

# SPINOZA'S BOOK OF LIFE

Freedom  
and Redemption  
in the *Ethics*

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## Thinking about the *Ethics*

Spinoza's *Ethics* is by general consensus one of the most difficult books ever written.<sup>1</sup> This is so in part because the ideas that Spinoza sought to convey are inherently difficult. The themes of substance, attribute, necessity, and eternity are not such as to allow easy access. But Spinoza's work is made doubly difficult by the method by which he attempted to communicate these ideas. As a work written *in more geometrico*, the *Ethics* consists of formal propositions, definitions, scholia, and corollaries, all of which are said to follow from one another in the manner of a formal geometrical proof. Philosophy means for Spinoza reasoning in a deductive manner. Taking Euclid's *Elements* as its model, his work is set out as a moral geometry intended to lead the reader from a condition of moral confusion and chaos to the one true way of life. Its theme, as Leon Roth claimed years ago, is not just the True but the Good.<sup>2</sup>

The difficulties with the *Ethics* do not end here. Not only are there inherent difficulties with reading the book, but Spinoza's thought has proven peculiarly resistant to classification. What, exactly, has been Spinoza's achievement? Was he a medieval or a modern or, as Harry Wolfson believed, a modern with one foot still in the medieval world?<sup>3</sup> Was he a soulless materialist and atheist as Bayle and Hume believed or a mystical pantheist and "God intoxicated man" as Goethe, Novalis, and Emerson laid claim? Was he a ruthless determinist who believed that nothing, not even our innermost thoughts and beliefs, escaped the causal order of nature or an apostle of human freedom whose philosophy sought to liberate the mind from bondage to false

beliefs and systems of power? A forerunner of German Idealism or Marxian materialism? <sup>4</sup> An individualist or a communitarian? The answer is to some degree all of the above.

Perhaps we can gain some clarity by examining Spinoza's major influences. But even here we find ourselves on no firmer ground. Like his older contemporary Thomas Hobbes, Spinoza is remarkably sparing with references to his predecessors, and when he does mention them, it is often brusquely to dismiss their various errors and fallacies. This has not stopped readers of the *Ethics* from attempting to situate the work within different intellectual contexts and traditions. According to Wolfson, Spinoza's philosophy is a kind of *mélange* of the works of the great Judeo-Arabic philosophers of the Middle Ages. For some, notably Edwin Curley, Spinoza belongs entirely to the world of modern philosophy, especially the Cartesian aspiration to create a "unified science" of man and nature bringing together metaphysics and morals.<sup>5</sup> For others, Spinoza was a product of the Marrano culture of Spain and the Iberian Peninsula who still utilized the forms of expression characteristic of a people living under the threat of persecution.<sup>6</sup> And for still others, Spinoza's philosophy constitutes a reworking of certain ancient Stoic moral positions.<sup>7</sup>

However much we can learn from historical studies of Spinoza's background, there is a sense in which he cannot be reduced to his various intellectual and cultural contexts. These may be useful for explaining this or that aspect of the *Ethics*, but all such attempts must necessarily fail in trying to make sense of the work as a whole. Spinoza was neither a renegade Maimonidean, a Cartesian, a Marrano, nor a Stoic. His work incorporates even as it transcends these various descriptions. His formal education both began and ended in the world of the Talmud Torah. This was a world deeply hostile to philosophy. The

conflict between philosophy and religion, “Athens and Jerusalem,” forms one of the essential motifs of his thought. Spinoza was himself a philosophical autodidact whose work drew on but was essentially independent of any particular tradition or school of thought. His readings in the philosophical literature were extensive but eclectic. He was an original who in the deepest sense of the term was a product of his own making.

To the extent that it is possible to classify the *Ethics*, it is as one of the great monuments to the modern enterprise. To be sure, modernity is an almost endlessly porous term. It can mean many things to many people. It has been defined by the rise of a scientific worldview often associated with mathematical physics, a skeptical disposition regarding religion and other traditional sources of authority, the emergence of the secular state, and the assertion of the autonomous individual as the primary locus of agency and moral responsibility. Spinoza endorses all of these features of modernity to varying degrees, although the aspect of his work to be emphasized here is his reading of human life as an adventure of self-discovery. The *Ethics* is nothing if not a testimony to the powers of human agency and the self-direction of the mind.<sup>8</sup>

The *Ethics* is a singular achievement written by someone who valued his own singularity. Its supreme achievement is to explore the moral and psychological postulates of freedom in a world that had been stripped, partly by Spinoza himself, of its previous theological, cosmological, and political moorings. His questions is: what place is there for human freedom in a world radically divested of divine purpose, devoid of telos, and in which human beings no longer occupy a “kingdom within a kingdom” but are rather fully articulated within a single self-contained system of nature? In this abyss of loneliness—the proverbial night in which all cows are gray—what conceivable grounds are left

for the assertion of human dignity and moral responsibility? Despite its claims to geometrical certainty and mathematical truth, the *Ethics* conceals a deeply personal, even existential, work written out of an author's confrontation with his own solitude. In spite of its apparently selfless style and the author's injunction to rise above the limited human standpoint and embrace the perspective of eternity, the work is a celebration of freedom and life with all of its legitimate joys and pleasures.

Above all, Spinoza taught us to appreciate and value life—both our own and that of others. Accordingly he repudiated the classical depreciation of life as “mere” life. He also rejected the messianic emphasis on the world to come at the expense of the here and now. What is to be appreciated is not just the biological fact of existence, although this is not to be despised, but the consciousness of ourselves as rational beings who strive to increase our power and freedom even as we create obstacles that serve to frustrate those ends. The *Ethics* is a celebration of life, of joy and laughter, of sociability and friendship. Spinoza's philosophy culminates not in the grim and remorseless recognition of necessity, as is often portrayed, but in the enjoyment of the pleasures of mind and body working together as a unified whole that helps to secure the conditions for human autonomy. He is a tireless advocate of individual liberty in its moral, psychological, and metaphysical dimensions, and these taken together form a pendant to his liberal politics.

