



While the *Ethics* progresses in a linear manner, it is helpful to first thoroughly acquaint oneself with Spinoza's epistemology, by which he establishes his various axioms. He proposes that knowledge is derived in three separate, yet progressively linked, ways: knowledge acquired from sense perception is of the lowest level, and while of some value, is neither completely authentic nor consistent. Knowledge at the next level is found in the rational, as scientific principles. These ideas Spinoza refers to as *adequate ideas*, considered as such because they are logically related and one can have complete certainty about them in the same way one has complete certainty in the mathematical logic of, say, six is to three as four is to two. Knowledge at the third and highest level Spinoza terms scientific intuition. Knowledge at this stage is wholly contingent upon mastery of the previous stage of knowledge, the rational, which it then enables one to transcend. This is the insight that enables one to see possibilities that are beyond the current realm of scientific knowledge. One who possesses such intuitive knowledge understands that everything is necessary to the whole of the eternal order of things, and as such, the universe is rendered as a single absolute system that is governed by rational law.

It is from such an unequivocal position that Spinoza promotes the tenets of the *Ethics*. His epistemology is inextricably tied to his metaphysics and takes up the first three parts of the treatise, wherein he argues that the Universe is cause of itself. And it is in the working out of this element of his philosophy that the most distinctive, and perhaps most remarkable, claims of Spinozism are made. Living at the early dawn of the Enlightenment, Spinoza felt the need to interpret the nature of God in language sufficient to do justice to the new universe that science was explaining. The problem Spinoza perceived is not to prove the existence of God, but to find what God is really like. His first step was to define the existence of God in such a way as to make it incontrovertible. This concept is regarded as *substance monism* by contemporary philosophers, in that there is only one root thing from which all other things stem. And it is this root thing which Spinoza alternately calls substance, or God. He maintains that (a) there is a substance that has every attribute; (b) there cannot be two substances that have an attribute in common; (c) there cannot be a substance that has no attributes, and consequently; (d) there cannot be two substances. As a result, this uniquely self-determining substance, God, cannot be produced by anything other than itself.

As such, God is immanent in the rational order of the universe; the rational order which is expressed through the natural world and in human thought. If something exists other than God, it is either within and dependent upon God, in which case it is merely a finite expression of God, what Spinoza calls a *mode*; or it is without God, in which case something exists which is not God, whereby God is limited, and therefore itself finite, which is impossible because God has been demonstrated to be infinite. A necessary consequence of this claim is that the only entity exhibiting anything resembling free will in the universe is God, because everything else is necessarily dependent upon it, or, as Spinoza himself puts it, "God is, and acts solely by the necessity of His own nature; He is the free cause of all things." As a result, everything is determined by the ultimate substance, including human behavior. Or, as Spinoza would have it, "men believe themselves to be free, simply because they are conscious of their actions, and unconscious of the causes whereby those actions are determined." Great stuff, that. While it may induce existential panic in most of my literary-minded, free will sympathetic friends, I find it liberating.

The determinism of Spinoza, a consequence of his claim of holism, leads into his next claim in the *Ethics*, that the mind and body are really the same thing conceived under the Cartesian attributes of Thought and Extension. Because both Thought and Extension must be regarded as two aspects of a single reality, but cannot be demonstrated to be two distinct substances under Spinoza's rational universe, they must be two attributes of the

single substance, or what I previously identified as God.

It therefore follows that God, the natural universe as a whole, can be conceived as simultaneously a system of extended or material things and a system of thinking or immaterial things. As such, mind and body, expressions of the attributes of Thought and Extension, are nothing more than different sides of the same coin. Even so, Spinoza differs with strict materialism, in that the identity of the mind doesn't reduce either mind to body or body to mind. Spinoza sees the scientific knowledge of the body through reason advancing from, rather than opposed to, awareness of the body through sense and imagination. His rationalism is a consequence of empiricism, not in competition with it.

What is meant, then, by Spinoza's controversial statement that the mind is the idea of the body is understood as it is related to his epistemological system: knowledge born of sensory experience is of a lower order than knowledge of a rational kind. Still, rational knowledge is not possible without prior empirical experience; as a result, the mind, as the rational, is a necessary and ascendant consequence of the body, as the empirical. As such, as one ascends the levels of knowledge and one's ideas of the modifications of one's body become more logically consistent, one can be said to more fully understand the causes of these modifications. Knowledge based solely on empiricism is then, strictly speaking, reactive, whereas knowledge based upon rationalism is proactive. Spinoza uses the example of the sun, which one's senses tells one is a disc some few hundred feet from the earth. This idea is not false if considered at merely the sensory level of knowledge, but is inadequate at the next level of knowledge, in as much as it is demonstrated that the sun is a gigantic star millions of miles away.

The reason Spinoza addresses epistemological and metaphysical questions in the first place is because he feels that they are a necessary foundation for ethical questions. We must first know our potentialities and our relation to Nature, otherwise our ideas about moral philosophy will simply be projections of our imaginations. Spinoza understands that the rational laws of science, being comprehensive, are just as applicable to human life as they are to the physical universe. Ethical behavior becomes a matter of applied psychology. The virtuous man is not one who lives in accord with moral commandments imposed upon him by some external, vengeful authority, but the man who acts in accordance with his nature. A nature which has been laid bare to him.

Having demonstrated that a person's life is determined by forces both external and seemingly unmanageable to it, Spinoza endeavors to show in the final parts of his treatise that freedom from the bondage of determinism is really a matter of degree. And it is by exercising freedom, as he defines it, that one acts in an ethical manner. By acknowledging that one's life is determined, one becomes free, in that one is aware of the chain of causation that governs one's actions. By achieving adequate knowledge one understands the eternal; yet, one simultaneously comes to understand that one's own nature is distinguished from the whole of things because one recognizes one's separate existence is locked in this time-bound conception of ours that promises only incomplete knowledge. One is able to transcend this limited knowledge by replacing one's confused notions with the aforementioned adequate ideas.

An example of a confused idea addressed by Spinoza is emotion. Our emotions, he contends, are a result of ignorance. "We feel strongly because we understand dimly." One's emotional reaction to another person is a result of not understanding what makes that person act as he or she does. In experiencing the passions, one is reacting to external causes and one's conscious life is proceeding at the level of sense-perception, not at the level of the rational. If knowledge of this kind is insufficient, so much more so is a life that is based on it. The free man is conscious of his compulsions and seeks to understand them. This is the only freedom one can truly aspire to — not escape from the necessity of one's reality, but to understand both it and oneself as a part of it.

