



# God-intoxicated man

The philosopher who questioned the existence of the world

CLARE CARLISLE AND  
YITZHAK Y. MELAMED

TEN YEARS AGO, a manuscript of the *Ethics*, Benedict de Spinoza's philosophical masterpiece, was discovered in the archives of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The manuscript, labelled *Tractatus theologiae* and annotated on the last page by an official of the Roman Inquisition, had been handed in to the Holy Office in September 1677 by the Danish physician and scientist Niels Stenson, who had been a member of Spinoza's circle during his student years in Leiden, before converting to Catholicism ("a superb physician, turned into a mediocre theologian" Leibniz complained). As rumours about Spinoza's atheism whirled through Christendom, Stensen denounced his former friend at the court of the Holy Office, demanding "remedies" to stall the spread of "evil" ideas and to prevent others from being "infected" (*non se n'infettino*) by them. The Catholic Church added the *Ethics* to its Index of prohibited books.

It is an irresistible irony that it was Spinoza's censors in the Vatican who, fearful of atheism, preserved a manuscript of his most important work. Thanks to the anxieties of the seventeenth-century Inquisition, twenty-first-century scholars can examine a complete version of the *Ethics* dating from its author's final years. In the autumn of 2011 Johns Hopkins University hosted a conference on Young Spinoza, and the first speaker was Pina Totaro, who with her colleague Leen Spruit had found the Vatican codex the previous year. As the organizer of the conference was handing out photocopies of the manuscript in preparation for her talk, it turned out that a Vatican librarian had emailed Totaro the previous night, asking her not to distribute scans of the manuscript. Alas, the horses had already bolted, and upon the organizer's request to return the photocopies, few galloped back into the stable.

Presses Universitaires de France are about to publish a critical edition of the *Ethics*, presenting a new

Latin text established by consulting the Vatican manuscript alongside Latin and Dutch editions of the work published shortly after Spinoza's death. In their editorial introduction, Pierre-François Moreau and Piet Steenbakkers describe how the Vatican manuscript was hastily copied from Spinoza's original sometime in 1674 or 1675 for E. W. von Tschirnhaus, Spinoza's philosophical disciple and the sharpest of his correspondents, who travelled from Amsterdam to Rome in 1677. It consists in a packet of ten small paper-wrapped cahiers "made to measure" for this journey - not only in a handy pocket-sized format, but with a view to disguising its controversial contents: "sans couverture, sans titre, sans nom d'auteur, sans table des matières".

Spinoza died before the Vatican banned his *Ethica*, but he had anticipated its getting into trouble. In July 1675 - not long after Tschirnhaus's copy was produced - the forty-three-year-old philosopher wrote to his longstanding correspondent Henry Oldenburg, the first Secretary of the Royal Society, announcing his plan to publish a five-part treatise. Spinoza had been working on his metaphysical opus since the early 1660s, and now he set off from his quiet home in the Hague to Amsterdam to get the work to press. In the autumn of 1675, however, he wrote again to Oldenburg, this time with news that "certain Theologians" and "stupid Cartesians" were racing to denounce his views to the Dutch authorities, since "a rumour was spread everywhere that a certain book of mine about God was in the press, and that in it I tried to show that there is no God". Spinoza, whose personal motto was "Caution", decided to delay publication.

Oldenburg wrote back from London in November, seeking a clarification of his friend's religious position. He was especially worried about Spinoza's view of the relationship between God and Nature: "a great many people think you confuse these two things". In his reply, Spinoza confessed that "I favour an opinion concerning God and Nature far different from the one Modern Christians usually defend". Yet he aligned himself with older religious traditions, both Jewish and Christian: "That all things are in God and move in God, I affirm with Paul, and ... with

all the ancient Hebrews, as far as we can conjecture from certain traditions, corrupted as they have been in many ways". Spinoza's reference to "certain traditions" may allude to Kabbalistic literature in which the identification of God and Nature is ubiquitous. In pre-modern Hebrew, the literal meaning of Kabbalah is "tradition", and in the seventeenth century the Kabbalah was widely regarded as an ancient wisdom of the mysteries of being, whose true significance had been corrupted over the ages.

