CHAPTER 1

Spinoza's life and works

A JEWISH MERCHANT OF AMSTERDAM

Bento de Spinoza was born in Amsterdam on November 24, 1632, to a prominent merchant family of that city's Portuguese-Jewish community.[1] He was the second of three sons, and one of five children of Michael de Spinoza and his wife, Hannah Deborah Senior, recent immigrants to the Netherlands from Portugal.[2]

New Christians – the descendants of Jews who had been forcibly converted to Christianity in Spain and Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century – had been living in the Low Countries, still under Spanish dominion, throughout most of the sixteenth century. Many of them resided in Antwerp, where they were able to pursue their business affairs at a relatively safe remove from the heart of the Inquisition. With the beginning of the armed revolt of the seven northern provinces, now called the United Provinces of the Netherlands, in the 1570s, and the consequent eclipse of Antwerp by Amsterdam as a major center for trade, many of these families moved up to that more liberal and cosmopolitan city on the Amstel River. In Amsterdam, with its generally tolerant environment and greater concern for economic prosperity than for religious uniformity, the Portuguese New Christians, or "conversos," were able to

[1] This chapter is drawn from the more extensive biography in Nadler 1999.

[2] It is actually unclear whether Spinoza's older brother, Isaac, is Hannah's son or the child of Michael's first wife, Rachel, who died in 1627; and likewise whether Spinoza's younger sister Rebecca is Hannah's child or the daughter of Esther, Michael's third wife (whom he married after Hannah died in 1639). There was also a brother, Gabriel (Abraham), and a sister, Miriam, who certainly are Michael and Hannah's children, and thus Spinoza's full siblings. My suspicion (but it is certainly no more than that) is that all were the offspring of Michael and Hannah.

return to the religion of their ancestors and reestablish themselves in Jewish life.

By the middle of the second decade of the seventeenth century, Amsterdam was home to three congregations of Iberian, or Sephardic, Jews. While formal approval by the city's leaders of public Jewish worship was still a few years away, the Jews enjoyed de facto recognition and were able to meet and follow their traditions in relative peace. There were always conservative sectors of Dutch society clamoring for their expulsion, but the more liberal regents of the city, not to mention the more enlightened elements in Dutch society at large, were unwilling to make the same mistake that Spain had made a century earlier by expelling a part of its population whose economic productivity would make a substantial contribution to the flourishing of the Dutch Golden Age.

The Spinoza family was not among the wealthiest of the city's Sephardim – whose wealth was, in turn, dwarfed by the fortunes of the wealthiest Dutch – but they were comfortably well-off. They lived on the Houtgracht, one of the main boulevards of the neighborhood where Jews tended to reside in Amsterdam. (This quarter, called "Vlooienburg," was favored by artists and art dealers as well, and the Spinoza home was one block away from the house in which Rembrandt lived from 1639 to 1658.) Michael's business was importing dried fruit and nuts, mainly from Spanish and Portuguese colonies. To judge both by his accounts and by the respect he earned from his peers, he seems for a time to have been a fairly successful merchant.

The family belonged to the Beth Ya'acov congregation, the first one established in the city. Michael served in various leadership capacities both in his synagogue and in the community, including a stint as a member of the Senhores Quinze, the joint group of representatives from the three congregations which was charged with managing issues of common concern. When, in 1639, the three original congregations – Beth Ya'acov, Neve Shalom, and Beth Israel – merged into one, called Talmud Torah, this leadership group was replaced by the *ma'amad*, the all-powerful lay governing board that ran the community's religious and secular affairs. Michael sat on the *ma'amad* for a term, in 1649, and took a turn on Talmud Torah's educational board as well.

Hannah Deborah, Spinoza's mother, was Michael's second wife. His first wife, Rachel, had died in 1627. Hannah herself was never very well, and she died in 1638, when Spinoza was only five years old. Michael, undoubtedly greatly in need of help in the home with five children, married the forty-year-old Esther Fernand in 1641. Esther would live only another twelve years; she died in October 1653. Michael himself followed her to the grave five months later. The household in which Spinoza grew up seems to have seen more than its fair share of sorrow.

Spinoza must have been an intellectually gifted youth, and he would have made a strong impression on his teachers as he progressed through the levels at the community's school on the Houtgracht. He probably studied at one time or another with all of the leading rabbis of Talmud Torah, including Menasseh ben Israel, an ecumenical and cosmopolitan rabbi who was perhaps the most famous Jew in Europe, and who was teaching in the elementary grades when Spinoza attended the school; the mystically inclined Isaac Aboab da Fonseca; and Saul Levi Mortera, the chief rabbi of the congregation whose tastes ran more to rational philosophy and who often clashed with Rabbi Aboab over the relevance of kabbalah.

