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## Spinoza



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### Related Topics

Affects · Eternity · Heresy · Monism · Moral Agency · Power · Teleology

## Introduction

Baruch or Benedictus Spinoza (1632–1677) is one of the most admired Early Modern philosophers. This may be because he is so extraordinarily *bold*, *multifaceted*, and *rigorous*. *Bold*: Spinoza's heterodox views are as numerous as they are controversial. Among other things, Spinoza denies divine purposefulness, free will, the immortality of the soul, and miracles. Spinoza is critical of monarchical government and considers democracy to be the ideal regime. These views are largely out-of-step with seventeenth-century consensus views. *Multifaceted*: Spinoza's contributions to philosophy cut across metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, epistemology, the philosophy of action, the theory of emotions, value theory and moral philosophy, political philosophy, and the philosophy of religion. In an age known for its ambition, Spinoza's philosophical reach is especially wide-ranging. *Rigorous*: Spinoza's philosophical sensibility is decidedly

informed by his approbation of the Euclidean geometrical method as a model of deductive reasoning. Spinoza's distinctive flair for careful and systematized argument exhibits his hostility to unexamined assumptions and allegedly commonsensical intuitions.

## Biography

Baruch Spinoza was born in 1632 in Amsterdam to a family of Portuguese Jews. The Spinoza family belonged to the Sephardic community that had found asylum from the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions in the newly independent United Provinces. Spinoza's upbringing consisted of traditional Jewish education in Hebrew and the Torah in the community's school. Following the death of his father and older brother, by 1654 Spinoza is running the family business with his younger brother. It is around the same time that Spinoza frequents Franciscus van den Enden and his Latin school. Van den Enden likely introduced Spinoza to Cartesian philosophy.

Spinoza's life is forever changed on July 27, 1656, when Amsterdam's Jewish community subjects Spinoza to a harsh act of communal and religious chastisement, the infamous *herem*. This writ of expulsion made Spinoza a *persona non grata* among Jews. The text of the *herem* refers without further specification to Spinoza's "evil opinions and acts" (*más opinioins e obras*), his "abominable heresies" (*horrendas heregias*) and

“monstrous deeds” (*ynormes obras*). There is room for speculation as to the exact nature of these “heresies” and “monstrous deeds” (Nadler 2002). Some suspect that Spinoza even wrote a defense or apologia in Spanish, now lost (Curley 2015). Spinoza’s rupture from the community is never repaired.

Sometime before 1661 Spinoza began but did not finish two works: the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and the so-called *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*. He lives not far from Leiden, in Rijnsburg, where he corresponds with Collegiants and a broad network of sympathetically minded thinkers including better known figures such as Henry Oldenburg, then Secretary of the Royal Society, and Christiaan Huygens. Spinoza makes his living as a lens-grinder. Later, while living in Voorburg, in 1665 Spinoza publishes the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*. He is already at work on the *Ethics* but interrupts its composition to begin work on the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

The *Theological-Political Treatise* appeared in 1670 and provoked immediate condemnation by religious and academic circles. Dutch secular authorities complied, and the work was banned; foreign authorities followed suite. In 1672 came the *Rampjaar*, the invasion of the United Provinces by the French. The ensuing collapse of the De Witt government propelled the Orangist camp and orthodox Calvinists to power. The De Witt brothers themselves were murdered by a lynch mob; Spinoza, uncharacteristically outraged and wanting to confront the mob, was held back from certain death by his landlord. Spinoza traveled to the French garrison in Utrecht to meet the Prince of Condé, though they failed to meet. He did, however, spend time with a lieutenant-colonel, Jean-Baptiste Stoupepe, eager to meet a Dutch intellectual celebrity (Nadler 2018a).

During his final years, spent mostly in the Hague, Spinoza completes the *Ethics*, receives Leibniz (whom he does not trust), declines a professorship in Heidelberg, composes a Hebrew grammar, and begins work on a second political treatise, the *Political Treatise*, also unfinished at the time of his death in 1677. Confidants Ludwig Meyer, Jarig Jelles, and Jan Rieuwerts band

together to present much of his unfinished or unpublished work to posterity, including the *Ethics*. They publish the *Opera posthuma* in 1677, and soon after its Dutch translation, the *Nagelate schriften*. With Jelles’ preface to the *Opera posthuma*, the legend of the saintly philosopher from the Low Countries who in quiet nobility suffered the injustices of the intolerant is already conceived.