When one comes to this understanding, good and evil are seen as one's reaction to circumstance, not as the eternal nature of things. Indeed, the concept of good and evil is relative and has nothing to do with that eternal nature. Spinoza writes, "So every man, according to his emotions, judges a thing to be good or bad, useful or useless." The solution to such a dilemma is to understand one's relation to the eternal order of things and in so doing one is liberated from the perpetual anxiety of striving against it. Things are neither good nor evil in and of themselves, they are just necessary to the universe as a whole. Coming to this awareness is no simple task, but if one extrapolates rationalism in the manner prescribed by Spinoza, it is a necessary outgrowth. It is only in comprehending the universe that man can rise above it, for as the philosopher reminds us, "The intellectual love of God, which arises from the intuitive kind of knowledge, is eternal."

So what Spinoza is up to in the *Ethics* is a rather grand attempt to construct a "geometry" (a la Euclid) which will demonstrate deductively truths about God's nature, man's nature, the nature of the human mind, human psychology, and human emotions; the way we are (and are not) in control of our desires, in what sense God and human beings are free agents; and what it means to act in a way in which "human freedom" can be achieved. This latter is what I would think comes closest to showing us what "ethically right" action is for humans.

Here, a summary of the five parts of Spinoza's *Ethics*.

**Part I Concerning God.** (view spoiler)

**Part II Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind.**(view spoiler)[This section of the treatise explores the ramifications of the first section when applied to the subject of the human mind and body. Frankly I didn't find it very interesting, aside from a couple sections.

Prop. XLVIII seems to be a pretty clear denial of human free will: *In the mind there is no absolute or free will; but the mind is determined to wish this or that by a cause, which has also been determined by another cause, and this last by another cause, and so on to infinity.*

Another proposition (XLIII) states *He who has a true idea, simultaneously knows that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt of the truth of the thing perceived.* Now if this is true, I guess I've never had a true idea, since I can't remember ever being absolutely certain that any idea I've had is true. (Except for mathematical things.) I think this proposition illustrates the spurious conclusions that a man of supreme intellect can be led to when his assumptions are fouled up. (hide spoiler)]

**Part III On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions.** To me, Part III is the real highlight of the *Ethics*. The section is an extremely interesting *deductive derivation* of human psychology. (At least that's what I perceived it as.) The Propositions stated seem mostly correct, perceptive, and illuminating. (view spoiler)[

My guess is that Spinoza cooked the books a bit here (perhaps unconsciously), was probably a very keen observer of human nature, knew what he *had* to show, and so arranged the proofs, definitions, axioms, etc. so as to show what he already believed to be true. I don't think he was led to these insights just by thinking about God, substance, body, mind, etc. (view spoiler)

*I originally hoped to present a useful overview of this chapter. It turned out to be a task beyond me, at least without spending an inordinate amount of time. It seemed that no matter where I started, endless trails led back through prior definitions, Propositions, etc. So many terms and words which are familiar to us in everyday discourse have specific, non-traditional meanings for Spinoza. He does define everything, but it is a big job to summarize things in an informative manner. I gave up, both because I knew it would take so long, and because of the likelihood that no one would be that interested as to read whatever I eventually came up with.*

So instead I'll just talk about the way that Spinoza views and defines emotions in the chapter.

First off, Spinoza believes there to be only three fundamental emotions (Note to Prop. XI): pleasure, pain and desire. This sounds sort of reasonable, or at least plausible, right? But wait. Let's just see how he defines these primary emotions. From the same note:

*Pleasure* is "a passive state wherein the mind passes to a greater perfection."

*Pain* is "a passive state wherein the mind passes to a lesser perfection."

And, from the Note to Prop. IX,

*Desire* is "appetite with consciousness thereof."

See what I mean? Now, am I going to tell you what, a "passive state" is? No, I'm not going there! And am I going to say what Spinoza's "appetite" means? Just a hint: It is a certain "endeavor", "referred to the mind and body in conjunction". I hope that satisfies your curiosity, because I'm not going any deeper into that either!

See, this is the really fundamental stuff that must be thoroughly understood to know what Spinoza's psychology is about, what he's saying – what, that is, these propositions are proving.

I'm *absolutely not* dismissing this stuff as nonsense; I'm throwing up my hands and saying its *too damn hard!*

So let's bypass this initial stuff, and see where Spinoza is led. Because it is interesting. These three primary

emotions are used in combination with mental states and dispositions, and hypothetical situations, to define and elucidate an entire gamut of human emotions. There's a list of most of them that he considers in **this** (view spoiler).

All the emotions in that list are treated in two separate places in Part III. They first enter the treatise in a Proposition, actually usually a Note to a Proposition; then later, in the final section of Part III (DEFINITIONS OF THE EMOTIONS), Spinoza treats them again in a somewhat different order, with additional comments, "interpolating such observations as I think should here and there be added."

For example, the emotion of love is defined in the Note to Prop. XIII: "Love is nothing else but *pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause*." In VI. of the DEFINITIONS section, love is defined in the same terms, and Spinoza says, in an *Explanation*, that these words "explain sufficiently clearly the essence of love"; then goes on **but this is TMI on my part so** (view spoiler)

Just a couple more remarks on this section.

Prop. XL: *He, who conceives himself to be hated by another, and believes that he has given him no cause for hatred, will hate that other in return.* A great example of how what we would think of as an *observation* about human nature or psychology (and perhaps not even an entirely convincing one – might not the counter-feeling be one of puzzlement, irritation, resignation ... ?), turns into a statement that can be proved deductively in Spinoza's system.

Finally. Let's compare Spinoza's definition of "hope" with a dictionary definition.

In DEFINITIONS XII, "Hope is an inconstant pleasure, arising from the idea of something past or future, whereof we to a certain extent doubt the issue."

My dictionary - Hope: "A wish or desire supported by some confidence of its fulfillment."

To me, there are significant differences here. First, the dictionary definition makes hope to be an active emotion, a "wish or desire". Spinoza on the other hand views it as a passive thing, something which "arises" from an "idea", not a thing which is produced by our will.

Also, the dictionary clearly means to show us what the *sign* (word) signifies, by giving us a string of other signs; whereas Spinoza's definition is not simply *language* attached to the word defined, but rather an explanation of *how* the thing signified by the word comes about. I think these distinctions are seen pretty much throughout the definitions and comments on the emotions in Part III. (hide spoiler)]

*I have not read the last two Parts of the book, but I did skim them so I could make some brief comments.*

**Part IV Of Human Bondage or the Strength of the Emotions.**(view spoiler)[Shades of Somerset Maugham!! ... and yes, this *is* where Maugham got his title.

Spinoza introduces this section as follows:

Human infirmity in moderating and checking the emotions I name bondage: for, when a man is a prey to his emotions, he is not his own master, but lies at the mercy of fortune: so much so, that he is often compelled, while seeing that which is better for him, to follow that which is worse. Why this is so, and what is good or evil in the emotions, I propose to show in this part of my treatise.