#### WHAT KIND OF BOOK IS THE *ETHICS*?

The kinds of questions raised above are made even more problematical when we ask what kind of book this is and who is its intended audience. Spinoza himself gives little by way of introduction. The title page announces only that it is a work in five parts which treats of the following subjects:

1. Of God
2. Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind
3. Of the Origin and Nature of the Affects
4. Of Human Bondage, or of the Power of the Affects
5. Of the Power of the Intellect, or of Human Freedom

Spinoza's relative taciturnity on the purpose of the *Ethics* and its readership stands in marked contrast to the *TTP*, his major work of political philosophy. In the preface to the *TTP* he is remarkably candid about the larger aims of the work. It was written to separate the claims of philosophy from theology and to put them on entirely different footings (*TTP*, pref, 27; III/10). Philosophy is concerned with the realm of truth, theology with moral practice and obedience to God. Spinoza presents himself as protecting philosophy from those who would make reason bow to the claims of Scripture, and also protecting the sanctity of religion from the philosophical systematizers and rationalizers. Furthermore, this distinction is said to serve a political end. The goal of the *TTP* is not merely to protect theology from false systems of philosophy but to demonstrate that freedom to philosophize can be granted without any injury either to piety or to the peace and security of the state.

In addition Spinoza tells us a great deal about the intended audience for the *TTP*. In a letter written to Henry Oldenburg five years before the book was published he spoke frankly about whom he was trying to reach:

I am now writing a Treatise about my interpretation of Scripture. This I am driven to do by the following reasons: 1. The prejudice of the theologians; for I know that these are among the chief obstacles which prevent men from directing their minds to philosophy; and to remove them from the minds of the more prudent. 2. The opinion which the com-

mon people have of me, who do not cease to accuse me falsely of atheism; I am also obliged to avert this accusation as far as it is possible to do so. 3. The freedom of philosophizing, and of saying what we think; this I desire to vindicate in every way, for here it is always suppressed through the excessive authority and impudence of the preachers. (*Ep* 30)

The distinction Spinoza draws here between the “prudent” reader (*prudentialiorum*) and the “common people” (*vulgus*) is repeated in the preface to the *TTP*, where he refers to the “philosophical reader” (*philosophie lector*) and the “multitude” (*multitudo*) (*TTP*, pref, 33; III/12). Yet, while claiming to address the philosophical reader, in the very next breath Spinoza notes that everything to appear in the work will be “more than adequately known to philosophers.” He seems to be positioning his audience between the “vulgar” or the “multitude” who live under the sway of superstition and prejudice and the true philosophers who already know what he is saying and for whom the book will be redundant. The audience seems to comprise not philosophers in the strict sense but potential philosophers, philosophers in the making, who still remain under the partial sway of theological prejudice but who can be induced by reason to reflect critically on the source of prejudice. It is a book written by a philosopher for potential philosophers out of a love for them and indeed out of a love for philosophy itself. The *TTP* is a book addressed to those who, in the words of Leo Strauss, “love to think.”<sup>9</sup>

If the *TTP* is a work addressed to potential philosophers in order to cure them of their prejudices, the *Ethics* is a work that takes no prisoners. “I do not assume that I have discovered the best philosophy,” he confidently asserts, “but I know that I understand the true one” (*Ep* 76). This sense of confidence pervades the work as a whole. The *Ethics* is addressed to philoso-

phers pure and simple. What Spinoza means by a philosopher is addressed in a letter to William van Blyenbergh in which he alludes to his correspondent as “a pure philosopher who . . . has no other touchstone of truth than the natural intellect and not theology” (*Ep* 23). To be a philosopher means to accept the authority of reason pure and simple. A work of philosophy, as Spinoza understands it, is a work that can be understood by reason or the “natural intellect” alone. It makes no concession to time, place, and circumstance. It requires only a reader who can follow a chain of reasoning and accept unflinchingly what is found there. It will accept no argument that is not acceptable to reason. Spinoza’s silence about his audience expresses the anonymity of reason itself. The *Ethics* is in the literal sense not Spinoza’s philosophy at all; it is the philosophical biography of the idea of reason. In this respect the *Ethics* can truly be called a book for everyone and for no one.

Yet the impersonality of the book and its audience can be overstated. Even if the intended audience for the *Ethics* is smaller, perhaps infinitesimally smaller, than for the *TTP*, Spinoza still wrote the book with a practical intent in mind. The perfect philosopher, like the ancient sage, is at best an ideal, a heuristic, against which any actual reader should be judged. In the preface to part four of the *Ethics* he speaks of “a model of human nature to which we may look” (IVpref/208). Although he never uses this expression again, it is clearly the idea of the philosopher or the philosophic life that he is thinking of. Presumably for such an exemplar of human nature a book like the *Ethics* would be unnecessary, but for the less-than-perfect readers who actually exist, it might actually prove useful.

Spinoza’s purpose was to liberate the mind from bondage to the passions and to encourage certain traits of character that he believes will increase the stock of human happiness. Among the virtues he recommends are the qualities of *animositas* and *gene-*

*rositas*—tenacity and nobility—both of which are described as aspects of the comprehensive virtue of *fortitudo* or strength of character (IIIp59). This is the highest of the moral virtues to which the book aspires. The point or purpose of the *Ethics* as a whole is clearly a pedagogic one, that is, to foster an ideal state of human character. Its goal is precisely to lessen emotional distress, or what Spinoza calls *fluctuatio animi*, vacillation of mind, which is the principal cause of so much misery and human conflict. The *Ethics* is intended as a work of moral therapy in which the reader is simultaneously analyst and patient.