## Overview of the *Ethics*

Spinoza’s *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*, provides us with the fullest exposition of his philosophy. Most discussions of his philosophy begin or end in accounting for the *Ethics*, so it is fitting to overview that here. Spinoza outright adopts the geometrical method of Euclid; definitions, axioms, scholia, this admirable and terrible “Dreadnought” (Bergson 1938) of intellectual machinery is called on to articulate a systematic view on God, humans, and the world. His goal is to “lead us by the hand, as it were, to the knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness” (2pr). To accomplish this requires discussions of: “God” (Part 1); “the nature and origin of the mind” (Part 2); “the origin and nature of the affects” (Part 3); “human bondage, or the power of the affects” (Part 4); and “the power of the intellect, or human freedom” (Part 5).

Part 1 consists of two subsections. 1p1–p15 establishes that there is only one substance, God, and that “whatever is, is in God” (1p15). Spinoza’s substance monism puts before the reader a problem in interpretation, viz., the problem of the attributes. Each attribute is conceptually independent (1p10), and there are infinitely many attributes that belong to God (1p11). Many readers ask how several attributes so conceived can be held to constitute one substance. Should not each attribute be held to constitute a substance on its own, if each is conceptually independent? Call this the unity objection. A classic response provided by H. A. Wolfson is that attributes are mind-dependent realities and that their plurality is not grounded in substance itself (Wolfson 1934). This would relieve the pressure raised by the unity

objection; substantial unity remains unimpinged by attribute diversity, as attribute diversity results from *the intellect's* conceiving each attribute independently of every other attribute. However, this comes at the cost of making substance unintelligible. Attributes are the means by which the mind comprehends substance's essence (1d4). If they are mind-dependent realities, mere subjective apprehensions of substance's essence, then the substance they qualify remains beyond the intellect's grasp. For this reason, this subjectivist interpretation is considered largely unattractive at present, but detractors have yet to settle the dispute (Gueroult 1968). In 1p16–p36 Spinoza moves to discussing God's production of infinitely many modes, or "that which is in another through which it is also conceived" (1d6). Spinoza's conception of modes as "in" God is the subject of another hot-button debate. One of Spinoza's early critics, Pierre Bayle, considers that this position yields the abhorrent conclusion that contrary properties can be predicated of God: all modes inhere in God, or God is the ultimate subject of predication of all modes, but modes themselves have contrary properties, thus contrary properties can be predicated of God (Bayle 1740). There is little agreement whether Bayle is right to interpret Spinoza's substance-mode relation as one of inherence and predication (Curley 2019; Della Rocca 2008; Lin 2018; Melamed 2013; Schmaltz 2019). In the concluding appendix to Part 1, Spinoza criticizes the prejudice that sees God's action as goal oriented. God, Spinoza argues, cannot have an end for which it exists; rather, God acts from the necessity of its nature alone, and all else that exists follows from the divine nature with a strict necessity (1p33). Spinoza's argument that belief in divine purposefulness and the efficacy of prayer arises from mere ignorance bears witness to his deep-seated anti-anthropomorphism.

In Part 2, Spinoza begins with a discussion of the metaphysical relation between the attributes of Thought and Extension. As every attribute is conceptually independent, no attribute can cause inter-attribute effects. However, as each attribute constitutes the essence of substance, all attributes unfold according to the same sequence of causes