Then, after the usual definitions, axioms, propositions, notes, etc. Spinoza adds an Appendix at the end of Part IV, in which he summarizes his remarks in a more natural manner than they were developed in the chain of propositions. This would be a fine place for a reader to gain an overview of this section. I won't try to summarize his summary. (hide spoiler)]

**Part V Of the Power of the Understanding, or of Human Freedom.**(view spoiler)[

In Part V Spinoza appears to close the loop, in a certain sense, because as in Part I (and not since) most of the Propositions contain "God" in their statement.

Spinoza introduces the section by saying that he will treat "the power of the reason, showing how far the reason can control the emotions, and what is the nature of Mental Freedom or Blessedness." He then continues,

I shall treat only of the power of the mind, or of reason; and I shall mainly show the extent and nature of its dominion over the emotions, for their control and moderation. That we do not possess absolute dominion over them, I have already shown.

(hide spoiler)]

## My Summary

Before a final quote, this is what I think of Spinoza's *Ethics*. For this modern reader, its main, though not only, interest is as a historical document. The rationalist program upon which it's founded I find completely unconvincing, in our modern era of scientific understanding.

The third part, wherein Spinoza lays forth what I take to be a psychology of the emotions, was/is interesting, and I wish I had been able to condense and summarize it better. I might return to it someday, but ... likely not, if I'm honest with myself.

Similarly, the fourth part, which I only skimmed, seems like it should be explored in conjunction with Part III.

The other parts of the *Ethics* did not attract me, and I doubt I will ever return to them.

But Spinoza was undoubtedly a great thinker, and deserves better than I've given him here. He deserves to provide his own summary. This quote is the last Note in *Ethics*.

## Spinoza's Summary

(view spoiler)]

I have thus completed all I wished to set forth touching the mind's power over the emotions and the mind's freedom. Whence it appears, how potent is the wise man, and how much he surpasses the ignorant man, who is driven only by his lusts. For the ignorant man is not only distracted in various ways by external causes without ever gaining the true acquiescence of his spirit, but moreover lives, as it were unwitting of himself, and of God, and of things, and as soon as he ceases to suffer, ceases also to be.

Whereas the wise man, in so far as he is regarded as such, is scarcely at all disturbed in spirit, but, being conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, by a certain eternal necessity, never ceases to be, but always possesses true acquiescence of his spirit.

If the way which I have pointed out as leading to this result seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered. Needs must it be hard, since it is so seldom found. How would it be possible, if salvation were ready to our hand, and could without great labour be found, that it should be by almost all men neglected? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.

One substance, with an infinite number of attributes, expressed in an infinite number of modes. Extension (matter) is an attribute of God, or, nature, as is thought (ideas); we can conceive of God now as ideas through thought, now as matter through extension; the substance is the same. The mind and body are not two separate things, but rather the same thing expressed through different attributes. The decisions of the mind are exactly the determinations or appetites of the body. Ideas of things are conceived through thought, while things are conceived through matter. The mind is bodied and the body minded. The affections of the body are exactly the ideas of the affections of the mind, but insofar as these affections necessarily involve external bodies they can be said to be inadequate, or, not fully comprehensible by our body alone. These affections are passions. The mind however, as a part of the divine nature expressed through thought, is blessed with the power of reasoning, that is, of forming adequate or complete ideas. Through the use of reasoning the mind is able to create understanding, or understandings, of the divine nature, and through this, reach higher levels of empowerment and affirmation.

An affect is an idea of an affection of the body. The body is composed of many individuals, each of which is itself composed of many individuals, and so on; roll the mouse wheel. From this it follows that the body, and so also the mind, can be affected in a great many ways; we do not yet know what a body can do. All affects can be generally ascribed to three main affects: joy, sadness and desire. Joy can be described simply as all those affects that increase our power, that is, our power to act; that *empower* us, bring us to a higher level of perfection, affirm us more and aid our ability to act as the manifestations of the divine nature that we are. Sad affects are all those that restrain us, that diminish or weaken our ability to act and that destroy us. Desire is the very essence of man, insofar as it represents the appetites of the body, or of the individuals that constitute our body, that at all times seeks to empower and

preserve, affirm and aid itself. This is the will to power, a will to life. This is, to this day, still one of the criteria we use to evaluate the living: all living things seek to preserve themselves. This, as we have just shown, is joy itself. Anything that seeks to destroy itself is not acting out of an intrinsic property, rather, anything, insofar as it seeks to destroy itself, is acting out of weakness of mind, that is, is being acted upon to such an extent by sad affects that it becomes completely overpowered. The man of reason, or of understanding, seeks at all times affects of joy, affects that increase our power.

The beautiful thing about Spinoza's immanent system of ethics, an ethics of empowerment and joy, is that once we stop subscribing to transcendent morals, morals that posit externally determined ideals of 'good' and 'evil', and that punish us (externally and internally) and render us guilty, we start to radiate positivity. This is the real charm of The Ethics. The more we seek to understand ourselves and the world of God/nature around us, the greater the ability we can gain to empower ourselves and brings ourselves to joy; the greater our power, the greater our ability to act, and the greater our ability to empower and preserve the things in our lives that bring us joy. Humans are necessarily social beings; we cannot live in isolation, and in fact, since the moment we were born (and certainly even before) we have been acted upon and ourselves acted upon other people. These people, in our lives, from those closest to us to those furthest away, have a very real impact on us; they affect us and we them. The more the people around us are empowered to act well, live joyfully, and make something of their lives and duration as mind-bodies, the more we are. The more that everyone else in the world is empowered and brought to joy, the more we are brought to joy, and, conversely, the more that we are empowered the more we are able to bring everyone else to joy. "If each person most seeks their own advantage, then men are most useful to one another" - this is the great lesson, the great gift. But the fundamental subtext is that we are not alone, the empowerment and joy of those around us affects us, and we them. Spinoza discovers the remarkable knock-on effect of positivity, hidden away by those who preach evil, repentance and sin. The man of reason, the strong, lives by *love*; he knows that nothing joyous can come from hate or sad affects: hate only breeds hate and even compounds it, whereas love can only breed love, empowerment can only breed empowerment.

Spinoza uses most of the metaphysics of Aristotle. He believes God is the efficient cause (the mover) of the universe, but he does not believe in Aristotle's final causes, teleology. He believes that God is necessary, and that the universe is determined because from the necessary existence and therefore essence of God everything must follow from cause and effect (i.e. that Free Will is an illusion. Aristotle in his Ethics believes that Free Will does exist, but mostly Spinoza and Aristotle seem to agree. The concept of 'essence' are essential items in each of their systems). Things are only contingent when we don't know enough.