#### IN MORE GEOMETRICO

Perhaps the single greatest obstacle to entering the world of the *Ethics* is cracking the style of the book. The work is presented in the form of a moral geometry. This has led many readers to wonder what is the purpose of the geometrical form and what is its relation to the content of the work as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Is the axiomatic method in some sense required by Spinoza's philosophy or is it a matter of choice or convenience, much like a poet's decision to write in iambic pentameter? There were certainly many styles of philosophical communication open to him—the dialogue (Plato), the treatise (Aristotle), the autobiography (Augustine), the disputed question (Aquinas), or the essay (Montaigne). Why, then, present oneself in the manner of a geometer? There has been a variety of answers to this question.

The standard view of Spinoza, the textbook image of him passed down in countless introductory courses of philosophy, is that of a relentless rationalist who sought to prescribe how the human mind could achieve clear and distinct ideas by means of the unaided intellect. The mathematical method of reasoning seemed best suited to this pursuit of truth unencumbered by reference to revelation, history, or imaginative experience. Spinoza

was among the first to present his philosophy as a “system” in which all problems—moral, metaphysical, political—could be deduced from the axioms and premises of pure reason alone. The *Ethics* gives classic expression to the view of philosophy as an activity carried out *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the aspect of eternity. It consists of taking a God’s-eye view of the human condition, a position sometimes diminished by its detractors as the “view from nowhere.”

This standard view of Spinoza is also bound up with the image of the philosopher as a kind of self-effacing rationalist for whom all traces of individuality or subjectivity must be expunged from his thought. Long before the advent of poststructuralism Spinoza seemed bent on eliminating the author or the subject from his own discourse. “He thus eliminated from the presentation of his philosophy the concealed means of persuasion and of engaging the imagination of the reader which are part of ordinary prose writing,” Stuart Hampshire claims. “He wished the true philosophy to be presented in a form which was, as nearly as possible, as objective and as free from appeals to the imagination as is Euclid’s *Elements*. He wished to be entirely effaced as individual and author, being no more than the mouthpiece of pure Reason.”<sup>11</sup> The “majestic impersonality” of this system, Hampshire continues, is even more apparent in Spinoza’s correspondence, where “the philosophical argument is deployed straitly and rigorously, and only occasionally, when intolerably provoked by the obscurantism of some moralizing or devout critic, does he allow a note of irony or of indignation to appear.”<sup>12</sup> As we shall see shortly, there are others who believe that these outbursts of irony and indignation are more than simply occasional grace notes to the system, but reveal what lies hidden just behind the geometrical method.

This view of the *Ethics* as a piece of rationalistic metaphysics constitutes what could be called the standard view of Spinoza.

On this reading of the *Ethics*, the geometrical method is not just a matter of convenience but is taken to express the actual structure of physical reality. In fact the geometry is not a method strictly so called, but is logically entailed by the subject matter of philosophy. There is, on this account, the strongest possible connection between Spinoza's use of the geometrical order of exposition and his views about the ontological structure of reality. That there is a necessary connection between the order of nature and the clear and distinct ideas of a geometrical proof is suggested by Spinoza himself: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (IIp7). According to this statement, the laws of nature act according to the same necessary and immutable principles as do the laws of thought. Nature and thought, the realm of extension and the realm of ideas, are not two causally connected substances but part of the same world seen from two points of view. There is, then, a necessary, not a contingent, relationship between the form and matter, the method and content, of the *Ethics*.

There are, of course, objections to this standard view of Spinoza. In the first place, it is not clear that Spinoza believed the geometrical method has some kind of unique relation with the truth. It seems to play the role of a pedagogical device for exposing the sources of error and false belief. For example, Spinoza employs the geometrical method in his *Principles of Descartes's Philosophy* to demonstrate propositions he believed to be manifestly untrue. More importantly, the idea that the geometrical method represents a kind of mirror of nature is widely believed to be false. The world may be susceptible to mathematization, but this does not make reality mathematical any more than a picture of water is wet. The view that philosophy is the self-articulation of nature and the philosopher merely the voice through which nature speaks fails to address a variety of post-Kantian concerns regarding subjectivity and personal expressions of the self.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, Spinoza's commitment to the geometrical method is often taken to be part of his residual Cartesianism.<sup>14</sup> Descartes certainly had a special fondness for mathematics. Like him, Spinoza is convinced that all genuine knowledge is demonstrative or deductive in form. The geometrical method is intended to provide the *Ethics* with the form of a deductive system that reasons from self-evident propositions to substantive conclusions about the nature of things. This same procedure was advocated by Descartes in the *Discourse on Method*:

Those long chains composed of very simple and easy reasoning, which geometers customarily use to arrive at their most difficult demonstrations, had given me occasion to suppose that all the things which can fall under human knowledge are interconnected in the same way. And I thought that, provided we refrain from accepting anything as true which is not, and always keep to the order required for deducing one thing from another, there can be nothing too remote to be reached in the end or too well hidden to be discovered. (AT, vi, 19)<sup>15</sup>

Descartes's infatuation with geometry was part of the new science and its attempt to achieve the complete mathematization of nature. For the apostles of this science—Galileo, Gassendi, Kepler, Hobbes, and a host of others—geometry seemed the ideal language of explanation whereby the ordinary world of perceptual phenomena revealed a whole new world of particles in motion. The sense of philosophical paranoia evinced in Descartes's dreams of evil geniuses is but the expression of the growing realization that the world of sensible forms, teleological explanations of natural happenings, and geocentric universes were all a kind of immense fiction from which mankind was only gradually awakening.<sup>16</sup> The answer to this kind of problem was

provided by the language of geometry, which alone could establish grounds for certainty when everything else seemed liable to systematic doubt.