and effects. The underlying identity of causal states and processes across attributes is characterized by Leibniz as the doctrine of "parallelism" (Leibniz 1999, 25). The nomenclature stuck, though it is not entirely accurate. Spinoza's suggestion that "the order and connection" of ideas and things is identical across attributes does evoke a kind of mirroring "in parallel" and one-to-one pairing of modes of Thought to the modes of other attributes (2p7). Hence, there is a causally isomorphic counterpart in the body for any idea in the mind, just as there must be a causally isomorphic counterpart in the mind for any bodily state, although the mind and body cannot causally interact (3p2). However, Spinoza additionally says God's power of thinking is equal to God's power of acting (2p7s). Yet not only are the attributes of Extension and Thought kinds of powers of acting, but so must every other attribute consist in a kind of power of acting. This suggests that there is as much going on in the attribute of Thought as there is in every other attribute. Following the account of attribute parallelism, Spinoza propounds a short physical interlude and an account of the human body and its complex corpuscular structure (2p13s et sq.) as a means of ascertaining the "excellence of the mind" (2p13s). The assumption here appears to be that knowledge of body is prior to knowledge of mind. The body's identity, claims Spinoza, consists in a certain and precise *ratio* of motion and rest; the mind is the idea of that *ratio*. The small physics is followed by Spinoza's theory of knowledge. Spinoza sorts knowledge into three kinds. The "first kind of knowledge" or imagination is mutilated and confused. It is knowledge of the "common order of Nature" (2p30d) or from random experience (2p40s2). It resembles opinion and hearsay, as it consists only in the truncated perceptions we have of our own bodily states and of other bodies insofar as they causally interact with the body and arouse such states. Such perceptions fail to do explanatory work, Spinoza thinks, for they present the mind with confused representations of the body's essence and external bodies' essences. This is the source of all falsity and error (2p41). However, because bodies share basic properties in common, the mind also has access to a "second kind of knowledge." This is

reason *stricto sensu* and consists in the “common notions” of Nature. Since whatever is fully present as much in the whole of Nature as in any of its parts cannot be inadequately perceived by the mind (2p38), “common notions” constitute “necessarily true” knowledge (2p41). However, we still do not have knowledge of essences. For this, there is the “third kind of knowledge” or *scientia intuitiva*. Spinoza maintains that we can deduce the idea of a singular thing’s essence “in one glance” from an attribute’s formal essence (2p42s). In conclusion to Part 2, Spinoza argues that ideas possess inherently affirmatory natures and are not mere mute “pictures” (2p48s). The mind does not contemplate its ideas *only then* to assent or reject them, *pace* Descartes. Rather, “the will and the intellect are one and the same” (2p49c) and representations command assent because of their innate power, which varies in proportion to their adequacy or veracity.

With Part 3, Spinoza turns to the domain of metaphysical psychology and the theory of the affects. No term is more connoted here than *conatus* or “striving.” The striving to persevere in being is said to characterize what anything does by its own power (3p6). A thing’s nature consists in an affirming of that nature and whatever effects follows from that nature and a thing naturally resists destruction by foreign incompatible natures. Some hold that this doctrine suggests that Spinoza is not utterly opposed to all teleological explanations, as finite things, like human beings, have goals or ends through which their natures appear conceived (Carriero 2005; Garrett 2002). Take the body. On logical grounds, whatever excludes its *ratio* of motion and rest is not contained in its definition or nature; the body strives to persevere in its *ratio* of motion and rest to the degree that it has sufficient power, causing other effects to follow from it. We as human beings desire, and call good, whatever agrees with this striving to affirm our nature and are averse to, and call evil, that which restrains it (3p9s). Further, Spinoza maintains that a thing’s activity consists in whatever follows from its nature alone, its passivity consists in whatever follows from its nature in conjunction with other natures (3d2), while affects are the ideas of the

body’s states of activity or passivity (3d3). In sum, for Spinoza, I don’t really *have* a *conatus*; rather, I *am* a *conatus*, a striving. Consequently, in my inevitable intercourse with the external world through which I am partly conceived, I come to experience affects. These indicate what I believe are my successes (re: joy) or failures (re: sadness) on the *conatus* front. Nonetheless, to the degree that affects arise from external causes, they neither constitute genuine actions nor genuine satisfactions of my nature as a *conatus*. Finally, because affects involve an element of belief, namely, the belief that certain objects can cause certain joys or sadness, affects can be rationally justified or not. Additionally, they are open to cognitive therapy, as beliefs can be challenged by the intellect. On Spinoza’s view, there are three explanatorily basic affects: joy, sadness, and desire (3p11s). Nonetheless, Spinoza seems to adduce an additional complexifying mechanism at 3p27 when he states that by nature humans imitate one another’s affects (Moreau 2005).