Here Spinoza lays out a complete system that encompasses metaphysics, theology, physics, psychology, and ethics. Throughout Spinoza is concerned with what it means to be free, and what sort of beliefs are worthy of a free human being. To be free, he insists, means not to be a slave -- not to anyone else, and not to your own wishes, compulsions, fantasies, and emotions. To be free is to be rational, and to be rational is to live the best kind of life for a human being to live.

Religion is a key part of Spinoza's philosophy. There is also a debate to exactly what he was religiously. At times this book isn't clear. We do know that he didn't like organized religion. He wasn't religiously Jewish or Christian (he was ethnically Jewish though). There is some question whether or not his God is what most people think of God or if it's a whole other type of God. George Eliot was the first person to translate this book into English. I haven't read her translation, so I can't compare, but I have read her views on Spinoza. She was evangelical, maybe too much, before reading him. After, she realized that she wasn't Christian. She questioned the religion and church too much. She eventually turned skeptic and atheist. She also became a better writer, but that's another story.

The more clearly you understand yourself and your emotions, the more you become a lover of what is."  
---Baruch Spinoza

Living a rational life that mimics the patterns that we commonly find in nature attests to a *modus operandi* that is superior to what many have been programmed to think what life should be like. Some may call the *nouveau* form of being based on reason. Spinoza suggests that blessedness emanates from the blessing of others. And via good actions and deeds allow man to obtain an internal state that is not subject to transfixation. Difficult read.

**In Ethics, Spinoza attempts to demonstrate a "fully cohesive philosophical system that strives to provide a coherent picture of reality and to comprehend the meaning of an ethical life. Following a logical step-by-step format, it defines in turn the nature of God, the mind, human bondage to the emotions, and the power of understanding -- moving from a consideration of the eternal, to speculate upon humanity's place in the**

## natural order, freedom, and the path to attainable happiness.

What the goal of the Ethics is, is to move from inadequate understanding towards understanding of the essences of the things as they are in God. Understanding is for Spinoza the highest perfection our mind can attain and this kind of knowledge will lead us to endless joy.

In Nietzsche we can hear an echo so clear of Spinoza's philosophy that every Nietzschean should take time to read this masterpiece. Just like Nietzsche, Spinoza's philosophy is one of joy, understanding what drives us and eventually of affirming life as it is. It is a beautiful book.

First there is the structure that follows Euclidean geometry – definitions, axioms, propositions, proofs and so on. Secondly, the content is all about: Nature as God, reason, rational laws, certainty of ideas and reason, God as reason, feelings opposing reason, mind and body, application of reason as ethics, and so on. Descartes with his rational program and with truth as certainty looms large in this book; moreover, he is the only philosopher Spinoza mentions here.

Even if most of its content and the axiomatic form is outdated, there are still surprisingly interesting and radical ideas in it. Additionally, one cannot understand Hegel and the entire German Idealism without this book.

Wittgenstein and his Tractatus is no longer strange after reading this book – Spinoza almost postulated the one-to-one correspondence between reality/things and reason/ideas that the logical atomism later centered on; while both books are just a long list of propositions (Wittgenstein at least dropped and spared us the "proofs").

According to the introduction, "Baruch Spinoza, who wrote in the mid-seventeenth century, has been considered the first modern philosopher, for he was the first to write philosophy from a standpoint beyond commitment to any particular religious persuasion. He was also among the first philosophers in modernity to advocate democracy as the best form of government." The introduction claims he was influenced by Aristotle, Hobbes, Descartes as well as such figures of Judaic-Arabic thought as Maimonides. *Ethics* is Spinoza's masterpiece--it came to my attention because it was on *Good Reading's* list of "100 Significant Books." In a way though, the title is a misnomer. Ethics, the study of right conduct, is only a small part of the treatise. Rather *Ethics* treats nearly the entirety of philosophy in its five parts.

The first part, "Concerning God" consists of a proof of God's existence. It's one of those ontological arguments, which I find among the most unconvincing of any attempts at a case for God. One of those that thinks the very definition of God is itself proof of existence. There's a peculiar consequence though of how Spinoza defines God. He believes that a consequence of God's very perfection is that "neither intellect nor will appertain to God's nature." After all, how can a perfect being wish to change any aspect of the universe? If God is infinite, how can he be outside Nature? Thus all is set, God does not and cannot intervene in the universe; there is no room for the supernatural. So Spinoza's own definition and "proof" of God reduces him to triviality. God is just another word for all that exists--in which case, I don't get why bother with the concept. (On the other hand, I understand it was precisely this line of argument which helped develop arguments for religious freedom and allowed free thinking, deism, and atheism to come out from hiding.) Part Two, "Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind" was the thorniest to read and understand. The best I can make out, contra Descartes, Spinoza denies any dichotomy between mind and body--both are expressions of an individual.

Part Three, Four, and Five are all closely connected. Part Three "On the Origin and Nature of Emotions" argues that "all emotions are attributed to desire, pleasure or pain" according to "each man's nature," recognizing individual differences in tastes and values. At the end he defines various emotions according to this system. Spinoza seems to argue for this being very deterministic, which makes me wonder, why bother with an ethical system at all, if humans are unable to conform to it? This is clarified somewhat in the next two parts, "Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of Emotions" and "Of Human Freedom"--which doesn't deal with politics as you might think, but with Freedom *from* those pesky emotions, by "framing a system of right conduct" and developing a habit of conforming to reason. Politics was touched on more in Part Four, where the influence of Hobbes' idea of the social contract was obvious.

It was from Section Four that I felt I took away something valuable. Much of the heart of Spinoza's ethics is very reminiscent to me of Aristotle's ethics, which established the whole line of "rational ethical egoism" which I find so much more appealing than appeals to disinterested altruism such as Kant's rule-based "categorical imperative" that calls for conforming to ethical rules without caring about consequences--to yourself or others--or utilitarianism which asks you to calculate the greatest good for the greatest number without caring about trampling on individuals with hobnailed boots. Spinoza, like Aristotle, emphasizes that ethics is about human flourishing and happiness. But

what I like about Spinoza, that I don't remember from Aristotle (who admittedly I haven't reread in years) is his emphasis on reciprocity and empathy--in other words, the Golden Rule that has been a near universal in moral thinking from Confucius to Jesus: "Every man should desire for others the good which he seeks for himself." Spinoza recognizing humans flourish best with other humans argues it's in a person's self-interest, and makes a person happiest, when consequently people "are just, faithful, and honourable in their conduct." I like that squaring of the circle of selfishness and altruism.