Descartes's use of mathematics was itself derived from Galileo's claim that "nature is written in the language of mathematics" (*grandissimo libro scritto in lingua mathematica*). The metaphor of the "two great books," nature and Scripture, were both taken to be mirrors of the divine. For Galileo, mathematics was henceforth conceived as the language of God: "Philosophy is written in that great book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures, without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth."<sup>17</sup>

The model of scientific proof was accepted as authoritative not only by Galileo and Descartes but by many of their most important contemporaries. Consider the well-known story from John Aubrey's life of Hobbes: "Being in a gentleman's library, Euclid's *Elements* lay open, and 'twas the 47th Proposition of the first Book. He read the Proposition. By God, said he . . . this is impossible! So he reads the demonstration of it, which referred back to such a Proposition; which proposition he read. That referred him back to another, which he also read. And so on, until at last he was demonstratively convinced of that truth. This made him in love with Geometry."<sup>18</sup>

Hobbes's passion for geometry underwrites his attempt to establish a political science founded only on mathematical exposition. In *Leviathan*, geometry, which is called "the only science that it hath pleased God hitherto to bestow on mankind," is but the science of names (*Lev*, iv, 12).<sup>19</sup> It consists in settling on defi-

nitions and drawing out the necessary consequences therefrom. The problem with all previously existing philosophies has been the failure to agree on certain definitions and axioms at the outset of reasoning. Consequently the result has been to doom their efforts to “cant” and other forms of useless speech. Unlike prudence or “knowledge gotten from experience,” reason consists “first in apt imposing of names, and secondly by getting a good and orderly method in proceeding from the elements, which are names, to assertions made by connexions of one of them to another . . . till we come to a knowledge of all the consequences of names appertaining to the subject in hand; and this is it men call SCIENCE” (*Lev*, v, 17).

Like Hobbes, Spinoza was an amateur mathematician in comparison to Descartes. Neither left any permanent contributions to mathematical knowledge. Perhaps due to his autodidacticism, Spinoza carried the geometrical project even further than Descartes had thought possible. The Cartesian method always presupposed a dualism between a materialist theory of nature and an immaterialist theory of the mind. There is evidence, however, that Spinoza regarded the geometrical method as more than an exposition of the nuclear structure of physical reality. He saw it as a universal method that in principle encompasses not just physics but psychology, ethics, and politics. While Descartes refrained, apparently from prudential grounds, from extending his geometrical approach to controversial subjects like theology and ethics, Spinoza tells us in the autobiographical preface to the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*TIE*) that all the sciences serve a single end and that politics, too, can be treated as a branch of the science of substance (*TIE*, xvi; II/9).

This view seems to fit with another of Spinoza’s major tenets, namely, that there can be no kingdom within a kingdom, no quarter of reality that is not subject to the same causal laws

and processes as everything else (IVpref/137). The uniformity of method is based on the belief that there is in the final analysis only one science capturing within its scope a diverse class of entities and activities that might otherwise appear to be irreducibly diverse. It is part of the reductive strategy of the *Ethics* to peer behind the phenomenological diversity of appearances in order to discover their foundations in the common order of nature. There is nothing in the *Ethics* to approximate Aristotle's three-fold classification of the sciences into the theoretical, practical, and productive branches of knowledge. In place of this older tradition, Spinoza offers a new conception of philosophy in which the human and nonhuman alike are treated by same method. As he puts it in the preface to part three: "I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies" (IIIpref/138).

#### HOW MANY SPINOZAS?

The conception of the *Ethics* as a work of deductive metaphysics is obviously not false. One can easily say of Spinoza what Aubrey reported of Hobbes, that he was "in love with geometry." It is under this guise that Spinoza has seemed to many a kind of protopositivist trying to reduce or replace our everyday common-sense language and beliefs with a cryptoscientific vocabulary of substance, modes, and attributes. However, the image of Spinoza as a committed positivist devoted only to what can be demonstrated by means of clear and distinct ideas is profoundly misleading. Indeed, the first person to provide this misreading of Spinoza's work was Spinoza himself. A careful reading of the *Ethics* is enough to show that it is not a purely axiomatic work, as he sometimes makes it appear. It is a work that draws on a wide range of human experiences—historical, moral, imaginative, even autobiographical—to make its case. The geomet-

rical method, far from a logically impregnable form, is in fact a kind of rhetoric that, like all rhetoric, often conceals more than it reveals. The standard conception of Spinoza has itself come under suspicion from those who have advised that we look, in Harry Wolfson's fine phrase, "behind the geometrical method."<sup>20</sup> What is it that we can expect to find there?

According to Wolfson's argument, Spinoza's geometrical method is not intended as an exact representation of the structure of the universe, but as a pedagogical device for presenting philosophical arguments. Wolfson even speaks of this method as a "literary form," that is, "a peculiar piece of writing" that Spinoza adopted for expository purposes.<sup>21</sup> He regards this method not as expressing Spinoza's ontological commitments but as a matter of convenience for expressing complicated trains of thought in a relatively shorthand manner. As such, the geometrical form is merely the external casement in which Spinoza chose to cast his major ideas.

