

Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Syracuse Scholar Spring 1983*

Article 6

1983

Glimpses of Spinoza

Jonathan Bennett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/sus scholar>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bennett, Jonathan (1983) "Glimpses of Spinoza," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/sus scholar/vol4/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991) by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Glimpses of Spinoza

Jonathan Bennett



Jonathan Bennett was born in New Zealand in 1930. His career as a teacher of philosophy has been spent mainly at the University of Cambridge (1956–68), the University of British Columbia (1970–79), and, since 1979, Syracuse University. He has written three books on early modern philosophy and two on the philosophy of mind and language. His *Spinoza's Ethics* will appear in December 1983.

About thirty years ago I began studying Spinoza's philosophy, especially as expressed in his *Ethics*. In these pages I shall describe some aspects of his thought, in the hope of making him sound worth the intermittent labor of three decades. The best reasons for finding him so absorbingly interesting lie in hard, technical details which cannot be presented here, but I hope I can say something from which an impression may emerge.

Pantheism and atheism

Spinoza was born and bred a Jew. At the age of 24 he was excommunicated by his synagogue—a rare event in the Jewish world, and in this case probably due to pressure (or the fear of pressure) from the surrounding Christian world. The excommunication was a result not of Spinoza's neglect of his religion, but of his unorthodox attention to it: The objection was to *what* he had to say about the nature of God.

There is a problem about Spinoza and God. When Hume referred to the "true atheism . . . for which Spinoza is so universally infamous," and to the "hideous hypothesis" upon which his metaphysics is based,¹ he had his tongue in his cheek; but it would have been no good as a joke unless Spinoza had indeed been thought by many people to be an atheist. And the fair and intelligent Antoine Arnauld was not joking when he described Spinoza as "the most dangerous and impious man of the century."² Yet the poet Novalis could characterize Spinoza as "a man who was drunk with God." There is something here to be explained.

The explanation starts from the fact that Spinoza was a pantheist: He said that there is nothing but God, i.e., that God is all there is. Obviously, that could encourage the description "drunk with God." It is less obvious that it can support a charge of atheism, but it can. To see how, one must realize that when Spinoza said that there is only

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed., with an analytical index, L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 240–41.

2. The remark is reported by Leibniz. See Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, *Samtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ser. 2, vol. 1 (Darmstadt: Otto Reichl Verlag, 1926), p. 535.

God, he was not saying that the daily world of waterfalls and butterflies and worries and comets is illusory, and that the only real thing is a God lurking behind or beneath it. On the contrary, he uses “God” as one of his two names for the *natural* world—his other name for it being “Nature.” So Spinoza’s “There is only God” means “There is only Nature, and it is God”; and that gives him an important point in common with the ordinary atheist, who says “There is only Nature,” i.e., only the natural world of beds and headaches and ice and euphoria. If we asked the atheist to “go on a bit—elaborate your position a little further,” he would say: “I am saying that there is no supernatural being in addition to the familiar world of things we see and hear and feel, and mental states and processes which we experience.” That further elaboration is something else Spinoza utterly agrees with.

Suppose then that we ask the atheist to say still more. “What else can you say about the God whose existence you deny?” He will be apt to reply: “Well, I am denying the existence of a *personal* being which is infinitely grander than any human person.” Here again Spinoza agrees wholeheartedly. When he says that the natural world is God, this is not because he thinks he has discovered that the natural world is something like a vast person. His God is severely impersonal: “He who loves God,” he writes—meaning the person who loves *and understands* God—“will not try to get God to love him back.”³ This is because such a person must realize that God is not the sort of item that can love a man.

3. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*, pt. 5, proposition 19.

So Spinoza’s God is entirely impersonal, as well as not being in any acceptable sense supernatural. There is a real question whether he is disagreeing with the atheist at all, i.e., whether he is himself an atheist in disguise. The answer must depend on what Spinoza *does* mean by “God,” if it is not anything supernatural or personal. Why does he think that “God” is a good name for the entire natural world?

I think he had two quite different reasons for this.

One was his view that much of what is traditionally said about God is indeed true of the natural world as a whole. God is said to be infinite, eternal, not acted on by anything else, the ultimate source of the explanation of everything, not susceptible to criticism by any valid standard; and Spinoza thought, rightly in my opinion, that all of these things may be true of Nature and are not true of anything else.

The other reason, I believe, was that the attitude traditionally adopted toward God—one of reverence, awe, humility, and love—seemed to Spinoza to be a proper attitude to take toward the entire universe. He *did* find it wonderful; he was awed and humbled and delighted by its grandeur, its extent, its complexity, its ultimate orderliness, the inflexibility of its laws.

I don’t think it was so very unreasonable for him to use the phrase *Deus sive Natura*—“God, or in other words, Nature.” And I think that Novalis was somewhere near right when he described Spinoza as intoxicated with God.