Mind you, this was difficult, dry reading. Philosophy doesn't have to be. I found Plato, with his dialogue format and use of metaphor and story quite fun, and Aristotle quite lucid. In comparison to Spinoza's *Ethics*, Descartes *Discourse on Method* is easy. Spinoza writes as if he's setting out a geometry text. His arguments are set out as definitions, axioms, corollaries, postulates, and especially propositions and their proofs. There are, mercifully, notes where he does set out his arguments in a more conventional narrative form, but especially in Part Two, when dealing with such concepts as the relationship between body and mind, and how we know what we know--well, this isn't for the faint of heart. Plato and Aristotle write as if their audience are ordinary people--Spinoza as if his audience consists of mathematicians, scientists and philosophers. So no, I'm not saying that in giving this a rating Goodreads equates with "Really Liked It" I'm saying this was a fun read, and I can't even say on first read on my own I felt I fully comprehended and got out of this all that I could. I possibly should have read more about Spinoza by popularizers before tackling this--it was hard going. But Spinoza is definitely a thinker worth encountering.

Spinoza was so unpopular, that for years after his death, it was a rite of passage for aspiring philosophers to write a polemic against him, denouncing his "atheistic fatalism". It wasn't until a century later, during the rise of German romanticism, that Spinoza was rehabilitated.

Formulated into five sections, "Concerning God", "Concerning the nature and origin of the mind", "concerning the origin and nature of the emotions", "on human servitude, or the strength of the emotions" and "concerning the power of the intellect or human freedom", Spinoza's approach is one of rigorous deduction. He begins every section with a set of numbered definitions and axioms before listing his propositions, each using preceding definitions, axioms and propositions as justification.

Of particular interest are the first two sections. Contained within are Spinoza's arguments for a single substance, and for that substance to be God. Also found in these sections are Spinoza's arguments for mind and extension to be seen as two attributes of the same substance.

By envisaging mind and body as two attributes of one and the same substance, Spinoza cut the Gordian knot of the mind-body problem centuries ago, something largely ignored until years after his death. This solution is one that finds support in the marxist and German idealist/romanticist traditions.

For Spinoza, a distinction must be made when conceiving nature and God. *Natura naturans* refers to nature as productive force and self causing activity (a theme taken up by the later German romanticists and idealists) while *Natura naturata* refers to the passive products of nature in the infinite causal chain.

Its central thesis is that God and Nature are the same. It is a deeply rationalist work. It divides knowledge into three kinds, two of which are a priori in nature. It is first and foremost a work on Ethics. It is aimed at providing a good life and making humans free through understanding the world through Spinoza's metaphysics and by understanding how ones emotions can control you and providing a remedy by controlling those emotions through understanding. It, in many ways, holds positions that would more easily fit into Eastern traditions.

To make things more interesting I tried reading Spinoza in the sense of know-your-enemies.

He writes against teleology, against anthropomorphism, against transcendence.

I think all these things must be rehabilitated, to a degree.

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By identifying freedom with reason, Spinoza identifies freedom with necessity, which is somewhat paradoxical. Reason is what you have to believe (if you're being reasonable). More widespread use of reason would bring about greater conformity in human affairs. So, despite his dim view of the multitude and their emotions, Spinoza is actually an optimist about the possibility of society.



Indeed, substance is "that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception." And later Spinoza will argue that we *only* have a clear concept of God. This sounds so bizarre that one must admire him for his boldness. So whereas Descartes had to be sure of his own being as a solid foundation from which to build up his world where a (non-deceiving) God had to be postulated, Spinoza starts with the notion of God. And whereas Descartes happily talks of substances (matter and mind) that are dependent on the real substance (God) and thus are not real substances Spinoza is much more vigorous. There is and logically can be only one substance. From this it follows, that what we would consider things ("we" for example) are part of the one substance. We are *modes* of the substance. There is just one thing: God or Nature. And where the god of Descartes had no extension (god cannot be part of the universe since that would be a limitation) Spinoza's God is co-extensive that is identical with the universe.

That makes sense. But is it true? First one might question the usefulness of the notion of substance. (That is what Russell would say. It is a philosophical construction based on the contingency of grammar where we have subjects with predicates.)

But if one admits that there is a meaningful (or even useful) concept of substance, where a substance is defined as independent of others and a building block of reality then one must ask why there could not be multiple substances, like e.g. atoms, or Wittgensteinian objects. Is there one God/Nature/Space-Time or does "the world" consist of many things? Is monism true or pluralism? (Or the hybrid dualism?) And if one is true, can it be proven? And can it be proven a priori? By some clever definitions and axioms?

How does Spinoza's proof work? Or rather: where in his arguments did he go wrong? One might think it should be relatively easy to pinpoint to one axiom or definition that one will not accept. In fact it is not easy at all.

But, I will just start with his second proposition.

PROP. 2: Two substances whose attributes are different have nothing in common.

Say we have two substances a and b where a is blue b is red and that is the only attribute they have. Now, it might be the case (and it is) that red and blue are emergent attributes coming into being by a different constellation of their underlying constituents.

So the substances do have after all something in common. Now, the "proof" of the proposition 2 is "evident", says Spinoza, from Definition 3:

DEF. III. By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself; in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.

What that means, and it becomes clearer with propositions 3 ("Things which have nothing in common cannot be one the cause of the other.") and 6 ("One substance cannot be produced by another substance."), there is only one substance.

I find myself arguing against Spinoza from a very modern point of view. Spinoza had no conception of emergent properties, he was alien to the concept of evolution, he had not heard about atoms (in the modern sense) or chemical elements. Is this unfair criticism then? Maybe. Spinoza talks repeatedly of the sun appearing to be at a distance of 200 feet from us. I doubt that a four-year old child today would think so. Spinoza literally saw the world differently.

But maybe I am quibbling. Let us accept the propositions. Where does it lead us?

To a world consisting of one substance, God or Nature. With a lot of "modifications" ("Affectiones") that explain why there are birds and bees and you and me. Why not?

But then Spinoza goes on in Proposition 11 to claim that God necessarily exists. And he does it with his version of the ontological argument. This seems absurd to me. If God is identical with Nature, why argue that he exists? Who denies that Nature exists? How does proofing the existence of a pantheistic God make sense?

Spinoza's argumentation so far was ingenious, but not really convincing to me.

At the end of Book I follows an Appendix, and it is here that the true genius of Spinoza becomes apparent.

First he sums up what he had done so far: "In the foregoing I have explained the nature and properties of God. I have shown that he necessarily exists, that he is one: that he is, and acts solely by the necessity of his own nature; that he is the free cause of all things, and how he is so; that all things are in God, and so depend on him, that without him they could neither exist nor be conceived; lastly, that all things are pre-determined by God, not through his free will or absolute fiat, but from the very nature of God or infinite power."

And then he adds a brilliant critique of the anthropological conception of God, that is, on practically any religious view in existence. The main point is that it is wrong to explain things by referring to God's will. To "take refuge in the will of God – in other words, the sanctuary of ignorance." There is no absolute good or bad, you do not go to Heaven for your good deeds or to Hell for your evil doings. God does not care. God does not love you. God had no intention of accomplishing something no purpose in creating the world. Like Leibniz' God he did so because he had to, and yet out of free will.