The choice of this method was not, however, altogether arbitrary. Wolfson accounts for this choice as a product of the peculiar circumstances in which the work was written. Because of the conditions of his exile, Spinoza lacked challenging students and friends who were prepared to ask tough questions and hold his feet to the fire. His correspondents and associates were genial laymen who lacked the ability to serve as an effective sounding board for his ideas during the developmental stages of his thinking. Spinoza's use of the geometrical method was intended as an exoteric cover in which to conceal some of his more polemical and controversial conclusions.<sup>22</sup>

Wolfson adds an important moral element to Spinoza's use of the geometrical method. It is not simply a matter of convenience but an important instrument of moral self-control. It grew out of a sense of caution and decorum: "In this strange environment, to which externally he seems to have fully adjusted himself, Spi-

noza never felt himself quite free to speak his mind; and he who among his own people never hesitated to speak out with boldness became cautious, hesitant, and reserved. It was a caution which sprang not from fear but from an inner sense of decorum which inevitably enforces itself on one in the presence of strangers, especially strangers who are kind.”<sup>23</sup> The geometrical method had the effect of boiling Spinoza’s complicated thought down to its “concentrated essence,” and this essence conceals more than it reveals. “The *Ethics*,” Wolfson avers, “is not a communication to the world; it is Spinoza’s communication with himself.”<sup>24</sup>

That the geometrical method is directly related to Spinoza’s habitual caution and need for restraint has been even further developed in an important article by Efraim Shmueli entitled “The Geometrical Method, Personal Caution, and the Idea of Tolerance.”<sup>25</sup> Shmueli distinguishes the strictly geometrical and propositional parts of the *Ethics* from the “non-geometrical” portions, in which he includes the prefaces, appendices, extended notes, and corollaries that help to fill out and provide some flesh to the bare geometrical skeleton of the work. The geometrical method was developed as “a form of caution, and indeed, as a pedagogical device of self-restraint” in contrast to “the non-geometrical assertions loaded with harsh rebukes, refutations, ridicule, and scorn.”<sup>26</sup>

Shmueli rejects the view that the *Ethics* forms a single, unified whole, but argues that the nongeometrical portions of the work have a distinctive character that do not follow deductively from the metaphysical premises. These are the parts of the work in which Spinoza lets down his guard and allows his true views to shine through. The result of Shmueli’s reading is to turn the *Ethics* into two books that often seem to be “highly antagonistic” to one another. Spinoza was a man of strong passions who

was torn by deep apprehensions and intellectual doubts. The *ordus geometricus* thus served as a form of moral self-discipline through which Spinoza sought to restrain his “aggressive impulses,” which might have otherwise brought his ideas into even further disrepute. The geometrical method thus served “consciously or semiconsciously as a device for restraining his strong temper when dealing with views whose treatment by him might have annoyed the public. Such discussion indeed called for increased caution and for self-conquest.”<sup>27</sup>

A further radicalization of the two-Spinoza thesis has been argued by the French Spinozist Gilles Deleuze.<sup>28</sup> The *Ethics*, he argues, is not one book or even two but three. The elements of the three *Ethics* consist of affects, concepts, and essences. These correspond to the three forms of knowledge or three very different languages discussed in part two of the work. In place of a rigorous, deductive metaphysical system, Deleuze deconstructs the work into several discontinuous treatises held together by only the loosest of connections. Like Wolfson and Shmueli, Deleuze argues that underneath the apparent calmness and serenity of its propositional structure, the *Ethics* contains another polemical and rhetorical discourse within the various scholia and corollaries. While the language of the propositions is likened to an “ageless ship that follows the eternal river,” the scholia are compared to “a broken chain, discontinuous, subterranean, volcanic, which at irregular intervals comes to interrupt the chain of demonstrative elements, the great and continuous fluvial chain.” “Each scholium is like a lighthouse that exchanges its signals with the others, at a distance and across the flow of the demonstrations. It is like a language of fire that is distinguishable from the language of the waters. It is undoubtedly the same Latin in appearance, but one could almost believe that the Latin of the scholia is translated from the Hebrew. On their own the scho-

lia form a book of Anger and Laughter, as if it were Spinoza's anti-Bible."<sup>29</sup> The difference between the propositions and the scholia, he concludes, are like "two versions of the language of God."<sup>30</sup>

The idea that the scholia form an independent Hebrew work, if taken literally, is absurd. But Deleuze is at least half right to say that Spinoza wrote his book as an "anti-Bible," although he overlooks the way in which he modeled it on the original. Like the Torah, the *Ethics* is a book written in five parts, a Pentateuch of sorts. But the *Ethics* is much more than an anti-Bible. It takes to heart and with the utmost seriousness the Shemah, the biblical injunction known to every Jew: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One." The book as a whole can be seen as a sustained midrash on this biblical passage. What is it to think of God as One? If God truly is One—the locus of all power and perfection—how is it possible for him (or it) to create something outside of and independent of himself that would seem to limit his power and perfection? Further, if God is truly One, this would seem to make not just human beings, but rocks and birds and all of the things under the earth and in the heavens a part of this One, no longer objects with an independent existence but, literally, parts of God. He seems committed to denying the ontological status of individuals. These are the questions that inform virtually every page of the *Ethics* and from which the logic of the work unfolds.

The theme of Oneness, which in the philosophical tradition goes back to Parmenides and the pre-Socratics, for Spinoza grows out of the biblical tradition of the single God. To be sure, the God of Spinoza is set up in direct opposition to the God of Genesis. The God of the *Ethics* is not the creator of heaven and earth but is an extended substance composed of an infinity of attributes that is purely immanent throughout nature. Spinoza wrote the *Ethics* in part to free men from the historical practices

of religion and from the revealed script upon which those practices were based. His theology, such as it is, is based on a new kind of piety with a new form of worship, the worship of nature. His formula *Deus sive natura*, God or nature, denies the transcendent status of the divine in part because he seeks to divinize the natural world. He invests nature and natural processes with an element of sublimity that makes the *Ethics* a worthy companion to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>31</sup>

### THE STYLE IS THE MAN

The efforts to read Spinoza's choice of the geometrical method as a literary form or a pedagogical device have considerable merit. In particular they cast doubt on the element of necessity that is often attributed to this form. The idea that there is a relation of logical entailment between Spinoza's view of the world and his geometrical method is false. There are many ways of communicating truth that do not require axiomatic form. But even if there is no logical necessity in Spinoza's manner of presentation, this is not to say that his choice of this method was purely fortuitous. Even if there is no logical necessity, there is still a moral necessity to Spinoza's choice of method.