An attack from within

But I also think that Arnauld may have been right not in calling Spinoza “impious” but in calling him “the most dangerous . . . man of this century.” Spinoza’s pantheism—even if it was a genuine theism, not atheism in disguise—arose from a profound criticism of traditional

Judaeo-Christian theology which could well qualify him as “dangerous.” I shall say a bit about that criticism.

It is rooted in a passage which has not been sufficiently attended to by Spinoza scholars. It occurs in an argument which is to be found not in his mature masterpiece, the *Ethics*, but in an early work in which he presents in his own way some of the main themes in Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy*. This work contains things which do not occur in the *Principles*, and which I therefore suppose represent Spinoza’s own view. One of these is an argument against polytheism, i.e., an argument for the proposition: “There are not several Gods.”⁴ What the proof boils down to is this. Suppose there are two Gods, A and B—taking these to be perfect, omniscient, self-sufficient, and so on. If A doesn’t know about B, then A is not omniscient and so is not God. But if A does know about B, then that knowledge is a fact about A which is caused from outside A. That implies that A is not causally self-sufficient, i.e., that A is as he is partly because of some reality outside him; in which case, once more, A is not a God. Either way, A is not a God.

I have suppressed an obscure detail in the argument which is supposed to show that if A knows about B then *if B is a God* B is the cause of a state of A’s mind. But that bit does not work, so far as I can see, and I am not convinced that Spinoza thought it did. What does apparently work is an argument using the stronger thesis that if A knows about B then *if B is real at all* B is the cause of a state of A’s mind. I can make no sense of the idea of knowing about some external reality without being in a state caused by that reality.

That goes with the fact that the very notion of a reality is tied to the notion of something which obeys its own laws, is a possible obstacle, a resistance, a thing which goes its own way and to which we must partly adapt. “Is this a dagger I see before me? Come, let me clutch thee!”—the test of reality is resistance, causally fighting back.

That is why this argument of Spinoza’s really shows not just that there cannot be a God and another God, but that there cannot be a God and another reality—unless the “God” is either ignorant or in some degree passive, “passive” in the sense of being *acted upon*, as one must be acted upon by something in order to know about it.

That is not just my conclusion—it is also Spinoza’s. In a short work published along with the Cartesian one, he comes right out with it: Rather than discussing the existence of a God and another God, he now argues that there cannot be a God and another real thing of any kind at all. Because God’s states of mind are not affected by outside objects, he says, “the object of God’s knowledge is not anything external to God.”⁵ And, to put it in a pair of nutshells: “God knows everything” and, a few paragraphs later, “God knows nothing but God.”

There is, in short, an intolerable difficulty confronting any theory according to which God has *knowledge of a reality* that is *other* than himself. Something must go: Drop the knowledge, and you have an ignorant God. Drop the reality, and you have the natural world as an illusion, God’s daydream (I shall say more about that in my next section). Spinoza proposes instead to drop the otherness: The natural world is real and God does know about it, but it *is* God, rather than something external to God. And so he arrives at pantheism.

4. Spinoza, *Descartes’s Principles of Philosophy*, pt. 1, proposition 11.

5. Spinoza, *Metaphysical Thoughts*, pt. 2, chap. 7.

You may think that a God which is identified with Nature should not really be said to know anything. Spinoza would sympathize with that. Just after his argument against polytheism he says: "Since no perfection is found in God which is not from God, things will of themselves contain nothing which could be a cause of God's knowledge. . . . Hence it clearly follows that God does not sense and does not, strictly speaking, perceive, for his understanding is not affected by anything outside himself."⁶ The item in question does not sense or perceive but is still to be credited with knowledge? Well, no, not really; and it is especially important to grasp that where the English language forces us in using singular pronouns to choose between personal and impersonal—calling God "he" or "she" on the one hand or "it" on the other—none of Spinoza's languages forced any such choice on him.

So far as the argument for pantheism is concerned, Spinoza need not be embarrassed by our pointing out that he should not credit God with knowing anything. His argument attacks orthodox Christian theology by boring from within: Its premises, even if he does not accept them without a little reinterpretation, are parts of the theology he is trying to topple. This form of attack is typical of Spinoza. As one of the best Spinozist commentators has said: "He seems intent on showing that theological speculation itself, when reason is once allowed free play, must at last purge itself of anthropomorphism and come round to the scientific view. Spinoza does not ignore theology, but provides a euthanasia for it."⁷