*Deus sive Natura*, "God or Nature", is probably the most quoted phrase in the *Ethics*, and it has often been taken as a slogan for Spinozism. Over the centuries the fame (and infamy) of this striking phrase has diverted many readers' attention from affinities between Spinoza's doctrine of God and traditional theologies. As Oldenburg's anxious enquiries suggest, for most of his Christian contemporaries *Deus sive Natura* was a horrifying idea, akin to atheism. Modern scholars who interpret the *Ethics* as a herald of scientific secularism echo this reaction, though in a more positive spirit, by claiming that Spinoza simply reduces God to nature. Conversely, when the early German Romantics embraced Spinoza, they seized on the idea that nature herself - considered as *Natura naturans*, a dynamic, creative power of "naturing" - is divine.

Yet readers have to wait until Part Four of the *Ethics*, titled "On Human Bondage, or the power of the emotions", to encounter the phrase *Deus sive Natura*. Part One of the book, "On God", defines God as an absolutely infinite substance. From this Spinoza infers other features of God, such as simplicity, uniqueness and eternity. He also argues that everything else that exists is a "mode" (or modification) of substance, and thus constitutionally and asymmetrically dependent on God. Substance is *in se*, "in itself" and caused by itself; modes are *in alio*, "in another". Spinoza's concepts of substance and mode lay the ground for his claim, a few pages into the *Ethics*, that "Whatever is, is in God".

Despite many readings of the *Ethics* which make the phrase *Deus sive Natura* a cornerstone of Spinoza's metaphysical system, to say that everything, including the world as a whole, is in God - a position now labelled "pantheism" - is quite different from claiming that the world is God, the view usually known as "pantheism". Spinoza's pantheism leaves room for the idea that God exceeds, or transcends, the sum total of all things (or "modes"). The God of the *Ethics* certainly transcends what we normally call "nature". This is inseparable from the fact that Spinoza's God transcends human knowledge and experience. God's essence is expressed through an infinity of attributes (or distinct ways of being), and we have access to just two of these attributes: thought and extension.

So Spinoza was not misrepresenting his own metaphysics when he told Henry Oldenburg that he "affirmed with Paul", along with Hebrew writers, that all things "are in God and move in God" - a reference to Acts 17:28. He was also correct in pointing out that his view differed from the teaching of "modern Christians". After Spinoza was banned by his Jewish community as a young man, he lived all his life in the Dutch Republic, religiously dominated by the Calvinist theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church. While Calvin was also fond of quoting Acts 17:28 to accentuate human dependence on an omnipresent God, his anthropomorphic descriptions of God's wilful character make it difficult to avoid imagining a divine Ruler and Judge presiding above the world.

The separation of God from nature that Spinoza, in 1675, recognized as distinctively "modern" was sharpened in eighteenth-century deism, and found striking expression in the image, popularized in William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), of a divine designer whose relation to the natural world was analogous to a watchmaker's relation to a watch. We can now recognize this anthropomorphic deity as the God of those modern atheists who caricature religious belief as a wish-fulfilment fantasy about a cosmic father-figure. Looked at this way, deist and

Clare Carlisle's latest book is *Philosopher of the Heart: The restless life of Søren Kierkegaard*, 2019, and she is the editor of *Spinoza's Ethics*, translated by George Eliot, 2020

Yitzhak Y. Melamed is the Charlotte Bloomberg Professor of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University, and is the author of *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and thought*, 2013

atheist challenges to traditional religion, far from following in Spinoza's footsteps, are decidedly unspinozist. If the seventeenth-century churches had been more attentive to the *Ethics* they might have better fortified their God against the ravages of secularism to come. Instead, Protestants and Catholics alike denounced Spinoza as an atheist.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, a new assessment of Spinoza's religiosity had emerged. The Lithuanian philosopher Salomon Maimon - admired by Kant as "the sharpest and deepest of his critics" - came to Spinoza after studying the Talmud, the Kabbalah and Maimonides. In 1792 Maimon's *Lebensgeschichte*, or Autobiography, shocked readers with the claim that "it is hard to fathom how Spinoza's system could have been made out to be atheistic, since the two systems are diametrically opposed. The atheist system denies the existence of God; Spinoza's denies the existence of the world. Thus, Spinoza's system should really be called acosmism".

Since the *Ethics* repeatedly affirms that whatever exists, exists in God, Maimon was right to emphasize Spinoza's commitment to the existence of God, and to the non-existence of anything that is not (in) God. Glossing over this stubborn little word "in", Maimon argued that for Spinoza, whatever is, is simply God. In his lectures on the history of philosophy delivered in Berlin during the 1820s, G. W. F. Hegel adopted verbatim Maimon's interpretation of Spinoza as an acosmist. Hegel also repeated Maimon's tongue-in-cheek suggestion that Leibnizian rationalists, such as Christian Wolff and Moses Mendelssohn, merely struck a compromise between acosmism and atheism when they insisted on the existence of both God and finite substances.