We live in a deterministic world without a purpose. Right. And what does that mean for our life? After all, the name of his book is Ethics.

Spinoza is radical. It would not be easy to find a quote by behaviourists that as clearly describes the nature of "good": "...in no case do we strive for, wish for, long for, or desire anything, because we deem it to be good, but on the other hand we deem a thing to be good, because we strive for it, wish for it, long for it, or desire it." (Book III, not to PROP IX)

And the first definition of Book IV: "By *good* I mean that which we certainly know to be useful to us." And then he nicely sums up his ethics when he says that people think that "the principle that every man is bound to seek what is useful for himself is the foundation of impiety, rather than of piety and virtue." In fact, he says the opposite is true.

In the end we must love God, although he will not love as back. Loving God means striving for adequate knowledge. And that means being free. "I call free him who is led solely by reason; he, therefore, who is born free, and who remains free, has only adequate ideas; therefore (IV. lxiv. Coroll.) he has no conception of evil, or consequently (good and evil being correlative) of good." (Proof of PROP LXVII, Book IV)

And now back to Russell: I dislike the method, because I dislike the metaphysics. And what I dislike, in one word, is his determinism. There is nothing wrong with determinism as such. But unlike Leibniz, Spinoza does not even grant the theoretical possibility of an alternative. No possible worlds for Spinoza. Leibniz God did choose our (*the*) world because you and I do act as we in fact do. That, Spinoza would say, is anthropomorphism, unworthy of a true God. Admirable. But deeply inhuman.

And a final word about the metaphysics. If you define substance as something that cannot be changed and at the same time as that which only truly exists, then all apparent changes are somewhat "modifications" within the substance. That is monism.

Interestingly Wittgenstein agrees that substance does not change. But for him, it means that the building blocks of reality, the state of affairs (Sachverhalte) consist of "objects" that have no ontological nature. They are proto-objects that do not really "exist". So it seems that either one must have a strange conception of "change" or of "existence".

God is infinite, and all substance is ultimately reliant on him. To say that there is any substance outside of God is an absurdity. God is the only substance. Everything was not created by God, but actually is God. This is extreme monism.

Related to this, and moreover to this, there is no Logos or realm of Ideas for Spinoza, no higher template against which reality should be measured for its authenticity. Existence as we know it is the pure form. "By reality and perfection I understand the same thing." A circle in nature and a Circle as it exists in God's mind, are the exact same. Phenomena accord exactly with what is in God's mind; the universe is the pure expression of God's thoughts, and its substance is eternal. In terms of metaphysics, no one is more antiBuddhist than Spinoza: nothing in phenomena is contingent; everything is necessary, essential, the ultimate reality.

The Platonic Ideals have no inherent reality and are merely the way the mind deals with an overwhelming variety of images: because it's overwhelmed, it groups these phenomena. Here's Spinoza four hundred years ago sounding like Wittgenstein (whose *Tractatus* was named after Spinoza's *Tractatus*): "Most [philosophical] controversies have arisen from this, that men do not rightly explain their own mind, or interpret the mind of other men badly. For . . . when they contradict one another most vehemently, they either have the same thoughts, or they are thinking of different things, so that what they think are errors and absurdities in the other are not." Then, in the tradition of nominalism, he says that we need to still retain such words (*good/evil, perfection, Man*) simply because they are useful.

He's also a precursor to Nietzsche: Spinoza's God was beyond good and evil. The concept of "the Good" is a human one that seeks to apply outside standards to God, and therefore to subject God to this outside standard, or to Fate. For Spinoza God did not create the universe with a certain model or ideal in mind; no, the universe, "good" and "bad," is the direct downloading of whatever is in God's mind. Spinoza is saying there is no mediation.

So the "problem of evil," together with imperfections in the world, is addressed in an odd way: Such corruptions are there because God has the material necessary to create all levels of things, from the highest to the lowest perfection. Hence, without saying it, it's clear that Spinoza is implying that God *also* has these imperfections and corruptions within him, but of course God also has the purifications, antidotes, and perfections of these things within him as well. (Perhaps this is why Hegel liked Spinoza: you could imagine that he sees this in a dialectical way, that these imperfections are counterbalanced and this counterbalance only reaffirms the whole; God wouldn't be God without also incorporating this "ungodliness" within him, something like that. Zizek could easily tear off a book about just this.)

Since the mind was conceived through God's essence itself, it is eternal. "Therefore, though we do not recollect that we existed before the body, we nevertheless feel that our mind, insofar as it involves the essence of the body under a species of eternity, is eternal, and that this existence it has cannot be defined by time or explained through duration."

The mind is eternal, it lives on past the body, and yet it's unclear whether Spinoza sees this afterlife as being much different from this one, which after all is supposed to be part of the one pure expression of God. In his philosophy, there is no idea of transcendence: We're already there. Maybe he envisioned we'd be able to inhabit God's mind on another level. Spinoza didn't elaborate on this. I don't think anyone ever elaborates on what the afterlife is supposed to be like day after day.

Spinoza's ethics could be summed up perhaps as enlightened egoism. The foundation of virtue consists in seeking what is best for yourself. At the same time, it's kind of incorrect to apply the term *egoism* to Spinoza's thought since in his view we and the universe are ultimately one, so looking after yourself is not any different from looking out for others. The emphasis on looking out for yourself first and foremost makes sense because this is the portion of the universe that you have the most direct control over. (Cf. Augustine, something like: "You have to be able to love yourself, in order to love others," which I guess could go back further to the ancients' *Nosce te ipsum*.)

This emphasis on self-interest is ethical because it is not a zero-sum situation. Doing what's really best for yourself would *not* entail disadvantaging others; it could only be beneficial to others (it strikes me that such individualist thoughts could form the foundation of capitalist theory and apologetics).

In line with this emphasis on self-interest, humility and repentance are not seen as virtues but as weaknesses (add Christianity to the list of worldviews Spinoza is in direct contradiction to). But he allows that as far as irrationalities go, these aren't so bad. After all, "the mob is terrifying, if unafraid. So it is no wonder that the prophets, who considered common advantage, not that of the few, commended humility, repentance, and reverence so greatly." This is an old idea, isn't it? The majority needs things to venerate and to fear, or the elite needs to be able to give them things to venerate and fear.

But "a free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life, not of death." This is Spinoza against *all* mainstream religions.

### **A Naturalism Worth Being Excommunicated For**

"Nothing happens in nature which can be regarded as nature's fault. Nature is always the same, and everywhere

there is one and the same virtue in it, one and the same power of action.\" (3P)

For Spinoza, all that is, is in God (1p15). And what God is, is nature itself (1p14). Since God is perfect and ultimate reality, things must be as they are. For things to be other than they are, God's nature (and the laws of nature) would have to change, which would deny God's perfection. The beauty of Spinoza's ontology, and of Book 1, is that this is not an anthropomorphic God. Spinoza rails against those who would attribute human characteristics to God as vain and foolish, and he's right. God is rather an impersonal eternal principle similar to the Brahman of the Vedanta, the immanent cause of all reality and of itself.