Spinoza may have excelled in school, but, contrary to the story long told, he did not study to be a rabbi. In fact, he never made it into the upper levels of the educational program, which involved advanced work in Talmud. In 1649, his older brother Isaac, who had been helping his father run the family business, died and Spinoza had to cease his formal studies to take his place. When Michael died in 1654, Spinoza found himself, along with his other brother Gabriel, a full-time merchant, running the firm "Bento y Gabriel de Spinoza." He seems not to have been a very shrewd businessman, however, and the company, burdened by the debts left behind by his father, floundered under his direction.

Spinoza did not have much of a taste for the life of commerce anyway. Financial success, which led to status and respect within the Portuguese-Jewish community, held very little attraction for him. By the time he and Gabriel took over the family business, he was already distracted from these worldly matters and was devoting more and more of his energies to intellectual interests. Looking back a few years later over his conversion to the philosophical life,

he wrote of his growing awareness of the vanity of the pursuits followed by most people (including himself), who gave little thought to the true value of the goods they so desperately sought.

> 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 find 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.

He was not unaware of the risks involved in abandoning his former engagements and undertaking this new enterprise.

> I say that "I resolved at last" – for at first glance it seemed ill-advised to be willing to lose something certain for something then uncertain. I saw, of course, the advantages that honor and wealth bring, and that I would be forced to abstain from seeking them, if I wished to devote myself seriously to something new and different; and if by chance the greatest happiness lay in them, I saw that I should have to do without it. But if it did not lie in them, and I devoted my energies only to acquiring them, then I would equally go without it. (TIE, G II.5/C I.7)

By the early to mid 1650s, Spinoza had decided that his future lay in philosophy, the search for knowledge and true happiness, not the importing of dried fruit.

CHEREM

At around the time of his disenchantment with the mercantile life, Spinoza began studies in Latin and the ancient classics, especially drama. Latin was still the lingua franca for most academic and intellectual discourse in Europe. Spinoza would need to know Latin for his studies in philosophy, especially if he intended on attending any university lectures, and would eventually compose his own philosophical works in that tongue. He had to go outside the Jewish community for instruction in these disciplines, and found what he needed under the tutelage of Franciscus van den Enden, a former Jesuit and political radical whose home seemed to function as a kind

of salon for secular humanists, arch-democrats, and freethinkers. (Van den Enden himself was later executed in France for his participation in a republican plot against King Louis XIV and the monarchy.) It was probably Van den Enden who also first introduced Spinoza to the works of Descartes and other contemporary thinkers. While pursuing this secular education in philosophy, literature, and political thought at his Latin tutor's home, Spinoza probably continued his Jewish education in the *yeshiva* or academy, Keter Torah ("Crown of the Law"), run by Rabbi Mortera.

Although distracted from his business affairs by his studies, and undoubtedly experiencing a serious weakening of his Jewish faith as he delved ever more deeply into the world of pagan and gentile letters, Spinoza kept up appearances and continued to be a member in good standing of the Talmud Torah congregation throughout the early 1650s. He paid his dues and communal taxes, and even made the contributions to the charitable funds that were expected of congregants.

And then, on July 27, 1656 (the sixth of Av, 5416, by the Jewish calendar), the following proclamation was read in Hebrew from in front of the ark of the Torah in the crowded synagogue on the Houtgracht:

> The *Senhores* of the *ma'amad* [the congregation's lay governing board] having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, they 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 *chakhamim* ["wise men," or rabbis] 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 which 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.

The document concludes with the warning that "no one should communicate with him, not even in writing, nor accord him any favor nor stay with him under the same roof nor [come] within four cubits in his vicinity; nor shall he read any treatise composed or written by him."[3]

It was the harshest writ of *cherem*, or ostracism, ever pronounced upon a member of the Portuguese-Jewish community of Amsterdam. The *parnassim* sitting on the *ma'amad* that year dug deep into their books to find just the right words for the occasion.[4] Unlike many of the other bans issued by *ma'amad*, this one was never rescinded.

For us, trying to understand the event three and a half centuries later on the basis of very meagre documentary evidence, it is all a bit of a mystery. We do not know for certain why Spinoza was punished with such extreme prejudice. That the punishment came from his own community – from the congregation that had nurtured and educated him, and that held his family in such high esteem – only adds to the enigma. Neither the *cherem* itself nor any document from the period tells us exactly what his "evil opinions and acts [*más opinioins e obras*]" were supposed to have been, nor what "abominable heresies [*horrendas heregias*]" or "monstrous deeds [*ynormes obras*]" he is alleged to have practiced and taught. He had not yet

[3] The Hebrew text is no longer extant, but the Portuguese version is found in the Book of Ordinances (*Livro dos Acordos de Naçao e Ascamot*), in the Municipal Archives of the City of Amsterdam, Archives for the Portuguese Jewish Community in Amsterdam, 334, no. 19, fol. 408.