Maimon helped inspire a new German Spinozism, which found memorable expression in Novalis's description of Spinoza as a "God-intoxicated man". Suddenly the damned atheist became the hero of a radical Romantic religiosity, which could claim to be more religious than traditional orthodoxy (insofar as it discovered God's presence in all things), yet free from the old illusions of an anthropomorphic God and an anthropocentric faith, and from the abuses of clericalism. Heinrich Heine summarized this view in his *Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (1835): "Only malice or lack of judgement could describe Spinoza's teaching as 'atheistic.' No one has ever expressed himself more sublimely about the divinity than Spinoza".

By the mid-nineteenth century, the identification of God with Nature, or with the world, was seen as the distinguishing feature of pantheism; in 1836, S. T. Coleridge equated pantheism with "cosmotheism, or the worship of the world as God". Rather than denying the world, pantheism deified it. Christian theologians consider this doctrine a heresy precisely because it erases the difference between God and creation - a difference often marked by the word "transcendence". Spinoza may force us to reconceive divine transcendence, but he does not deny it. Indeed, the theological concepts of immanence and transcendence, considered as opposing terms, did not emerge until late in the eighteenth century.

In the *Ethics* the difference between God and the world lies in that humdrum yet cryptic word "in": "Whatever is, is in God [*in Deo est*]". In 1943, Étienne Souriau, a brilliant yet now overlooked philosopher who contributed to a remarkable revival of Spinoza in France, suggested that "the meaning of the little word 'in' is the key to all Spinozism". Is the world dissolved (acosmism) or deified (pantheism) in God-or-Nature? Or is the world grounded in a transcendent God in which real entities "live and move and have their being"? And what difference does this make to the way we understand ourselves, and to how we live - which is the ultimate question of the *Ethics*?

In his last surviving letter to Henry Oldenburg, written in February 1676, Spinoza concisely summarized the conclusion of his *Ethics*: the highest human good is "peace of mind and the knowledge

and love of God". At the same time, he did not hesitate to criticize official religion. It should go without saying, he continued, that "when Scripture says that God becomes angry with sinners, and that he is a judge, who finds out about men's actions, makes decisions about them, and passes sentence, it is speaking in a human way, and according to the accepted opinions of the common people, because its intent is not to teach Philosophy". In this final letter Spinoza also warned Oldenburg that he could accept the doctrine of Christ's resurrection only "allegorically". Throughout his career, he had resisted friends' entreaties to convert to Christianity because he valued above all his freedom to philosophize. He once turned down the offer of a university professorship for the same reason.

Spinoza did not publish the *Ethics* during his lifetime. He bequeathed this task to the small circle of devoted friends who had been reading and discussing his work-in-progress since the early 1660s. Between February 21, 1677, the date of Spinoza's death, and the publication of his *Opera Posthuma* in the first days of 1678, these friends attended to his manuscripts and letters. While Stenson was busy denouncing the *Ethics* in the Vatican, they quietly produced a Dutch edition, *De nagelate schriften*, as well as the Latin *Opera*. Their editorial task was formidable: Spinoza is a sparse, sometimes elliptical writer, and a single noun or verb can carry great metaphysical weight. Written in a geometrical form modelled on Euclid's *Elements*, the *Ethics* presents an intricate deductive argument full of cross-references between its numbered definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations and scholia. Due to the very high level of precision Spinoza sought to achieve by his geometrical method, small transcription errors could reverberate through this conceptual edifice.

The conscientious, courageous labour of Spinoza's first editors - Lodewijk Meyer, Johannes Bouwmeester, Jarig Jelles, Jan Rieuwertsz and Jan Glazemaker - made a momentous contribution to our history of philosophy: without their *Opera Posthuma*, and above all the *Ethics*, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel would all have thought and written differently. This obscure circle of friends were the forebears of successive generations of editors and translators who have toiled on the *Ethics*. Since no manuscript of the work survived, philosophers and philologists in later centuries had to navigate differences between the Latin and Dutch editions produced in 1677. The first German translation of the *Ethics* appeared in 1744, accompanied by a refutation of Spinoza's philosophy by Christian Wolff; a French translation was published in 1842; and in 1856 Marian Evans - who was soon to become George Eliot - completed the first English translation. Several new Latin editions of the text were also published during the nineteenth century, mostly by German scholars. In 1925 Carl Gebhardt presented his four-volume edition of the entire *Opera* as the "*editio definitiva*" of Spinoza's writings, and for eighty-five years Gebhardt's *Ethics* was indeed the standard Latin edition of the text.