Descartes on God's knowledge

This argument against polytheism and the subsequent argument for pantheism occur, of course, in Spinoza's work, not Descartes's. What we get from the Christian Descartes is something which, if allowed to stand, will undercut Spinoza's argument: It is as though Descartes had seen the storm clouds gathering and was trying to put up a shelter. Having made the routine point that God does not have a body, he goes on to say that God does not know things by sensing them: "Although it is an advantage for men to have senses, still, because sensations occur in us as a result of impressions from outside, which testifies to our being dependent, I conclude that God does not have senses."⁸ So God, according to Descartes, knows—or as he says, "understands"—the world without depending on it or having any intake from it. How is this done? Descartes says that in God's case *knowing about the world* is like *deciding what to do*: God's knowing comes from within himself rather than being caused from the outside. This comparison of knowing and deciding, or in Descartes's terminology "understanding" and "willing," is more than a mere comparison. Descartes says: "God does not understand and will by two entirely different operations, as we do; rather, he understands and wills and does everything by a single kind of action." But what does this mean? If we are expected to swallow the idea of an act of understanding which is *of* something external but comes purely from within, we are entitled to some account of what this "action" is like. Well, Descartes is ready for that demand too. In quoting him I suppressed a phrase: What he actually says is that God understands and wills and does everything by "a single *very simple* kind of action" (emphasis added). What "very simple" means here is that

6. Spinoza, *Descartes's Principles of Philosophy*, pt. 1, corollaries of proposition 12.

7. Frederick Pollock, *Spinoza, His Life and Philosophy* (London, 1880; reprint, Dubuque, Iowa: Reprint Library), p. 166.

8. René Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, pt. 1, sec. 53.

the action defies analysis: There is no “how” to it, nothing to be said about what it involves or amounts to or breaks down into.

Spinoza would say, in my view rightly, that this is unacceptable as philosophy. Descartes is answering the question, How does he do it?, by saying, in effect, “He just does!” Granted that all explanations must stop somewhere, could we reasonably let our theology come to a halt here?

If we are to squeeze any sort of further explanation out of what Descartes says, it must be through the hint that the “very simple kind of action” is a kind of willing, an inner-directed making up of the mind. But that takes us from evasive philosophy to preposterous theology. Taken strictly, it implies that what God is said to know or “understand” is not an independent reality at all but a fantasy, a divine daydream, something God makes up as he goes along. In Harold Pinter’s play *The Homecoming* one of the odious brothers is reminiscing about a woman friend whom he dropped because “she had the pox.” He is asked, “How did you know she had the pox?” “How did I know?” he replies. “I *decided* she had!” That seems a good example of divine knowledge on the Cartesian plan.

As I said, we cannot allow that the Christian God has knowledge of a reality other than himself. Drop the knowledge and God is ignorant; drop the otherness and you have pantheism; so Descartes drops the reality and turns the natural world into a sort of game that God is playing. How did God know we sinned? He *decided* we had!

The status of man

From God, let us move down the scale to man. Since he had no room for a personal God, Spinoza could not think that mankind is somehow especially chosen or favored. From that fact flow two of his chief metaphysical doctrines—one about morals and one about men.

The first is the doctrine that there are no absolute values.⁹ Spinoza holds that when the man in the street calls something “good” or “bad” he means only that it does or does not suit *him*. We can use value terms somewhat more objectively, by calling things good or bad according to how suitable they are to mankind in general; but this is still a parochial matter. It would have cosmic significance if our welfare somehow mirrored the eternal values of a caring and favoring God; but really all we are talking about is the welfare of a biological species, one among thousands, which concerns us not for its intrinsic uniqueness but merely because we are members of it. On the cosmic scale, whatever happens is “right” in the sense of being *comme il faut*—of flowing inevitably from the inflexible nature of things, and correctly expressing the nature of the universe. Any attempt to divide reality into right/wrong or good/bad is just an absurd kicking against the pricks.

The other metaphysical doctrine is that there is nothing *sui generis* about men as compared with the rest of Nature: We are built of the same stuff as everything else, and we operate by the same laws. Man is, says Spinoza, in the fullest sense “a part of Nature”: He is not “situated within Nature like a kingdom within a kingdom,” or like something which “disturbs Nature’s laws rather than following them.”¹⁰

I know of no other philosopher who holds to this doctrine more pertinaciously than Spinoza does. Although he thinks there is more to a

9. See Spinoza, *Ethics*, appendix to pt. 1 and preface to pt. 4.

10. *Ibid.*, preface to pt. 3.

human being than an animal body, he maintains that everything that is true of a human being, including his thoughts and feelings, are reflections of, and so cannot be more complex than, what happens in the body. From this he infers that the laws governing human bodies are sufficient, in a way, to explain everything about a human being. And those laws, he holds, are pure physics; a human body is a collection of particles which happen to be so interrelated as to constitute a mildly durable and weakly self-sustaining system—not a kingdom within a kingdom, merely a little whirlpool within a big flood. Spinoza cannot tell us much about what kind of internal integrity such a system has—he merely speaks of it as maintaining “the same proportions of motion and rest,” which I think we must take as only a stopgap, a placeholder to be filled some day by a thorough anatomy and physiology. But he is at any rate clear that all there is to the unity of a human body is a set of interrelationships among particles of matter. He says: “I understand the body to die when its parts are so disposed as to acquire a different proportion of motion and rest to each other.”¹¹ Here is a somewhat less cryptic but equally Spinozist account of dying, from a novel in which a character named Dyson is attending the funeral of a former colleague named Eddy:

