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Spinoza's Life

1.1 Early life in Amsterdam¹

Baruch Spinoza was born in Amsterdam on November 24, 1632. He came from a family of Portuguese *converso* Jews, or Jews who were forced to convert outwardly to Christianity after Judaism was prohibited in Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century. His father's family emigrated to the Netherlands near the turn of the seventeenth century, when the Netherlands were fighting for independence from the Spanish Hapsburgs in the so-called Dutch Revolt (1568–1648). The aspiring republic cautiously admitted Jews, recognizing that many of these *conversos* were experienced merchants who maintained trade connections with Portugal and its colonies. In addition to the economic reasons for allowing Jewish settlement, there were also theological and ideological motivations: Dutch Calvinists conceived of themselves as the New Israelites, identifying to some degree with the plight of the Jews; and, more pragmatically, they hoped that the Jews might help to teach them Hebrew so that they could read the Hebrew Bible directly. Still, Jews were regarded with mistrust and were accorded a rather precarious status in Dutch society. Their teachings were monitored for blasphemy, and they were not formally admitted as Dutch subjects until 1657.

The Amsterdam Jewish community in which Spinoza was raised was small and tight-knit, comprised of roughly two thousand members in the middle of the seventeenth century. They occupied a vibrant, bustling neighborhood of Vlooienburg (also known as

Jodenbuurt), which was home not only to Jews but also to some Christians, including the renowned painter Rembrandt van Rijn, who lived in the Jewish Quarter between 1639 and 1658, very near Spinoza's family home. Spinoza's father Michael was a respected and relatively successful member of this community. He was a merchant who imported dried fruit, among other things. And he served for some time on the *parnassim*, a board of elders who governed the affairs of the Jewish community and who served as liaisons to the Dutch authorities.

While we know disappointingly little about the early years of Spinoza's life, we do know that he – who at the time was known as Bento and Baruch, meaning “blessed [one]” in Portuguese and Hebrew, respectively – started his studies at a rather young age in the well-regarded Talmud Torah school. Here he would have studied Hebrew, the 24 books in the Hebrew Bible, and parts of Jewish law derived from the Oral Torah, or Talmud. One of the most prominent teachers at the school was Menasseh ben Israel, a rabbi who engaged with unorthodox thought, such as the work of the French Calvinist theologian Isaac La Peyrère. But the rabbi who is more likely to have been a proper teacher to Spinoza was Saul Levi Morteira, a respected Talmudist, whose weekly study group Spinoza would attend even after he had to abandon his formal schooling at the age of 14 to work in his father's business. Through Morteira, Spinoza was likely introduced to the works of rationalist Jewish philosophers like Saadia Gaon, Gersonides, and, most importantly, Maimonides.

Some time in his early twenties (in the mid-1650s), Spinoza sought to learn Latin, the language of philosophy and natural science. This led him to another formative intellectual influence in his life: his Latin teacher, Franciscus van den Enden (1602–1674). Van den Enden is a very interesting figure in his own right. He was an apostate Jesuit (and a suspected atheist), a medical doctor, a radical egalitarian, and an abolitionist with a fierce anticlerical streak. He was put to death in 1674, having been found guilty of conspiring to depose the king of France, Louis XIV, in order to establish a free republic in Normandy. And his political ideas, expressed for instance in his *Free Political Propositions and Considerations of the State* (1665), might well have influenced Spinoza's own political thought.² The lessons at Van den Enden's school would have opened up new horizons of thought for the young Spinoza, who would come to be known by the Latinized version of his name: Benedictus or Benedict. They read classical history, literature, and philosophy from such authors

as Seneca, Horace, Tacitus, Ovid, Livy, and Cicero. The school also put on productions of Terence's plays in which it is thought that Spinoza participated. It is also likely that Van den Enden would have introduced Spinoza to the "new science" of Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes, as well as to the bold political theories of Machiavelli and Hobbes. These ideas, together with the Jewish thought of his earlier education, provided a foundation and orientation for the development of Spinoza's original philosophical system. Through his involvement in Van den Enden's school, Spinoza would also have gotten to know many members of a group of Collegiants, heterodoxical religious thinkers (including Lutherans, Mennonites, Quakers, Arminians, and Anabaptists) who formed what they called "colleges" that met every other Sunday. Several of these Collegiants would later become part of Spinoza's philosophical circle, including Simon de Vries, Pieter Balling, Jarig Jellesz, and his future publisher Jan Rieuwertsz.