The geometrical method was for Spinoza, Hobbes, and Descartes strongly related not just to a model of knowledge but to their very ideas of the individual. It has a definite moral purpose, but it is not one of self-abnegation or self-denial, as both Hampshire and Wolfson believe, but rather of individual self-creation. The mathematical method was not for these early moderns a means of purging their philosophies of all personal touches or expressions of individuality, but was closely bound up with a vision of human beings as the products of their own making. Mathematics as a system of symbolization became the paradigm for the individual as, literally, something self-constructed.<sup>32</sup>

Spinoza's views on the moral and constructivist uses of geometry were suggested a generation before him by Descartes. Descartes had set out to turn mathematics, especially geometry, into the veritable model for all human knowledge. The model for Descartes's geometry was, of course, Euclid, who had set out the basic form and structure of geometrical reasoning that held sway for centuries. While Renaissance humanists and philologists turned to Euclid as part of the project of the rehabilitation of ancient arts and letters, Descartes wanted to move beyond the humanistic reception of his work in one crucial respect. While mathematics represented for Descartes's Renaissance predecessors one possible mode of knowledge, for him it took on a privileged character, due in part to the purity of its concepts and their expression in symbolic language. It was, above all, this independence from ordinary language and traditional means of expression that was connected to Descartes's essentially productivist conception of knowledge as a science of human mastery. The term *mathesis universalis*, used for the first time in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, was intended to demonstrate that there was just one royal road to science and this was the path of geometry (AT, ix, 378).

The method of analytical geometry was valid for Descartes not because it represented the "mirror of nature," but because it was a form of self-making. Much of the prestige of modern mathematics derived from the fact that it was a purely self-created system. Its virtue was that it was a heuristic that could be transported from one discipline to another. "The artificial nature of mathematical concepts," Amos Funkenstein has written, "guarantees their absolute unequivocation. Mathematics is the paradigm for all other sciences because we created it ourselves out of nothingness: its veracity is entirely convertible into its construction."<sup>33</sup> Funkenstein's association of mathematics with creation out of nothingness suggests a theological dimension to

the image of man as self-creator. In fashioning mathematical entities we are imitating God's original *creatio ex nihilo*. Hobbes applied this analogy to the study of politics when he wrote in the introduction to *Leviathan* that political society is an artificial construction made by imitating God's absolute and arbitrary sovereignty over nature (*Lev*, intro, 1).<sup>34</sup>

Descartes's mathematization of knowledge was more than an epistemological or scientific strategy. It formed an essential move in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth-century creation of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. The place of mathematics in this struggle has been brilliantly analyzed by David Lachterman in his aptly titled *The Ethics of Geometry*.<sup>35</sup> "The 'quarrel of the ancients and the moderns,'" he writes, "was much more than a literary parlor game, a bookish battle of shadow-contestants. Indeed, the literary versions of the quarrel often recapitulate in illuminating ways prior engagements on the field of philosophy and science; thus, Perrault, spokesman for modern writers toward the end of the seventeenth century, invokes the superiority of Copernicus and Descartes as proof of modern superiority."<sup>36</sup>

The novelty of the moderns turned on their alleged insight into the constructed character of all knowledge. Today we are inured to hearing about the "social construction" of reality and that terms like *race* and *gender*, previously thought to be biological "givens," are in fact social constructions. Much of the authority of this language comes from adopting, consciously or unconsciously, a Cartesian mind-set. Terms like *doing*, *producing*, *constructing*, and *generating* were all used to convey the idea that, however it may appear, all knowledge is a form of human making, an active and self-conscious projection of the mind. Geometry provides a litmus test for this view of knowledge as making. Mathematics is the clearest illustration of the principle that *verum et factum convertuntur*, or that the mind can know

only what it makes.<sup>37</sup> It is a feature of all genuine knowledge that it is radically constructed by the knowing subject. To cite Lachterman again:

Under the sign of making or construction, modernity is an empty form, indeed, the form of endlessly iterable projection, but it is so because it is receptive to all those possible contents which carry the seal of human “fabrication” in its most literal sense. Projection, then, belongs to the idea of modernity, as the programmatic anticipation of an endless sequence of human feats, while productive virtuosity is the touchstone of discriminating genuine from bogus feats, determining when a content did or did not result from a deliberately crafted project. Similarly, the polar antithesis between ancient and modern no longer simply marks off chronologically distinct periods, but turns on an ontological axis; the genuine and the bogus are distinct styles of being. The ancient, necessarily retained in memory as what modernity had to negate in order to secure its own identity, now names the inauthentic itself, that is, the recollected absence of the projected infinitude of human making.<sup>38</sup>

As Lachterman’s terms like “genuine” and “bogus” suggest, the Cartesian conception of a universal mathematics is more than an epistemological enterprise; it is part of a larger project of self-transformation that entails notions of personal integrity and authenticity. Philosophers have generally focused on Descartes’s two-substance doctrine, his mind-body dualism, to describe this self. Others have in mind Descartes’s famous skepticism regarding all knowledge that does not stand up to the rigorous test of clarity and distinctness. Only what is self-evidently true or cer-

tain counts as knowledge for him. While Cartesian dualism and skepticism capture important moments of the modern self, they fail to grasp Descartes's truly novel emphasis on the self as the product of its own making. It is the experience of subjectivity or the "I" that marks the real originality of Descartes. The very idea of the individual is itself a product of Descartes's constructive image of knowledge. The features of this new self include liberation from tradition and authority, especially the authority of opinion as congealed in certain ancient books; the mastery of method by which we can arrive at certain truths that can be validated by a well-regulated mind; and finally the control of the passions in order to achieve an ideal of autarchy or individual autonomy that Descartes described by the term *un vrai homme* (AT, vi, 59).