Since \"the mind is a specific and determinate mode of thinking\" (2p48; 2p11) there is no free will; it is determined to will by a cause. \"Human beings are mistaken in thinking they are free. This belief consists simply of their being conscious of their actions but ignorant of the causes by which they are determined.\" (2p35s) Likewise good and evil, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, are all subjective value judgments of the human mind, one that is ignorant of the perfection and necessity of all things in God's immanent causation of them. Our subjective assertions only stem from our false and mutilated ideas of things.

By accepting the determinateness of the will and the determinateness of all things, we learn that \"we act solely at the behest of God.\" This gives peace to the spirit, and teaches us that our highest happiness \"consists solely in the cognition of God, which leads us to do only those things that love and piety urge us to do.\" It \"teaches us to expect and to bear both faces of fortune with equanimity, because of course all things follow from the eternal decree of God by the same necessity as it follows from the essence of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles.\" We are also freed from resentment, we realise everyone is a piece of fate, we neither hate nor despise nor ridicule nor become angry with nor become envious of anyone. We are taught to become content with what we have and to help our neighbour, \"not from womanish compassion\"—sigh—\"but by the guidance of reason alone as time and circumstances require.\" Finally, \"it teaches us how citizens should be governed and led, not to be slaves, but to do freely the actions that are best.\" Likely aware of the inevitable objection that a rejection of human freedom entails amorality and social anarchy, Spinoza instead invites us to envision a Being-with of reason and kindness, where the servitude of human powerlessness is overcome by the intellect, by the formation of clear and distinct ideas of our passions; this is the inverse of Lucretius' collapsing civil society, where superstition and fear of the Gods generates acrimony, hatred, and the bellum omnium contra omnes.

### **What's In A Name?**

\"Moreover such a composite individual thing retains its nature, whether it moves as a whole or remains at rest, or moves in this direction or in that, provided that each individual part retains its own motion and communicates to the rest as before.\" (217)

For Spinoza, an entity, as a definite mode of God, is not identical with itself over time because of its specific matter, which can of course change (\"Your atoms replace themselves every seven years!\" you hear faintly echoing in your ears, a fragment of errant and reductive bio-chemistry knowledge that self-help types like to throw around...); the being of an entity is rather the pattern of its composition, the particular constellation of data that makes something what it is, and which is indifferent to the changes in molecular structure that occur from moment to moment.

\"By all this then we see how an individual composite thing can be affected in many ways, while still keeping its own nature.\" From here Spinoza invites us to conceive of how an individual thing can be composed of only the \"simplest bodies\", how another thing can then be composed of \"several individual things of different natures\" (which gives it a lot more room for affectation while retaining its own nature), all the way up to the whole of nature itself, which is \"one individual thing, whose parts, i.e. all bodies, vary in an infinite number of ways without change to the whole individual.\" At this level of complexity, we can never speak of a change in essence or destruction from without, as at this point what we are really dealing with is God (or nature) in so far as he is an extended thing.

### **God Is An INTJ And So Are You**

\"The first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human mind is simply the idea of an actually existing particular thing.\" (2p11)

A human mind is therefore always thinking about something, directed towards something. Because every mind is \"a part of the infinite intellect of God\", whenever God has this or that idea, the human mind perceives this or that

object. This means that anything that occurs in the object of any idea must be perceived by the human mind, for "there is necessarily cognition in God of anything that occurs in the object" and therefore "cognition of the thing [by God] will necessarily be in the mind, or the mind perceives it." (2p12) Consider the implication of this statement for a moment. Anything that occurs in the object will be perceived by the mind. As I type this, I'm watching the cheese on a pizza coagulate with a mild sense of uneasy regret. According to Spinoza, I should perceive the microscopic dance of the carbon, hydrogen, and nitrogen atoms as they and the other components of the casein protein rearrange themselves into increasingly unappetising positions. In fact, if a quark or a lepton is out of place I should know about it. This is another bizarre Spinozist proposition that has, of course, been rendered impossible to believe by the neverending march of scientific discovery, where we know that uncertainty is a fundamental property of the universe. It is simply not possible for God in his infinite intellect to know everything that occurs in the object of the idea, let alone for a human mind to do so. The former may be surprising to Spinoza, but surely not the latter, which is what makes this proposition so strange.

For Spinoza, the ability of the human mind to perceive many things is directly linked to (but not dependent upon) the compositional complexity of the human body (2p14). This is because the human body can be affected and affect many things, and the human mind must perceive everything in the human body. Perhaps Spinoza was just drastically more in tune with his body than the rest of us. Although, to be clear, as far as Spinoza is concerned, the human mind does not know the human body itself after all (2p19) but rather the idea of the human body that is in God, insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind. One has to wonder what the difference actually is in reality outside of Spinozist word games, as ultimately one figures that the idea of the human body must relate to the human body itself, as Spinoza seems to suggest when he says nothing can happen in the human body without it being perceived by the mind. If this relation goes both ways, it would surely also be true that anything that is thought in the mind must manifest physically in the body. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Spinoza's parallelism is something to be treated separately, and imminently!

### **Parallelism, or, the Unlikely Tale of Psycho-physical Convenience**

"There is in God, necessarily, an idea both of his essence and of everything that necessarily follows from his essence." (2p3) "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things." (2p7)

Spinoza's cosmology conceives of the attributes of thought and extension running in parallel. Everything that is in God's power to do, he does. Every physical event follows immediately or mediately from God's essence in so far as he is an extended thing. Likewise, there is an idea of everything that follows from his essence in so far as he is a thinking thing (2p3). Thought and extension, as different attributes of God, do not interact (1p3), but for every object there is an idea (and for every idea there is an object), and these exist in corresponding, but non-interacting, causal chains (2p7). Spinozism hits rocky waters with language here, and we need to go deeper to understand what this proposition is truly getting at. God, in so far as he is an extended thing, corresponds to God, in so far as he is a thinking thing. But it is not that God exists in a dual aspect, but rather that "thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, which is comprehended sometimes under the one and sometimes under the other attribute." The comprehension aspect is important here. From the standpoint of the intellect, an attribute is that which is perceived as constituting the essence of the substance (1d4), but "God is in truth the cause of things as they are in themselves insofar as he consists of infinite attributes. For the present I cannot explain these things more clearly," Spinoza adds wearily. The gap between our perception, as beings whose perception is limited to thought and extension (2a5), and the true being of God, who has infinite essence and infinite attributes, leads us to perceive a causal connection between thought and extended substance, but underlying this is a deeper ontological ground which we can only posit logically, but not access phenomenologically.