*Light; flowers; brass fittings; solemn intonation; and in that box the already decomposing remains of the man who had occupied the corner desk in Dyson's office each day since he had taken the department over. Then poor old Eddy had been a jungle of faint electric circuits connected to make thoughts and memories and aches and sleepiness, like a blackboard of chalk dust patterned to form the binomial theorem or the history of the Fourth Crusade. Now those slight differences of electric potential had disappeared, like the chalk dust at the end of the lesson. Old Eddy had been wiped clean. Dyson tried to fix his mind upon the tiny grains of chalk fleeing before the duster, filling the air, and settling upon shiny surfaces, totally and eternally discharged of theorem and crusade, or any lingering imprint of them.*¹²

Mind and body

This way of talking about the death of the body may well sound all right: We are accustomed to the idea of “causes of death,” and from thinking of those in essentially chemical terms we move easily to thinking of death, and thus of animal life, in chemical terms also. But what about the death of the mind, the soul, the person who doesn't just walk and breathe and eat and excrete and sleep, but who also reasons and wonders and hopes and fears and pities and believes? This is the high hurdle for those who want thoroughly to represent man as just “a part of Nature,” in the sense of wanting an absolutely smooth, bumpless slope running from man down through animals and on to the inorganic world. It seems that somewhere along that slope there is the difference between the parts of the world which have minds and those which do not, and that looks like a bump.

We need to get clear about what it means to credit an animal with having a mind, and on that basis to develop a tenable view about how we fit into the rest of Nature. This is a tremendous unsolved philosophical problem. To see a little about what kind of problem it is, consider Descartes's attempt to solve it. He held that mentality is

11. Ibid., pt. 4, the scholium to proposition 39.

12. Michael Frayn, *Against Entropy* (New York: Belmont Books, 1972), p. 171. Reprinted by permission of the author.

to be found only in man, and that an injured dog is a screaming machine but not a subject of real inwardly felt pain. And he held that a human being *is* a mind; that minds are substances of a special sort, in which God takes great interest, and that we have the honor to be of that sort. How, according to Descartes, do we fit into the rest of Nature? Well, we—that is, these minds—are each associated with a collection of chemicals called a human body; so we are attached to bodies, and the bodies are parts of the physical realm; and that is how we fit into Nature.

It is a plausible enough story (give or take the theology), but let us press it for some details. First, how is each of us associated with a body? What makes this body *mine*, i.e., the one especially associated with this mind? The most plausible answer, and the only one Descartes had, was that this is the body which is directly causally connected with this mind by a two-way flow: The body acts according to what the mind wants, and the mind suffers according to what befalls the body. But then it turns out that this body, this collection of chemicals, is related in a very peculiar way to the rest of the physical world. Other chemical systems perform according to purely chemical laws; but this one, in Descartes's story, is subject to intrusions from outside the physical realm, namely, from my mind. It seems, indeed, that in a human body the laws of chemistry must sometimes be overridden: They ordain that the chemicals should do one thing, but my mind ordains that they do something different. If that never happens, the commands of my mind are a pretense, ordering my body to do what it will do anyway out of chemical necessity, like the character in *The Little Prince* who gives the universe "reasonable orders" such as commanding the sun to set in the evenings.

There is more to be said, of course; but that is enough to show that there is a serious question here, and that Descartes's answer to it is disappointing: It provides us with an awkward "fit" into the rest of nature—one which is more like a mis-fit!

What does Spinoza do about this? He says that a human being is an item which has both a material and a mental side or aspect; that I am a body and I am a mind, and that in this respect I am just like every other part of reality. This is the astonishingly bold hypothesis of psychophysical parallelism, according to which the entire universe is physical reality and a *corresponding* mental reality—one which runs parallel to the physical one, mirroring it in every detail. That does not mean that every stick and stone has a mind: Spinoza reserves the term "mind" for mental systems of a high degree of complexity, matching the complexity of the physical systems we classify as higher organisms. But he postulates a smooth slide from my mental aspect to that of a pebble, parallel to the smooth slide from my physical state to that of a pebble.

He expresses this parallelism thesis by saying that, for every physical thing or event which reality contains, there is also the "idea of" it: The "idea of" something is just that thing's mental counterpart. On this theory, the human mind is the "idea of" the human body. Thus, Spinoza again on death: "If other bodies act so violently upon our body that the proportion of its motion and rest cannot persist: that is death of the body, and an annihilation of our mind, insofar as that is only the idea of this thus-proportioned body."¹³

Psychophysical parallelism is a bold theory indeed. You may well feel

13. Adapted from a quotation in H. H. Joachim, *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901), p. 129n.

that there is after all less interest in the endeavor to relate man smoothly to the rest of Nature if the endeavor includes such an inflated account of the latter. I sympathize with that. But I had better confess that, although I have no very strong reason to accept Spinoza's parallelism doctrine, I do not know of any clearly better solution to the extraordinarily difficult problem of "the mind and its place in Nature."