Spinoza's involvement with this group of freethinkers would have given him a foothold on intellectual life outside of the Jewish community. In the meantime, during this period, he witnessed and grieved the deaths of one family member after another, resulting in a further loosening of his connection to the Jewish community. His birth mother, Hanna, had died when he was just six in 1638; his brother Isaac died in 1649; and in a span of three years (1651–1654) his sister Miriam, his stepmother Esther, who helped to raise him, and his father all died. Spinoza would write in the *Ethics* that "[a] free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death" (4p67), but it is hard to imagine Spinoza at this stage in his life maintaining the high-minded perspective of a free person. At any rate, the death of his father in 1654, when Spinoza was just 21, left him and his younger brother Gabriel to run the family business.

His life as head of a business did not last long. On July 27, 1656, a *cherem* – a complete excommunication from the Jewish congregation and community – was pronounced against Spinoza. The insecure social position of Amsterdam Jews encouraged elders to wield the punishment of *cherem* as a form of communal protection so as not to fall afoul of Dutch mores. The importance of enforcing standards of religious propriety was perhaps heightened at this moment, as Rabbi ben Israel was negotiating with Oliver Cromwell for the readmission of Jews into England, and as Jews were finally on the cusp of achieving full recognition as subjects of the Dutch Republic.

Spinoza was hardly the first member of the community to receive this treatment. Ironically, ben Israel himself had been banned – though only for a single day – for a minor form of malfeasance. A more disturbing precedent was the *cherem* of Uriel da Costa, who in 1640 (when Spinoza was just eight years old) was cast out of the community for denying the immortality of the soul and challenging the status of the Torah as divine revelation. A *cherem* was typically followed by an invitation to renounce one's offensive beliefs and rejoin the community, and, in da Costa's case, the condition of readmission was that he was publicly whipped and forced to lie down just outside of the synagogue, where he was ignominiously trampled by congregants. Just days after being subjected to these humiliations, he took his own life.

Spinoza's *cherem* was distinctive in its severity, and he was cast out permanently and unconditionally. The text of the pronouncement reads:

The Lords of the *ma'amad*, having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, have endeavored by various means and promises, to turn him from his evil ways. But having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having for this numerous trustworthy witnesses who have deposed and born witness to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they became convinced of the truth of this matter; and after all of this has been investigated in the presence of the honorable *chachamim*, they have decided, with their consent, that the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel. By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations that are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that

are written in this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.

While the nature of the “abominable heresies” and “monstrous deeds” that Spinoza is accused of committing remains something of a mystery, it is likely that he was censured for, among other things, denying the existence of a personal, caring God, denying that Scripture was divinely revealed, and denying that there is a separable soul that could survive physical death.

Even though Spinoza had begun to form ties with Dutch freethinkers, such a decisive expulsion would have carried enormous social costs for anyone. Spinoza was thoroughly cut off from what remained of his family and the rather insular Jewish community of his youth; and he was left to find a new form of employment without the benefit of his communal network in a society that was still deeply suspicious of, if not hostile towards, Jews. And yet, were it not for this experience, it is very unlikely that any of us would know of Spinoza today. From this expulsion, a philosopher was born.

1.2 The young philosopher: after the *cherem*

There is almost no record of what Spinoza's life in Amsterdam was like in the years immediately following the *cherem*. All indications, though, are that Spinoza was remarkably resilient. He probably immersed himself further in Van den Enden's school, likely even lodging there. He also occasionally went to lectures at the University of Leiden, which was at the time a hotbed of Cartesian thought. Notable Cartesian professors there were Adriaan Heereboord, a philosopher of logic, and Johannes de Raey, a former pupil of the great Dutch proponent of Cartesianism, Henricus Regius. Other philosophy students in Leiden at that time who would go on to become friends of Spinoza were Adriaan Koerbagh and Lodewijk Meyer. In the summer of 1661, Spinoza moved to Rijnsburg, a small village near Leiden, maybe to establish closer contact with Leiden Collegiants or perhaps simply to escape some of the distractions of Amsterdam.