This changed when Leen Spruit and Pina Totaro discovered the Vatican manuscript of the *Ethics* in 2010. At that time a team of scholars had been working for several years on a critical edition of the Latin text for the Presses Universitaires de France, under the direction of Pierre-François Moreau. Believing their volume to be near completion, they might be forgiven if they received news of the discovery as a mixed blessing. Three members of Moreau's outstanding editorial team - the Dutch philologist Fokke Akkerman, and the French Spinoza scholars Alexandre Matheron and Jean-Marie Beyssade - have died during the last four years, leaving Moreau and Piet Steenbakkers to complete the project. A decade after the lost manuscript appeared, an *Ethics* based on three seventeenth-century sources - the *Opera Posthuma*, the Dutch translation, and the Vatican codex - is complete, and will replace Gebhardt's *Ethica* as the authoritative edition.

PUF's magnificent *Ethics* contains a new French translation alongside the Latin text. It is prefaced by

“

a meticulous introduction that combines detailed philological analysis with the compelling story of how the *Ethics* passed from Spinoza's hands to those of his readers and editors. Its publication will crown the ascent of a French Spinozism which began with the publication of Martial Gueroult's two 700-page studies of Parts One (1968) and Two (1974) of the *Ethics*. Through the work of Gueroult, Moreau, Matheron and others - not least Gilles Deleuze, Louis Althusser, Jacqueline Lagrée, Chantal Jaquet and Étienne Balibar - Spinoza emerged as one of the most influential philosophers of the French intellectual scene.

The fate of the *Ethics* in the Anglo-American world is another story. In the 1970s and 80s most analytic philosophers regarded Spinoza as an uncritical and extravagant metaphysician, whose strange ideas might - at best - be allowed into serious discourse only once domesticated. This often meant abstracting his arguments from his complex engagement, constructive as well as critical, with Jewish and Christian scriptural and philosophical traditions.

This uneasy reception of the *Ethics* into contemporary Anglophone philosophy changed dramatically with the re-emergence of analytic metaphysics in the 1990s. A new generation of rigorously trained philosophers and historians of philosophy - all of them indebted to Edwin Curley's astute, scholarly translation of the *Ethics* - found Spinoza's strict naturalism, uncompromising systematicity and deep aversion towards anthropocentric illusions immensely attractive. Don Garrett and Michael Della Rocca did groundbreaking work that repositioned Spinoza as a meticulous rationalist. In 2017 Della Rocca assembled twenty-five scholars to produce *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, much of it devoted to metaphysical issues arising from the *Ethics*, and since then OUP has published significant books on Spinoza's metaphysics by the North American philosophers Sam Newlands and Martin Lin, as well as an outstanding new collection of papers by Garrett. The recent explosion of Spinoza studies - and of contemporary metaphysics and epistemology inspired by Spinoza - has resulted in a deep reorientation in analytic as well as continental philosophy. In many ways, Spinoza is now replacing Kant and Descartes as both the compass and the watershed of modern thought.

Part of Spinoza's allure is his willingness to follow reason wherever it led him. Deliberately remaining outside both Jewish and Christian communities, Spinoza gained a remarkably perspicacious insight into taken-for-granted intuitions and prejudices. Recognizing no authority beyond the power of his arguments, he presented his reasoning in the most transparent manner, as if daring his opponents to challenge the validity of his inferences.

While philosophical boldness and precision underwrite the intellectual power of Spinozism, the religious element of his thought remains crucial. For centuries the *Ethics* has been religiously questionable, and when we read it today we should take the question of religion seriously. This is best treated as a genuinely open question, since Spinoza's religion does not fit easily into any pre-existent category. Like Thomas Aquinas, he treated *religio* not as a system of beliefs but as a virtue - the virtue of honouring God. In the *Ethics* he considers *religio* alongside other virtues such as piety, nobility, generosity and fortitude. Without concealing his contempt for superstitious, anthropomorphic images of God, Spinoza asks what it means to know - and love - the God which grounds our being. ■

Works cited in this essay:

Euvres IV: *Ethica / Éthique* by Benedict de Spinoza, edited by Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkers, translated by Pierre-François Moreau (Presses Universitaires de France. €32).

Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy by Don Garrett (552pp. Oxford University Press. £47.99).

Reconceiving Spinoza by Samuel Newlands (304pp. Oxford University Press. £50).