

Spinoza [\[1\]](#)

SPINOZA, BENEDICT (or Baruch) de , (1632-1677). A Dutch philosopher, Spinoza is best known now for his *Ethics* (1677), an attempt to work out a system of philosophy "geometrically," by formal proofs from axioms and definitions, beginning with a demonstration of the existence and nature of God, proceeding through an account of human nature, and culminating in a theory of human conduct and well-being. Spinoza's God is a philosopher's god, an impersonal first cause of everything which happens (though not first in a temporal sense, since Spinoza conceives the world as eternal); God acts not to achieve any purposes, but simply out of necessity. Since affirming God's existence amounts to affirming that everything in nature happens because of immutable natural laws, in his own time Spinoza was held to be an atheist; now commentators are more inclined to regard his view as religious, even if unconventional. His theory of human nature is egoistic, and attempts to show that enlightened egoism leads to much the same rules of conduct as does traditional religion. Though he identifies mind and body, the *Ethics* concludes with an almost mystical affirmation of the mind's ability to achieve eternity through the intellectual love of God.

In his own time Spinoza was at least as well known for his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), a landmark in the history of biblical criticism, which argued for extensive freedom of thought and expression. Spinoza was raised in the Jewish community in Amsterdam, most of whose members were formerly from the Iberian peninsula, where they had been forcibly converted (nominally at least) to Christianity. In Amsterdam they found freedom to practice their religion openly, but were not always prepared to allow equal freedom to dissenters within their midst. As a youth Spinoza was trained in theology, but became dissatisfied with the rabbis' teachings and turned to philosophy, where he was influenced particularly by the work of Descartes and Hobbes. By 1656 he had departed sufficiently from orthodoxy to be expelled from the community. The reasons for this are obscure, but a report in the files of the Inquisition,

from an informant who talked to him shortly afterwards, says that he held that God exists only philosophically, that the mind dies with the body, and that the Jewish law is not the true law. On excommunication Spinoza wrote a defense of his opinions, now lost, though contemporary accounts report that some of its contents survive in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

At the heart of Spinoza's Biblical scholarship is the doctrine that in interpreting Scripture we must not start from the assumption that it is true in every passage. To do that leads inevitably to reading our own views into Scripture. Spinoza was particularly opposed to those who, like Maimonides, interpreted Scripture in the light of Greek philosophy.

The proper procedure, he argued, was to attribute no doctrine to Scripture which we cannot clearly discover from its "history." A history of Scripture, in his sense, will contain: an account of the nature of the language the books of Scripture were written in, establishing the ordinary use of its terms and possible sources of ambiguity (such as the absence of vowel markings in ancient Hebrew); a thoroughly organized collection of passages on various topics, noting all those which are ambiguous or obscure or seem inconsistent with one another; and an account of the life and mentality of the author of each book, when and for whom he wrote, how the book was preserved, transmitted and accepted as canonical, and how many variant readings there are.

Spinoza contends that for much of Scripture we lack the historical information necessary to discover its true meaning, particularly when it deals with speculative matters or historical narratives. But he insists that the central moral teaching of the Bible - to obey God through the practice of justice and love - is clear and consistent throughout. Other prescriptions of the law are inessential for salvation, designed only to provide for the political stability of the Jewish state. Spinoza's biblical criticism deals almost exclusively with the Hebrew Bible. He excuses himself from commenting extensively on the New Testament on the ground that he lacks adequate Greek. He does, however, have

some brief and suggestive remarks to make about the New Testament.

He shocked many of his contemporaries by holding a) that the Bible frequently shows an inadequate conception of God, insofar as the prophets think of God as a lawgiver or attribute to him such emotions as jealousy and anger, love and mercy; b) that miracles are impossible, the miracle narratives reflecting either a misunderstanding of a natural event or a deliberate falsification of the historical record; c) that most of the historical sequence from Genesis through Kings was written by one man (probably Ezra), who worked in the postexilic period, from sources now largely lost, to tell a story with a political moral (obedience to the law brings prosperity; disobedience, disaster); d) that among the lost works was the original text of the covenant between God and the people of Israel; and e) that many of the difficulties in this narrative arise from Ezra's not having been able to smooth out all the inconsistencies in his sources.

Though his contemporaries thought his work intolerably bold and moved quickly to suppress it, the principal controversy now is whether Spinoza did not conceal much of his radicalism in an attempt to avoid persecution.

Bibliography

Spinoza's Works

The most complete edition of the texts in the original languages is still Spinoza, *Opera*, 4 vols., ed. By Carl Gebhardt, publ. in Heidelberg by Carl Winters Universitätsverlag, 1925. A fifth volume, containing Gebhardt's commentary on the political treatises, was published by Carl Winter in 1987.

But a new critical edition of the original language texts, with French translations on the facing pages, is in progress, under the editorship of Pierre-François Moreau and published by Presses Universitaires de France. As of this date three volumes have been published:

- I. *Premiers écrits*, including the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*, text by Filippo Mignini, tr. by Michelle Beyssade, and the *Korte Verhandling van God, de Mensch, en deszelfs Welstand*, text by Mignini, tr. by Joël

Ganault, PUF, Paris, 2009.

III. *Traité théologico-politique*, text by Fokke Akkerman, tr. by Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau, Paris, PUF, 1999.

V. *Traité politique*, text by Omero Proietti, tr. by Charles Ramond, Paris, PUF, 2005.

Volume IV, with a new text of the *Ethica*, est. by Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkers, and tr. by Pierre-François Moreau, is currently expected in May 2020.

As for English translations, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and tr. by Edwin M. Curley, publ. by Princeton UP, now consists of two volumes:

I. containing the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*, *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*, *Metaphysical Thoughts*, the *Ethics* and Letters 1 through 28, 1985.

II. containing the *Theological-political Treatise*, the *Political Treatise*, and Letters 29-84, 2016.

A third volume is now planned, containing translations of Spinoza's *Hebrew Grammar* (by Steve Nadler, in collaboration with Curley), Jelles's preface to Spinoza's *Opera posthuma* (by Russ Leo, in collaboration with Curley), the sentence of excommunication (by Nadler) and a catalogue of Spinoza's library (by Nadler).

Works on Spinoza

There is an extensive literature on Spinoza, of which the following is a very short selection of important English-language books:

Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Hackett, 1984.

Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, Princeton UP, 1988.

Don Garrett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, Cambridge UP, 1st edition, 1996. A second edition is in progress.

Don Garrett, *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy*, Oxford UP, 2018.

Steven Nadler's *Spinoza, A Life*, Cambridge UP, 1999.

Jack Stetter and Charles Ramond (eds.), *Spinoza in Twenty-First-Century American and*

French Philosophy, Bloomsbury, 2019.

[1] From the *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by John H. Hayes, Abingdon Press, 1999.

Bibliography updated on Mar. 23, 2020.