It is only with Part 4 that Spinoza provides his ethical theory, where the central intuition is that reason can clarify what is ethical and guide us accordingly. Nonetheless, it is unclear whether Spinoza’s account can accommodate talk of moral permissibility, obligations, blameworthiness, and other characteristic intuitions of moral thought. Consider the following. Spinoza adopts an ostensibly normative ethical principle, ethical egoism. Thus, the basic rational precept, what we ought to do under the guidance of reason, is seek what is useful (4p18s). His practical prescriptions, the *dictamen rationis* (e.g., “the *homo liber* always acts honestly, not deceptively” (4p72)), are applications of this ethical egoist principle. They show how reason does what is most useful, namely, it corrects the imagination’s errors, counters the passions, and accommodates the striving to be active and joyous. Reason is thus charged with a therapeutic role as it can “remedy” the affects (5pr). On reason’s instruction, we also strive to form mutually beneficial friendships with our fellow human beings (4app12); it is because we are rational that we agree in nature (4p35). Indeed, our greatest good, the knowledge of God, is particularly good because no one

person can monopolize it (4p36). (The reader eager to master the *recta vivendi ratio* can turn directly to the *vade mecum* provided as an Appendix to Part 4.) So far, so good; however, there is a sense in which, as seen above in 4p72, Spinoza's view may not be that reason prescribes ends or that the *dictamen rationis* are normative propositions, but rather that, in all rigor, under the guidance of reason we are determined to such and such actions. The normative collapses into the descriptive. It is not that I ought not to lie, but that if I am rational, I do not lie. Elsewhere Spinoza seems to question the worth of normative propositions altogether, as they misapprehend specific natures. For instance, in correspondence with the Calvinist Willem van Blijenbergh, Spinoza disparages the belief that someone depraved, such as Nero, can really be held morally blameworthy, since in relation to such a nature, crimes like matricide constitute virtue (Ep. 23). Such considerations have led some notable commentators to maintain that Spinoza's ethics provides scant space for a conception of morality and moral agency (Deleuze 1981).

Part 5, like Part 1, consists in two subsections. 5p1–20s covers the remedies for the affects that pertain to the mind's duration and relation to the body (5p20s). In brief, since we cannot control the objects to which we attach ourselves, we must control our evaluations themselves by means of intellectual self-discipline, which involves considering all things as necessary. This amounts to a *erga Deum amor* or "love toward God" (Nadler 2018b). In contrast, 5p21–42s introduce Spinoza's discussion of the eternity of the mind and the *amor Dei intellectualis* or "intellectual love of God." On Spinoza's account, the mind necessarily possesses an eternal part, constituted by the understanding itself and to grasp this fact is to experience a condition of intellectual love of God. The views espoused here in the second half of Part 5 have long puzzled, and enchanted, Spinoza's readers. How, it may be asked, can a part of the mind remain after the destruction of the body (5p23), if the mind just *is* the idea of the body? Further, how is it that we can in this present life do something with the body to increase the part of the mind which is eternal (5p39s)? One

thing appears clear: Spinoza is *not* offering a doctrine of personal immortality. The part of the mind that remains is the understanding of the eternal essence of the body and that understanding does not overlap with most of what characterizes our individual existences as we experience them in duration. Spinoza attaches supreme importance to this aspect of his thinking, since it is in understanding the eternal part of the mind and seeing all things *sub specie aeternitatis* that we attain, on his view, genuine wisdom, true peace of mind, and freedom. Alas, Spinoza concludes, only so very few of us come to realize this goal (5p42s).

### Conclusion: Spinoza as a Political Thinker

Though Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (the *TTP*) and his *Political Treatise* (the *TP*) have received far less attention than they deserve, no discussion of Spinoza is complete without an account of his political philosophy.

As its subtitle indicates, the *TTP*'s central contention is that "the freedom to philosophize" cannot harm sovereign powers or states. Justifying this claim involves showing that Scripture does not purport to establish any theoretical or speculative truths and that "the freedom to philosophize" does not run counter to Scripture's commandments. To show this, Spinoza develops a method of interpreting Scripture, namely, "that our whole knowledge of it and of spiritual matters must be sought from Scripture alone, and not from those things we know by the natural light" (*TTP* pr., §25; *TTP* ch. vii). Upon examination, Scripture intends uniquely to encourage obedience to the cult of justice and loving-kindness. Prophets do not possess theoretical knowledge and are endowed only with moral certainty. Their goal was to reach a wide audience and in consequence they adopted their message to accommodate superstitious views of God as powerful because capable of extraordinary feats, hence the belief in miracles (*TTP* ch. vi). Only with regard to the content and meaning of the moral doctrine has Scripture reached us uncorrupted (*TTP* ch. xv,