### **Spinoza and His Marvellous Mental Machines**

Not to bang on about Spinoza's philosophy of mind too much, but if we ignore his dead-in-the-water parallelism, there are some interesting thoughts on the mind that are ripe for harvesting. The later parts of Part 2 see Spinoza pivot away from his all-encompassing human intellect for which no change in the body can go unnoticed to a position that is, ultimately, even stranger. Because "the parts of the human body are highly composite individual things whose parts can be separated from the human body while its nature and form are completely preserved" (2p24) they can be considered as individual things without relation to the human body." While this does away with the question of why I can't feel my gut flora digesting my pizza or my eye muscles doing overtime to keep my eyes focused on the screen, it does immediately raise a new question of why I should get any sensory input from my extremities at all. But even more interesting than that is the explicit panpsychism of the passage: "Therefore the idea or cognition of any part will be in God... The same must equally be said of any part of an

individual component of the human body.\" What this means, really, is there is a mind for every matter. My arms, legs, my laptop, my copy of Lucretius, for every object and interaction there is a thought in the mind of God. So even when Spinoza is accepting that \"the idea of the idea of any affection of the human body does not involve adequate cognition of the human mind\" (2p29) something even stranger is entering the picture. Every thing is a thinking thing.

Ultimately, however, this late-game change is underdeveloped and confusing. In 2p17 we learn that \"the idea of any affection of the human body does not involve adequate cognition of the human body itself\" since a body can be affected by many things. This seems to contradict 1a4, where Spinoza tells us the knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the knowledge of a cause. To be clear, I agree that the mind has inadequate cognition of the body, but I deny that Spinoza has legitimate grounds to make this claim given that he precludes it axiomatically in Part 1 and spends much of Part 2 setting up the opposite of this view. It seems as if Spinoza suddenly realised that the absolutely infallible mind he was attributing to human beings made no sense after all, and so he engages in a confusing and unconvincing legerdemain to get things back on track. Every time I read Book 2, I'm left with the same feeling of ultimate bewilderment, scratching my head as I wonder what I'm actually supposed to take away from this discussion, and why it was so perplexing after the straightforward beauty of Part 1.

## Coda

I have only explored some of the rich arguments and themes of this masterpiece of philosophy. There is a reason Spinoza is thought of so fondly by so many philosophers, and nobody can deny the creativity, originality, daring and power of his thought. Often what is wrong is inessential, and what is essential is eye-opening and compelling. A philosophy of joy, immanence, and reason. It's enough to turn even a pessimist like myself into a believer (of sorts) whenever I cast my eye back to it.

In this work, Spinoza attempts to articulate a full metaphysics, and extrapolate from it knowledge of God, man, and ultimately the nature of the \"good life.\" It is a towering and dense project, and its heights show us the challenges we face when reasoning about an infinite, all-powerful God: rather than use his rhetorical ability to affirm the traditional, comforting picture of a very human God, Spinoza confronts the concept of God in all its implications. For example, such a being could never make mistakes or even decisions, could never have chosen to make the world in a different way, would not possess our fallible human faculties of doubt, etc. In this and other parts of the book, he is not afraid of following his reasoning to its conclusion, trusting that reason will reveal to him the true nature of God.

Spinoza attempts to apply the rigor of mathematical, objective proof to the practice of philosophy. Of course, this was a common approach in early modern philosophy, especially for the medieval philosophers. However, any attempt to elevate philosophy to the unimpeachable status of mathematics is misguided and doomed to failure. One needn't even raise the objection that the choice of axioms is arbitrary, while these axioms ostensibly set the entire course of what is to be later derived via proof; our languages and concepts are simply too inexact for a mathematical treatment. Even given a common set of philosophical axioms, I highly doubt any two philosophers would come to the same conclusions. Where you take the particular investigation is to some extent a matter of personal choice- the conclusions are not as inexorable as they pretend to be, which amounts to a sort of sophistry, a misrepresentation of the strength of one's position.

That is to say, while the approach may work for geometry, set theory, algebra, and other such abstracted disciplines, you simply cannot attempt to formulate a philosophical \"proof\" of any statement. An objector would always be able to find fault with the initial assumptions, or else would be forced to engage the \"proof\" on its own territory and painstakingly try to find some inconsistency within the twisted logic of the argument. Argumentation and language being what they are, there would even be room for dispute on such a level. Thankfully, in contemporary times we have moved beyond this noble but pointless approach to philosophy, for the most part.

Though its title and ultimate aim is ethics, it really is a work of metaphysics first and foremost. Spinoza of course is trying to show how his view of ethics follows unflinchingly from certain basic assumptions about reality. His world-picture is remarkably prescient at times: his vision of the universe in its multiplicity of forms being ultimately various \"modes\" of a singular \"substance\" anticipates the ontology of quantum field theory (not to mention its resonance with Taoism.) His omnipotent, omniscient God also requires a deterministic universe that unfolds according to the ironclad logic of the deity, which resembles in my mind the universality of physical law. Some of these concepts were borrowed by later philosophers of a materialist bent, like Deleuze.

Furthermore, his \"neutral monist\" approach to the mind / body divide is much more appropriate for modern science than Descartes' naive dualism. In this view, the mind and brain are two aspects of the same thing, which recalls for me the modern neurological approach that attempts to find correlations between mental and physical states. The universe is a thinking thing.

Spinoza certainly rejects the prevailing medieval Catholic theology of his time; and yet there is still something very Thomistic even in the pantheism he imagines as an alternative. In stark contrast to the materialists who would follow him, Spinoza's naturalism seems to have been not so much a materialization of God as it was a deification of materiality. He is certainly very modern in his view that the substance of things (substance being a very important word for him) lies in their actuality in the natural plane of existence; but at the same time, the way he writes about the eternal, infinite, pervasive, self-sufficient, and active nature of the substantial being realized by God/Nature alone (for with Spinoza, God and Nature are truly identical) brings immediately to mind a more classical Platonic/Monotheistic theology. He conflates a type of mystical metaphysics with the material world, and his naturalistic outlook is consequently derived from his metaphysics, rather than the other way around, as it would be with a strict materialist.

His definition of Substance itself threw me for a loop. When I think of the word Substance, I think of something substantial; that is, something with a tangible existence. But Spinoza defines substance as something entirely uncaused, independent, and eternal; something not produced by anything else nor dependent on anything else for its existence, which all physical substances, the way i'm inclined to think of them, are. Needless to say, I first found his definition of God as the only thing bearing substance quite confusing at first, until it dawned on me that for Spinoza, the eternal and infinite, on the one hand, and the actual and substantial, on the other, *really are the same thing*.