Between the *cherem* and the move to Rijnsburg, Spinoza began composing what is likely his first extant manuscript, the unfinished work on method, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. It opens with an inspiring, if rather stylized, autobiographical sketch:

After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to figure out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected – whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity. (TIE, §1)³

He proceeds to clarify that since the chief ends which people pursue – honor, wealth, and sensual pleasure – do not supply lasting satisfaction, he sought to turn his mind away from these things and direct it instead to the “knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature” (TIE, §13). If these remarks seem rather out of place in a work on epistemology and method, we must bear in mind that many works of logic or method in this period explicitly aimed at purifying the mind so that one can better know and love God. In any case, the view that philosophy aims to reorient the mind, or heal the intellect, persisted throughout Spinoza’s life, underwriting his masterwork, the *Ethics*.

Other elements of this early work prefigure Spinoza’s mature philosophy. For instance, he distinguishes the unreliable, if useful, forms of cognition that arise from testimony, language, and “random experience” from the secure knowledge of a thing’s essence (TIE, §19). He would refine this epistemic hierarchy throughout his life. He also argues here that true ideas possess the highest certainty (i.e., are self-evident) and so do not depend on extrinsic validation, a point that he also reprised in later writings. But the fact that Spinoza never completed the work suggests that he either remained unsatisfied with certain aspects of it or simply felt that the core ideas were successfully incorporated into later works.

In the early 1660s, Spinoza was also hard at work on two other manuscripts. One was a kind of early, non-geometrical attempt to work out some of the ideas that would be expressed in refined, geometrical form in the *Ethics*. This work, the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, begins, like the *Ethics*, with a discussion of God, God’s nature as a substance of which all attributes are predicated, and of the properties that follow from this nature, before turning to an account of human nature, human knowledge, the passions, and human blessedness. By providing a window into the full range of Spinoza’s early ideas, this text sheds light on Spinoza’s

development as a philosopher. However, it was never prepared for publication and the extant versions – discovered only in the 1850s – might not be the most reliable expressions of Spinoza's thought since we only have later Dutch copies, while the original work was likely written in Latin and translated into Dutch (perhaps originally by Spinoza himself).

The other work from the period was the only book that was published in Spinoza's name in his lifetime: *Descartes's "Principles of Philosophy"*. As the title would suggest, this is an exposition of, and commentary on, Descartes's textbook (especially *Principles* parts 2 and 3), to which Spinoza appended further ruminations on God, necessity, truth, and many other central preoccupations under the title *Metaphysical Thoughts*. The work – which was written for a student at Leiden University named Johannes Casear (or Casearius), whom Spinoza was tutoring – reconstructs the main claims of Cartesian science in geometrical order. In his introduction to the work, Spinoza's friend Lodewijk Meyer defends the structure of the text on the grounds that the "noble discipline of mathematics" provides the firmest foundations for grounding "the whole edifice of human knowledge" (G I, 127). While Spinoza sought in this work "not to depart a hair's breadth from Descartes' opinion" (G I, 131), Meyer reveals some of the ways in which Spinoza's own thinking was already sharply at odds with Descartes's, including the fact that Spinoza denied both that the human mind is a thinking substance and that we have a free will that is distinct from the intellect. Spinoza's relationship to Cartesianism remained fraught throughout his life. There can be no doubt that Spinoza adopts a fundamentally Cartesian conceptual framework, and Descartes's influence on Spinoza's own intellectual circle can hardly be overstated. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that Spinoza was deeply critical of his revered predecessor, often undermining Descartes's views from within this shared framework. And later in his life, Spinoza would rail against the "stupid Cartesians" who sought to distance themselves from him by publicly denouncing his philosophy (Ep. 68).

While in Rijnsburg, Spinoza took lodging with Herman Homan. In order to earn his living, Spinoza did more than just tutor; he ground lenses for various optical instruments, including microscopes and telescopes. Homan's house, now known as the *Spinozahuis*, can be visited today, and in it one will find a lathe that is much like the one that Spinoza would have used to grind lenses, along with a reconstruction of his personal library at the time of his death. Lens

grinding required at once a theoretical grasp of optics and a crafts-person's precision, and Spinoza was evidently quite skilled, as his lenses were sought after, and lauded, by eminent scientists like Christiaan Huygens (1629–1695).