Descartes uses the term *un vrai homme*—a true man, a real man—only once in the *Discourse*, but it is his highest term of praise. To be a real man is to have the qualities of courage, resoluteness, and authenticity necessary for a free life. Central to his idea of freedom is the notion that life is an adventure in self-making. To be free is to be authentic, to be oneself. The real man is one who is true to himself. The Cartesian emphasis on authenticity puts him in a line of Renaissance moralists going back to Montaigne's *Essays* and Charron's *De la sagesse*. It is the emphasis on authentic individuality, as opposed to various forms of role playing and dissimulation, that finds its expression in Spinoza's praise of the *vir fortis*, the noble or, literally, the manly man.

The role of Descartes in the creation of our modern ideas of individualism and individuality is acknowledged by no less authority than Tocqueville. In the opening sentences of volume two of *Democracy in America*, Descartes is presented as more than the founder of a new school of philosophy, but as the discoverer of a whole new world. While the people in the United States pay less attention to philosophy "than in any other

country in the civilized world," Tocqueville asserts, their democratic social state leads them "naturally" to adopt something like the principles of Cartesian methodology. Tocqueville defines the main outlines of this method as follows: "To escape from imposed systems, the yoke of habit, family maxims, class prejudices, and to a certain extent national prejudices as well; to treat tradition as valuable for information only and to accept existing facts as no more than a useful sketch to show how things could be done differently and better; to seek by themselves and in themselves for the only reason for things, looking to results without getting entangled in the means toward them and looking through forms to the basis of things."<sup>39</sup> The Cartesian method is not just a philosophical method; it is a democratic method. "So of all the countries in the world," Tocqueville says, "America is the one in which the precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed. No one," he adds, "should be surprised at that."<sup>40</sup>

#### AN ETHIC OF RESPONSIBILITY

The *Ethics* is a book that begins with God and ends with human freedom. What on first sight appears to be a chain of bloodless propositions is on closer examination an exodus of the mind from a state of bondage to false beliefs and systems of power to the promised land of clarity and self-knowledge. It is a work of moral therapy that seeks to liberate the reader from the power of the passions and give us control over our lives. Although the *Ethics* is structured in the formal manner of a geometrical proof, it is a work infused with biblical images of bondage, freedom, love, and redemption. It is not just a demonstrative but a dialectical work, leading the reader from the most general definitions and axioms to the more concrete specifications of what is entailed in those initial generalizations. It leads us from lesser to

greater degrees of adequation. Like the Torah, the *Ethics* begins with a general account of God's provenance in the world, his power and attributes, and moves quickly to an exploration of the human condition within the causal order of nature. It concludes with a soul-swelling conception of freedom as "the intellectual love of God."

It is not an exaggeration to say that Spinoza makes freedom into the core of the *Ethics*. His treatment of God, body, mind, and the passions are all written with an eye to how they illuminate the great problem of human freedom. Indeed, what distinguishes Spinoza from prior theological and philosophical thinkers is the value and shape that he accords to the idea of freedom. In contrasting the philosophies of Aristotle and Spinoza in his book *Morality and Conflict*, Stuart Hampshire had it more or less correct when he wrote: "There have been changes both in knowledge and in ways of life, which have the effect of making Aristotle's construction of moral and particularly political thought seem incorrigibly incomplete. The succinct phrase for the barrier, and for the missing element, is the concept of freedom, which is applied in individual psychology and politics."<sup>41</sup>

Spinoza's status as a prophet of modern freedom entailed a profound transformation and rupture not just with Aristotle and the classical tradition but with the prevailing orthodoxies, both theological and philosophical, of his own time. Unlike his greatest philosophical contemporaries, Spinoza does not equate freedom with the mastery and control of nature. There is not the kind of "prometheanism" associated with the Baconian or Cartesian quest to turn us into the masters and possessors of nature.<sup>42</sup> Nowhere do we find the dream of a science of universal human mastery of the kind associated with Descartes's *Discourse of Method* (AT, vi, 62). Spinoza seems less impressed with our capacity to transform nature than with our embedded-

ness within it. Our attainment of autonomy is predicated on our understanding of the various natural and causal contexts in which our lives—both our ideas and choices as well as our behavior and bodily states—are governed. Freedom is not achieved by liberation from nature but through our capacity to understand it. The idea that we cannot escape the causal order of nature often gives the misleading impression that Spinoza equates freedom with the understanding of and reconciliation with necessity, that freedom means understanding why things have to be the way they are, or that it culminates in a kind of Stoic acquiescence to fate.

There is a stern and unyielding necessitarianism in the *Ethics* that has a neo-Stoic dimension to it. However, understanding nature, including the various causal contexts of our lives, does not amount in the end to an ethic of resignation. To increase our powers of understanding is but the first step toward increasing our powers of moral agency. Once we understand the external and internal factors governing our lives, we cease to be passively dependent upon them but can learn to take control of ourselves and responsibility for our actions. The *Ethics* is very much an ethic of responsibility. It teaches that while we cannot escape nature and that much that goes on within it will forever elude human control, we can take responsibility for our lives and how we choose to live them. Accepting responsibility is a necessary component of human freedom. Spinoza teaches us not only to take responsibility for our lives but to find joy and happiness in doing so. He is a thoroughgoing eudaimonist. He makes the joy of life itself his greatest good.