Mental representation

Even if one utterly rejects psychophysical parallelism, Spinoza's handling of it can still be absorbingly interesting and challenging. I shall briefly explain why, because this touches on the main reason that I love his work.

By treating man as a bunch of chemicals with a mental correlate, Spinoza implies that whatever is true of the human mind is a mental mirror of some fact about the human body: There can be no question of the mind's having little tricks of its own, with no bodily analogues, any more than of the mind's interfering with the body. That confronts Spinoza with some large, urgent, beautiful problems.

They do not include the problem of saying in detail what the bodily processes are which correspond to the mind's various activities. Spinoza was entitled to say, as he did, that he and his contemporaries knew almost nothing about how animal bodies function; in one place he adduces our belief *that we shall die* as one of those convictions which we hold firmly without having the faintest understanding of why they are true.

But he is obliged to face up to, and not evade or postpone, certain strategic mind-body problems—ones which seem to be purely philosophical, not involving scientific knowledge of biology. Chief among these is the problem of what it is for a mental state to represent something in the physical realm. Even if he insists that there is no causal influence either way between the mental and physical realms, Spinoza has to say that a mental item can represent—be an idea of or a belief about—a physical item. There is a fantastically difficult and still unsolved problem of seeing clearly what this representing relation is, i.e., what it is for something to be 'of' or 'about' something else. The problem is old. St. Augustine was onto it when he expressed wonder at the fact that his own mind, which had no size at all, was capacious enough to hold the universe.

On the face of it, Spinoza has an answer built right into his metaphysics: There is a systematic, across-the-board parallelism between physical and mental; and a mental representation *of* something is just that item's routine, automatic, mental correlate—its partner in the parallelistic scheme of things. But if that were the whole story about mental representation, it would mean that we could never have beliefs about anything except our own bodies!

Spinoza sees this and tries to show how my mind can contain ideas (directly) of my body and also (indirectly) of other things: I have an idea indirectly of your body if my body is in a certain state (which is of course registered in my mind) as a result of being acted on by your body, e.g., by light waves being reflected from your skin onto my eyes. This is a good start toward a theory of perception, but not toward a theory of mental representation generally, and especially not toward a theory of belief. In explaining why, I shall focus on belief because

Spinoza holds that the basic constituents of the mind—the items he calls “ideas”—are all fundamentally belief-like.

There are two big facts about belief: Something can be the case without our believing it, and we can believe something without its being the case; that is, we are ignorant, and we err. Any acceptable theory of belief must accommodate those two facts. But Spinoza, though he can accommodate ignorance, has no room for error. He can say that I am ignorant of an event in the outer world if it fails to cause any change in my body. But what can he say about error? What he *does* say is that it is a kind of ignorance. His arguments for this are amazingly stubborn and ingenious, but they are complete failures, as they are bound to be since their conclusion is patently false.

Minimalism

Why then did I say that this matter links with my main reason for loving Spinoza’s work? It is because my own wrestlings with the concept of mental representation have been helped, stimulated, refreshed, and challenged more by Spinoza’s failures than by anything else I have read. And, like some other philosophers, I find him good in this way in many areas of philosophy. He was by temperament a conceptual minimalist. He constantly tried to do philosophical jobs by means of too small a stock of intellectual instruments—for example, to generate a total classification of the emotions out of a basic division between those which are moves toward heightened vitality and those which are moves the other way; to derive human self-interest from the general metaphysical doctrine that no thing—no person or pebble or mountain—could conceivably be the cause of its own destruction; to show that it is all right for us to exploit the lower animals, not because they are *lower* but just because they are *different* from us. In these and many other of his doctrines one can see minimalism, as I call it, at work.

It is nowhere more conspicuously at work than in Spinoza’s theory of belief—or his substitute for such a theory. It is because that theory is such a minimalist one that it fails, I think; but that is also what makes it profoundly instructive and helpful. Compare this with the instructiveness of watching someone try to build an automobile engine out of an erector set: Even if he is a genius at automobile engines, he will not succeed in building one out of those materials, but as you watch him try you will learn a terrific amount about automobile engines. If on the other hand he were given the run of the spare-parts shop for his materials, he might bolt together about half a dozen mysterious pieces and produce a working engine, but we as onlookers would learn nothing about what sort of thing an automobile engine is. I see Spinoza as a mechanical genius who is, for his own reasons, trying to build automobile engines out of an erector set.