His connection to the larger scientific community would also be aided by his friendship with the theologian, diplomat, and scientist Henry Oldenburg (1620–1677), who was elected as the first secretary of the recently founded Royal Society. From his position at the center of English scientific activity, Oldenburg sent Spinoza work from the groundbreaking chemist and physicist Robert Boyle (1627–1691), to which Spinoza replied in a lengthy letter (Ep. 6). The early exchange with Oldenburg – with whom he would correspond periodically throughout his life – along with his continued application of optical theory, reveals his engagement with the experimental sciences. Still, the picture of Spinoza relayed by his early biographer, Johannes Colerus, captures Spinoza's rationalist, or anti-experimental, cast of mind well: "He also often took his magnifying glass, observing through this the smallest mosquitoes and flies, at the same time reasoning about them. He knows, however, that things cannot be seen as they are in themselves. The eternal properties and laws of things and processes can only be discovered by deduction from common notions and evident axioms."⁴

1.3 The mature Spinoza: Voorburg and The Hague

In 1663, Spinoza moved into the house of Collegiant painter Daniel Tydeman in Voorburg, a village near The Hague. While continuing to ply his trade as a lens grinder, he also kept working towards a comprehensive, precise, and systematized account of his philosophy. By 1665, he seems to have composed a rough draft of the *Ethics*, which at the time was comprised of just three parts that would later be expanded into five. And while he had not yet published anything that would fully reveal his boldness as a thinker, he was gaining a notorious reputation in the general Dutch public as an antireligious thinker. In order to rebut these personal charges and defend the freedom to philosophize in the face of an intolerant Calvinist clergy, Spinoza began work on what would become the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), or *Theological-Political Treatise*, a daring work of scriptural interpretation and political philosophy.

The TTP was probably long in gestation, perhaps originating in the apology or defense that he allegedly wrote in response to the

cherem. In a 1665 letter to Oldenburg, he states three reasons for composing the work: to oppose the prejudices of theologians; to rebut the charge of atheism; and to defend the freedom of philosophizing (Ep. 30). Between the time when he first started the work and the time of its eventual publication in 1670, the situation only seemed to get worse for freethinkers in the Netherlands; and in 1668, Spinoza's friend Adriaan Koerbagh was arrested on charges of blasphemy. Koerbagh's imprisonment and subsequent death likely spurred Spinoza to publish the work.

The TTP is a challenging and multifaceted work. In it, Spinoza joins his knowledge of Scripture, dating back to his years at Talmud Torah, to his metaphysical commitments, and caps it all off with an original account of the rights and principles of state governance. The central claim of the text is that Scripture is not a work of metaphysics but rather a book of simple moral teachings. Consequently, we should not regard philosophical arguments about God and God's nature as in conflict with Scripture itself. It also advances further arguments for diminishing clerical authority and for permitting freedom of conscience and expression.

While the TTP was published anonymously and with a false imprint, the identity of the author was soon discovered, and the work was denounced as godless and dangerous. His one-time correspondent Willem van Blijenbergh called it "a book full of studious abominations and an accumulation of opinions which have been forged in hell." Numerous other refutations of the work by prominent authors appeared soon after its publication, with critical responses being written even by some of the same liberal theologians whom Spinoza had hoped to win over. Even Thomas Hobbes, no stranger to controversy, is reported as having remarked upon reading the TTP that the work "cut through him a bar's length, for he durst not write so boldly."⁵ It was a mark of Spinoza's well-known caution (he famously wore a ring with the motto "*Caute*," Latin for "caution," on it) that he published the work only in Latin, the language of the educated, personally intervening before a Dutch translation was prepared.