There is an even further difficulty in coming to terms with the *Ethics* arising from the very title of the work. The *Ethics* is not a conventional treatise of moral philosophy. Its subject matter seems both more and less than we would expect from a work called the *Ethics*. It is an ambitious and multifaceted work, bold

to the point of audacity. While the work contains materials directly relevant to the content of ethics, such as the source of our judgments of good and bad and discussions of the principal motivations or causes of human action, there is a great deal that points beyond the sphere of ethics conventionally understood. “Ethics,” Spinoza writes to a correspondent, “as everyone knows, ought to be based on metaphysics and physics” (*Ep* 27). But ought it? This is by no means obvious, and surely “everyone” does not know this. In particular how are the metaphysics and psychology of parts one and two related to the ethical and political discussions of parts three and four, and how are both related to the treatment of divine love in part five of the work? These kinds of questions have led some readers to wonder why Spinoza called his book the *Ethics* at all.

To be sure, most readers have accepted that the title of Spinoza’s work is appropriate without reflecting much on what makes it so. This is strange, because a reading of the book reveals that there is no Spinozistic equivalent of the Aristotelian golden mean, the Kantian Categorical Imperative, or the Benthamite principle of utility. Anyone looking to the book in search of that kind of moral rule is bound to be disappointed. The author of the *Ethics* is not an ethicist in the sense of a person of high moral standards. He is a *moraliste*, that is, someone who sees through layers of convention, custom, and social appearance in order to discover what makes people tick.<sup>43</sup> The *Ethics* offers no answer to the question “what ought I to do?” because it sets out to answer the prior and more fundamental question “how ought I to live?” Spinoza is less interested in the rules governing social life than in questions involving the good life and the supreme happiness for a human being. It is a work of moral pedagogy similar to the other great philosophical and literary romances of education—Plato’s *Republic*, Rousseau’s *Emile*, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, and Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*.

Its aim is emancipatory and redemptive. The *Ethics* is not a book of moral dos and don'ts; it is nothing less than a book of life.<sup>44</sup>

One important difference that distinguishes Spinoza from other early modern thinkers is worth noting at the outset. It is a standard conceit of early modern thought to deny the viability of final causes of all sorts and to regard human desires as produced by efficient causes. The result of both claims was to see all human behavior purely in terms of power and power relations. Machiavelli and Hobbes both saw politics as a science of power. So did Spinoza. But unlike his predecessors, he did not attempt to divest power from some notion of telos or human perfectibility. Spinoza was a critic of the doctrine of divine or supernatural teleology, which he took to task in the appendix to part one and the preface to part four of the *Ethics*. But he still regarded human beings as teleological creatures whose actions only make sense as expressions of certain goals or purposes. This does not rule out the proposition that our ends have antecedent causal conditions, but to know the background causes of an action is only to know a part. It is a central theme of the *Ethics* that we are essentially goal-directed animals and that life is, at bottom, the expression of an ideal or goal. We are beings who are constituted by a desire or endeavor (*conatus*) not just to live but to live freely, and freedom, properly understood, constitutes the perfection of the individual. There is a single word that unites Spinoza's psychology, politics, and ethics. That word is *freedom*.

The *TTP* sought to liberate its readers from the authority of Scripture and its ecclesiastical interpreters. Its aim was the creation of a tolerant republic in which each person would be free to think what he likes and say what he thinks (*TTP*xx; III/239). The *Ethics* is concerned more with the ethics and psychology of freedom. Its concern, in contemporary usage, is not "freedom from" but "freedom to." The free individual requires more than the absence of external impediments in order to realize his

liberty, but the exercise of certain powers of mind and understanding that make it possible. For Spinoza, freedom is not a natural condition into which we are born. The natural condition is rather one of bondage to the passions and the imagination. Freedom is an achievement of reason that comes about through the harnessing of power and the proper understanding of the passions. The originality of Spinoza consists in his attempt to combine a politics of negative freedom with an ethics of positive freedom. The *TTP* and the *Ethics* constitute the two sides of the problem of freedom.

The *Ethics* is not only a piece of practical philosophy; it is also a profoundly Jewish book, as I have already suggested. Spinoza's indebtedness to and critique of the Jewish tradition has already been developed in a number of previous biographical and interpretive studies.<sup>45</sup> For now I would like to express my agreement with Leon Roth, who may have exaggerated the point but was in my opinion substantially correct when he wrote:

Now Spinoza was not only, nor even primarily, interested in external nature and the physical sciences. His interest in nature and science was indeed . . . in some sort, incidental. His primary concern was with man and human conduct, and it was in search of a way of life that he set out on the path of science . . . Spinoza's interest in morals came to him by inheritance. He is a descendant of a people which, from the earliest times, had cared little for abstract theories, everything for practical conduct; he is the product of a literature dominated by the ideal of righteousness, of a history which is one long appeal for justice. In spite of himself, and in spite of the Amsterdam community, he remained in his innermost being a son of the People of the Book.<sup>46</sup>

It is hard to say with a straight face that Spinoza “cared little for abstract theories.” The *Ethics* is full of such theories—his theory of the oneness or unity of nature, mind-body parallelism, the physiological theory of the passions, and so on. Nevertheless, the insight that all of these theories are subordinate to the practical aim of the *Ethics* is important and a point that needs making. The point of the present study is to return Spinoza to his place among the great moralists of modernity and as a guide of the perplexed to people in all times.