§35–36). At root, Scriptural teaching is simple and accessible to anyone regardless of intellectual ability (TTP ch. xiii); the foundations of universal faith, the so-called catholic *credo minimum*, are the doctrines necessary to make us just and loving and kind (TTP ch. xiv, §25–28). Commentators have drawn attention to the *credo minimum*'s peculiarities, as it does consist in views that are patently anthropomorphic and superstitious and thus at odds with Spinoza's own philosophy (Garber 2019; Matheron 1971). Consequently, neither is philosophy the handmaid of theology nor is theology the handmaid of philosophy (TTP ch. xv). Having separated philosophy and theology, Spinoza proceeds to bind politics and theology to the benefit of the former. States which are otherwise powerful collapse because of an unresolved theological element in their mix. Spinoza takes his cues from the history of the ancient Hebrew Republic founded by Moses (TTP ch. xvii–xviii). Priestly classes, desirous of power, undermine the common good by monopolizing the administration of the rites and ceremonies that are held to constitute religious affairs. This undermines the common good because the common people attach special value to these rites and ceremonies and are willing to engage in dissident political behavior or civil war in view of securing the benefits they allegedly accrue. Spinoza has not yet fully worked out what kind of regimes are most powerful and why, a point to which he returns in the *TP*; however, because sovereign political powers are charged primarily with administering this worldly interhuman affairs, it already follows that the true message of Scripture is in principle capable of being fulfilled, if not superseded, by sovereign political powers that can effectively see to it that multitudes behave justly and with loving-kindness. Sovereign political powers therefore see no detriment in tolerating the “freedom to philosophize,” but they do suffer internal division and rebellion in attempting to stamp it out (TTP ch. xx).

The *TP* revisits several core commitments in Spinoza's political thinking. For one, Spinoza develops the view that natural right just *is* power (TTP ch. xvi; *TP* ch. ii, §4). Whether we are driven by passions or reason, what we have the

power to do we have the right to do (*TP* ch. ii, §5). However, because our power consists in reason, and because reason cannot take root without social support, it is a priori empowering to form political and social units, or states. In fact, only where there are common rules of law is natural right even conceivable, as outside collective associations we do not possess the power necessary to secure our basic livelihood (*TP* ch. ii, §15). Because in a state of nature we do not have anything but an imaginary natural right, Spinoza thinks we are therefore led spontaneously to form what are essentially tacit social contracts. Some readers stress the alleged difference between the *TP*, with its emphasis on political naturalism, and the *TTP*, where Spinoza's explicit contractualist view is more pronounced (Matheron 1990). The right that defines the multitude's common power, and, hence, general welfare is called the *imperium*, which is to say “state” or “commonwealth” (*TP* ch. ii, §17)). Now, states also strive to persevere in themselves and look to increase their power. Here, as elsewhere, the most successful striver will be the most rational, which for a state consists in enjoying concord and tranquility (*TP* ch. iii, §10). Spinoza's primary worry, then, is to secure the conditions for long-lasting peaceful alliances of natural right, where individual agents consent to the law, do no harm to the general welfare, and thus see their own power increased. The bulk of the *TP* is spent spelling out the specifics of the ideal or model constitutions for monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic regimes. The aim is to maximize the amount of rationality involved in each regime. Spinoza reveals himself very preoccupied with the arithmetic involved in careful institution design (Ramond 2005). Fundamentally, a monarchy will always be flawed, but a well-designed, decentralized aristocracy can last forever (*TP* ch. x, §9). Democracies are best of all, because the power of the state consists in the power of all the multitude that composes it (*TP* ch. xi). Regrettably, Spinoza's early death deprives us of a detailed account of what this “absolute regime” should look like.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Principle of Sufficient Reason](#)
- ▶ [Spinoza and the Sciences](#)
- ▶ [Spinoza in Social Science](#)
- ▶ [Spinoza's Metaphysics](#)
- ▶ [Teleology in Early Modern Philosophy and Science](#)
- ▶ [Whole-Part Relations in Early Modern Philosophy](#)

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