Around the time of the publication of the TTP, Spinoza moved from Voorburg to The Hague. At this point, he likely resumed work on the *Ethics*, maintaining a relatively low profile. However, his attention turned once again to politics in 1672 when King Louis XIV led French troops to invade the United Provinces, capturing a number of Dutch cities. Johan de Witt, who, as Grand Pensionary, occupied the highest political post at the time, was held responsible

for not preventing the incursion. And after resigning from the position, he and his brother were viciously killed by a mob. This incident clearly upset the otherwise unflappable Spinoza, who reportedly had to be restrained from confronting the mob.

De Witt was a champion of liberty, and his death marked the end of the purely republican period in the United Provinces where there was no stadtholder or quasi-monarchical figure. Spinoza was both a committed republican and a supporter of the De Witt regime, and it is thought that this episode might have prompted him to begin composing a second work of politics, the *Tractatus Politicus* or *Political Treatise*. This work, which bears the unmistakable influence of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), explores how political institutions are to be designed so as to promote peace and avoid regime collapses like De Witt's. Unfortunately, it remained unfinished at the time of Spinoza's death, just as he had begun describing the organization of a model democracy. Perhaps more regrettable is that in the few paragraphs that he did write he excluded women from participation in this democracy.

Spinoza was hardly a hermit as he maintained a circle of friends and was apparently quite companionable in general. Still, he valued his privacy. All of that might have changed in 1673, when he was invited by Karl Ludwig, the Elector of Palatine – who evidently had *not* read the TTP – to take up a professorship at the University of Heidelberg. Spinoza declined the invitation, worrying that teaching would limit his own intellectual advancement and that the freedom to philosophize would not be extensive enough to protect him from charges of blasphemy (Ep. 48). Spinoza's caution probably served him well in this instance.

He also seems to have exercised discretion by not publishing the *Ethics* when it was completed in 1675. And he was careful about whom he allowed to read the manuscript. One of the few trusted readers was Ehrenfried Walter von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708), whose correspondence with Spinoza is one of the richest and most illuminating. Almost ten years after Spinoza's death, Tschirnhaus published *The Medicine of the Mind*, a philosophical treatise that clearly bears Spinoza's influence. Tschirnhaus was a friend of the great philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who was deeply curious about Spinoza's philosophy. While Spinoza directed Tschirnhaus not to let Leibniz read his copy of the *Ethics*, it seems likely that Tschirnhaus did not honor Spinoza's wish, and in 1676 the inquisitive Leibniz travelled to visit and converse with Spinoza. Not much evidence of their legendary meetings survives, but it

seems that the two discussed at least Cartesian physics, principles of metaphysics, and the ontological proof of God's existence.

Around the time of Leibniz's visit, Spinoza's health was deteriorating. He had been suffering from a chronic lung condition for many years, exacerbated by the prolonged inhalation of the glass particulates from lens grinding. He died in February 1677 in The Hague. Spinoza's burial four days later gathered a notable crowd of friends and admirers. Soon after his death, his friend and publisher Jan Rieuwertsz printed copies of Spinoza's *Opera Posthuma*, which contained Spinoza's previously unpublished texts, including the TIE, the TP, a work on Hebrew grammar, and his magnum opus, the *Ethics*. While his life was short, he apparently lived well, at least according to the standards of his own philosophy. All reports suggest that he eschewed riches and honors, was generous and kind to those around him, maintained remarkable control of his emotions, and, of course, dedicated himself thoroughly to the pursuit of knowledge. Bertrand Russell's assessment of Spinoza as "the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers" seems fitting.⁶ But, of course, to really understand this lovable philosopher, we must turn directly to his ideas. So let us begin our examination of Spinoza's philosophy.

Further reading

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Notes

Chapter 1 Spinoza's Life

- 1 The relatively brief sketch of Spinoza's life presented in this chapter is indebted to several informative biographical studies, including Curley 1985; Nadler 1999; Klever 1996; and Yovel 1989.
- 2 One commentator has, somewhat hyperbolically, called Van den Enden "the genius behind Spinoza," claiming that Van den Enden's writings "contain a political theory which is in fact the same as the one worked out by Spinoza" (Klever 1996: 26).
- 3 For the full list of abbreviations, see the section "Primary Sources and Abbreviations," pp. viii–ix.
- 4 Cited in Klever 1996: 34–5.
- 5 Aubrey 1898, I: 357.
- 6 Russell 1945: 569.