Such minimalism brings not only profit but also pleasure, if one enjoys wrestling with texts and getting them to succumb. Spinoza is not only parsimonious with concepts; he is also sparing with words, sometimes throwing in the reader’s face a tiny sentence which proves to be unpackable into something deserving of lengthier treatment. A favorite example of mine is a remark which, having lost the reference, I must quote from memory. It goes something like this: “To think that *God is angry with men because they are wicked* is to put the truth back to front.” It is easy to slide over such a sentence as this, being content

to take from it only a vague impression that Spinoza is, unsurprisingly, expressing skepticism about objective wickedness and/or divine anger. But look again: What is offered is not vague skepticism, but a precise claim about the order of explanations. If we take it seriously and reverse what Spinoza says should be reversed, we get "Men are wicked because God is angry with them." Now, for Spinoza "God" is one name for Nature; the item to which it refers is not personal, and thus not capable of "anger" in any normal sense; but we have a common metaphor which lets us speak of "angry skies" and the like, and it would let us say that God or Nature is angry with a person, meaning simply that the universe has dealt him a rotten hand. On that reading, Spinoza is saying that moral wickedness, e.g., the vile unfeelingness of the sociopath, belongs in the same category of natural misfortune as does spina bifida or congenital blindness. Spinoza sometimes makes the point that although wicked men are necessarily wicked "they are not on that account less to be feared or less pernicious,"¹⁴ but in this sentence about putting things back to front he is implying—clearly enough, if one knows how to read him—that such men should nevertheless be seen as victims of dire misfortune. I applaud what he is saying, and I loved making the discovery that he is saying it.

14. Spinoza, letter 58.

The moral system

Spinoza's great masterpiece is entitled *Ethics*. In its early parts he lays out his metaphysical system, and his account of how man fits into the universe, of the nature of the mind, and so on. Then he proceeds to describe a way of life which he aims to recommend to us, and to prove certain things about what causes one to live in this way and what results from one's so doing.

Probably the truest and best part of all this is the theory in Part 1 about things in space. Spinoza says that there is, really and basically, only one extended thing; it is (though he does not say so explicitly) *space*; and what we call things in space are really thickenings of space, as it were. A "movement of a stone" through the air is, at the deepest metaphysical level, comparable with the "movement of a thaw" across a countryside. In the latter case we know quite well that nothing really moves: There are merely alterations in which bits of the countryside are frozen and which are not. Analogously, Spinoza holds that, in what we call the movement of a body through space, really (deep down) nothing moves: There are merely alterations in which bits of space are stony and which are airy. He has good reasons for this strange-sounding theory, but I cannot expound them here.

I shall, however, say a little about the end of the *Ethics*, namely, the moral system which gives the work its title.

The Spinozist way of life rests on determinism. Because he thinks that Nature is rigidly controlled by causal laws, and that man is just a part of Nature, Spinoza holds that human actions, too, are entirely under causal control. This belief operates powerfully in his views about how the rational man will live. For one thing, he thinks that if determinism is true then no one is ever to blame for anything. To blame someone, he says, is to regret what the person did and to believe that he did it freely; and since that belief is always false, blame is always mistaken. Here is something he wrote to a friend near the end of his short life:

*You insist that if men sin from the necessity of their nature, they are excusable: but I do not know what you want to conclude from this—is it that God cannot be angry with them, or that they are worthy of happiness? If you mean the former, I fully admit that God is not angry, and that all things come to pass according to his decree; but I deny that they ought on that account to be happy; for men can be excusable and nevertheless lack happiness and be tormented in many ways. He who goes mad from the bite of a dog is indeed to be excused, and yet is rightly suffocated; and he who is unable to control his desires and to restrain them through fear of the laws, although he must be excused for his weakness, is nevertheless unable to enjoy peace of mind and necessarily perishes.*¹⁵

15. Spinoza, letter 78, quoted with omissions.

Blame is only one on the list of human performances that Spinoza thinks we would be better off without, and which he thinks result from ignorance or weakness or instability. There is another range of reactions, including disappointment and sharp regret, which he frowns on because they are antilife; they are forms of “unpleasure” and thus constitute moves toward lowered vitality. These will be less likely to occur, he holds, in proportion as one understands certain things, the greatest source of peace, stability, and self-control being a clear grasp and acceptance of the view that whatever happens was bound to happen. This is not the fatalism which says that the future is written in the Great Book. Spinoza has no notion of destiny as a factor in the human condition. His determinism is a down-to-earth causal affair: Whatever happens was inevitable because sufficient causes of it already existed in the world. It follows that there is no such thing as a “near miss”—something which nearly happened but didn’t quite. Whatever didn’t happen, couldn’t have happened—was utterly ruled out by the prevailing conditions. And there is perhaps a kind of comfort, or at least a calming effect, in that. I throw an apple core toward the wastepaper basket, and it misses by an inch and skids across the floor making a mark which I have to wipe off. “Damn!” I say—and there is a small perturbation which there would not have been if the floor had been marked through some visibly inevitable and unstoppable process. But according to Spinoza the perturbation arises from my not realizing that my missing was inevitable. Listen to this poem by Philip Larkin:

As Bad As a Mile

*Watching the thrown core
Striking the basket, skidding across the floor,
Shows less and less of luck, and more and more*

*Of failure spreading back up the arm
Earlier and earlier, the unraised hand calm,
The apple unbitten in the palm.*¹⁶

16. Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 32. Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber.

