding generations of natural scientists, psychologists, novelists, and poets have found in his writings a continuing source of inspiration. In Chapter 11, Pierre-François Moreau and Mogens Lærke chronicle the varied history of Spinoza's reception and influence from the seventeenth century onward. In spite of – and sometimes because of – his use of “geometrical order,” Spinoza is among the most difficult philosophers to interpret; and as Moreau and Lærke make clear, he has been the subject of many divergent interpretations up to and including the present. Our understanding of what Spinoza meant to convey to his readers is by no means complete; it is, however, considerably greater than it has been at any time in the past.

More than half of the chapters in this volume – Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, and 10 – are entirely new contributions by leading scholars written specifically for this second edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*. The other chapters have been updated by their authors (and,