That is the whole poem, and it is perfect Spinoza: Before I first sink my teeth into the apple, it is settled that when I throw the core I’ll miss. It is Spinozist metaphysics without the Spinozist ethics, because nothing is said about the peace of mind, the freedom from disagreeable upset, which can come from seeing the failure spreading back up the arm. The emphasis on peace of mind is central to Spinoza’s own account of his recommended way of life.

What *is* that way of life? Well, the man who follows it lives a life of reason: He clears his mind of hopes and fears, of ambitions and goals which put him at the mercy of circumstances which he cannot control or predict; he is always modestly aware of how small he is in the scheme of things; he knows that he will be pained and damaged if he permits himself resentment, hatred, or contempt toward others, and so he tries not to be the subject of such attitudes and emotions; he will be helpful and cooperative toward others of his own kind, because he knows that it is best for him if he is so—but he will for that reason be positively drawn toward the interests of others, and not merely scared into it by the fear of trouble if he does not. He will not act out of pity, for two reasons: Pity clouds the mind and makes one inefficient in helping needy people; and pity is an “unpleasure,” an emotional downdraft, and as such it is to be avoided.

There is much more to the Spinozist way of life than that, but perhaps that is enough to give the flavor.

Spinoza’s own life squared pretty well with his moral system. He lived quietly and modestly, declined academic appointments and stayed with his lens grinding, formed many friendships but kept them cool, and so on. There is something pure and true about the relation between Spinoza’s life and his moral philosophy, but the customary admiration for his resolute conformity to his own principles strikes me as a touch naive. It implies that the principles came first, and I doubt they did. I suspect that with all sincere moral philosophers, Spinoza included, the moral theory is largely a projection of the theorist’s character. So we may be impressed by how closely Spinoza’s theory modeled his tastes—his *liking* for quiet, cool restraint—but not at how heroically he stuck to his principles.

An objection

Be that as it may, I want to say that I finally reject Spinoza’s ideal. An essential part of it is the avoidance not just of sudden downdrafts but of all kinds of suddenness, every sort of inner turbulence. Spinoza thinks, probably rightly, that the only escape from occasional gusts of painful or harmful emotion is to opt right out of the life of the emotions. He does advocate a sort of calm joy which he thinks is intrinsic to the life lived “according to the dictates of reason”; but it is more calm than joyful, and is not what we would ordinarily call an emotion.

In my view, the price is too high.

I shall illustrate that with another literary example. It comes from Isaac Bashevis Singer’s short story “The Spinoza of Market Street.”¹⁷ The title refers to Dr. Fischelson, an elderly unemployed scholar, living on a tiny pension got together by friends and admirers, who has spent his life studying Spinoza’s *Ethics* and living like Spinoza. The time is August 1914, the place Warsaw. Dr. Fischelson has been seriously ill and is nursed by another occupant of his lodging house—an ugly, ungainly, graceless woman, apparently in early middle age, known derisively in the neighborhood as Black Dobbe. As an absentminded act of prudence and kindness, Dr. Fischelson agrees to marry her: The marriage may provide him with some conveniences in his declining years and will do something for her—satisfy her pride, perhaps, and reconcile her a little to her boniness, her swarthy skin, her broken nose, her

17. Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Spinoza of Market Street and Other Stories* (New York: Avon Books, 1963), pp. 24–25. Originally published 1961; reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, inc.

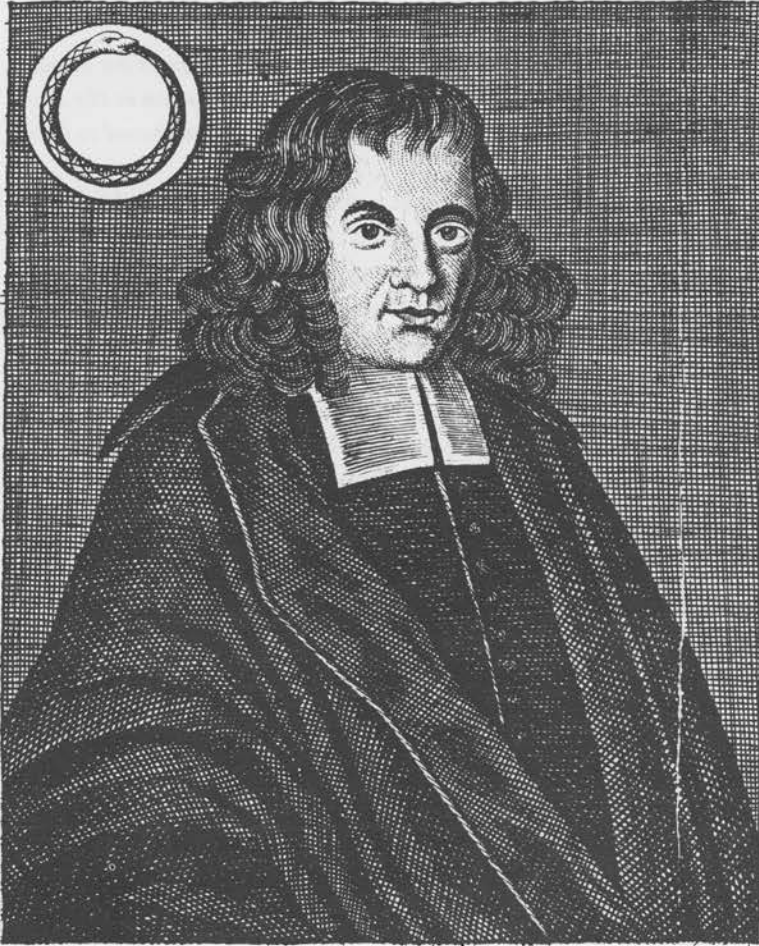
mustache, her hoarse man's voice. Dr. Fischelson's marriage is motivated in a fairly Spinozist way, but then something un-Spinozist happens. Before presenting the last page or so of the story, giving Singer the final word, I want to call attention to two things. One, just in passing, is that Singer offers an intensely Spinozist picture of the universe: a picture in which there is *one* extended substance, *one* utterly integrated and inflexibly unrolling system. Such items as the galaxies, the opening shots of the First World War, and an elderly scholar looking out of the window in a state of postcoital calm—these are all “modes,” ways in which the one substance is, complicated movements of thaws across the universal countryside, so to speak. Nothing could be more redolent of Spinoza's thought than the insistence that all this hangs together in a single picture. The other thing is my real point in introducing Singer's story into my remarks. It is that Dr. Fischelson, having strayed from the Spinozist way of life, apologizes; and it is for something one should not have to apologize for. That is what is wrong with the Spinozist way of life: The price of calm is set too high.

We pick up the story on the wedding night, when Black Dobbe, the Spinoza scholar's wife of convenience and compassion, astonishes him by coming to his bed.

Dr. Fischelson trembled, and the Ethics dropped from his hands. The candle went out. Dobbe groped for Dr. Fischelson in the dark and kissed his mouth. “My dear husband,” she whispered to him, “Mazel tov.”

What happened that night could be called a miracle. If Dr. Fischelson hadn't been convinced that every occurrence is in accordance with the laws of nature, he would have thought that Black Dobbe had bewitched him. Powers long dormant awakened in him. Although he had had only a sip of the benediction wine, he was as if intoxicated. He kissed Dobbe and spoke to her of love. Long forgotten quotations from Klopstock, Lessing, Goethe, rose to his lips. The pressures and aches stopped. He embraced Dobbe, pressed her to himself, was again a man as in his youth. Dobbe was faint with delight; crying, she murmured things to him in a Warsaw slang which he did not understand. Later, Dr. Fischelson slipped off into the deep sleep young men know. He dreamed that he was in Switzerland and that he was climbing mountains—running, falling, flying. Toward dawn he opened his eyes; it seemed to him that someone had blown in his ears. Dobbe was snoring. Dr. Fischelson quietly got out of bed. In his long nightshirt he approached the window, walked up the steps and looked out in wonder. Market Street was asleep, breathing with a deep stillness. The gas lamps were flickering. The black shutters on the stores were fastened with iron bars. A cool breeze was blowing. Dr. Fischelson looked up at the sky. The black arch was thickly sown with stars—there were green, red, yellow, blue stars; there were large ones and small ones, winking and steady ones. There were those that were clustered in dense groups and those that were alone. In the higher sphere, apparently, little notice was taken of the fact that a certain Dr. Fischelson had in his declining days married someone called Black Dobbe. Seen from above, even the Great War was nothing but a temporary play of the modes. The myriads of fixed stars continued to travel

their destined courses in unbounded space. The comets, planets, satellites, asteroids kept circling these shining centers. Worlds were born and died in cosmic upheavals. In the chaos of nebulae, primeval matter was being formed. Now and again a star tore loose, and swept across the sky, leaving behind it a fiery streak. It was the month of August when there are showers of meteors. Yes, the divine substance was extended and had neither beginning nor end; it was absolute, indivisible, eternal, without duration, infinite in its attributes. Its waves and bubbles danced in the universal cauldron, seething with change, following the unbroken chain of causes and effects, and he, Dr. Fischelson, with his unavoidable fate, was part of this. The doctor closed his eyelids and allowed the breeze to cool the sweat on his forehead and stir the hair of his beard. He breathed deeply of the night air, supported his shaky hands on the window sill and murmured, "Divine Spinoza, forgive me. I have become a fool."



BENEDICTVS de SPINOZA, Amstelodamensis.

Gente et Professione Iudaeus, postea coetui Christianorum se adiungens, primi systematis inter Atheos subtiliores Architectus Tandem, ut Atheorum nostra aetate Princeps Hagae Comitum infelicem vitam clausit, characterem reprobationis in vultu ge. Natus A. 1632. d. 24 Nov. reus. Den. 1677. d. 21 Febr.