[4] The text used for the *cherem* had been brought back to Amsterdam from Venice by Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera almost forty years earlier, ostensibly to be used in case an intramural congregational dispute in 1619 could not be resolved amicably.

published anything, nor (as far as we know) even composed any treatise. Spinoza never refers to this period of his life in his extant letters, and thus does not offer his correspondents (or us) any clues as to why he was expelled.[5] All we know for certain is that Spinoza received, from the community's leadership in 1656, a *cherem* like no other in the period.

Writing many years after the fact, and claiming to have talked with Spinoza himself, his earliest biographer, Jean-Maximilian Lucas, relates that Spinoza was convicted "not of blasphemy, but only of a lack of respect for Moses and the law."[6] Perhaps Spinoza was violating the restrictions of the Jewish Sabbath or the dietary code of *kashrut* or some other aspect of *halakhah*, Jewish law. On the other hand, it has been argued that his "sins" were more secular in nature, and that Spinoza, who had gone over the heads of the community's governors and appealed to the Dutch authorities in order to escape his inherited debts, "had to be removed from the community because legal and financial interests were at stake."[7]

Neither of these explanations, however, appears to be sufficient to account for the singular venom directed at Spinoza in his *cherem*. Instead, what seems really to have been the offense behind the vicious *cherem* earned by Spinoza are not actions, either religious or legal, but rather, as the proclamation reads, *más opinioins* and *horrendas heregias*: "evil opinions" and "abominable heresies" – that is, ideas.

Three relatively reliable sources from the period tell us as much. In Lucas's chronology of the events leading up to the *cherem*, there was much talk in the congregation about Spinoza's opinions; people, especially the rabbis, were curious about what the young man, known for his intelligence, was thinking. As Lucas tells it – and this particular anecdote is not confirmed by any other source – "among those most eager to associate with him there were two young men who, professing to be his most intimate friends, begged him to tell them his real views. They promised him that whatever his opinions

[5] Spinoza's friends, who edited his works and letters for publication immediately after his death, seem to have destroyed all letters that were not of mainly philosophical (as opposed to biographical and personal) interest.

[6] Freudenthal 1899, p. 10.

[7] See Vlessing 1996, pp. 205–10.

were, he had nothing to fear on their part, for their curiosity had no other end than to clear up their own doubts."[8] They suggested, trying to draw Spinoza out, that if one read Moses and the Prophets closely, then one would be led to the conclusion that the soul is not immortal and that God is material. "How does it appear to you?", they asked Spinoza. "Does God have a body? Is the soul immortal?" After some hesitation, Spinoza took the bait.

> I confess, said [Spinoza], that since nothing is to be found in the Bible about the non-material or incorporeal, there is nothing objectionable in believing that God is a body. All the more so since, as the Prophet says, God is great, and it is impossible to comprehend greatness without extension and, therefore, without body. As for spirits, it is certain that Scripture does not say that these are real and permanent substances, but mere phantoms, called angels because God makes use of them to declare his will; they are of such kind that the angels and all other kinds of spirits are invisible only because their matter is very fine and diaphanous, so that it can only be seen as one sees phantoms in a mirror, in a dream, or in the night.

As for the human soul, Spinoza reportedly replied that "whenever Scripture speaks of it, the word 'soul' is used simply to express life, or anything that is living. It would be useless to search for any passage in support of its immortality. As for the contrary view, it may be seen in a hundred places, and nothing is so easy as to prove it."

Spinoza did not trust the motives behind the curiosity of his "friends" – with good reason – and he broke off the conversation as soon as he had the opportunity. At first his interlocutors thought he was just teasing them or trying merely to shock them by expressing scandalous ideas. But when they saw that he was serious, they started talking about Spinoza to others. "They said that the people deceived themselves in believing that this young man might become one of the pillars of the synagogue; that it seemed more likely that he would be its destroyer, as he had nothing but hatred and contempt for the Law of Moses." Lucas relates that when Spinoza was called before his judges, these same individuals bore witness against him, alleging that he "scoffed at the Jews as 'superstitious

[8] Freudenthal 1899, p. 5.

people born and bred in ignorance, who do not know what God is, and who nevertheless have the audacity to speak of themselves as His People, to the disparagement of other nations'."[9]

Then there is the report of Brother Tomas Solano y Robles. Brother Tomas was an Augustinian monk who was in Madrid in 1659, right after a voyage that had taken him through Amsterdam in late 1658. The Spanish Inquisitors were interested in what was going on among the former New Christians now living in northern Europe, most of whom had once been in its domain and still had converso relatives back in Iberia. They interviewed the friar, as well as another traveler to the Netherlands, Captain Miguel Pérez de Maltranilla, who had stayed in the same house in Amsterdam, and at the same time, as Brother Tomas. Both men claimed that in Amsterdam they had met Spinoza and a man named Juan de Prado, who had been expelled from the community shortly after Spinoza. The two apostates told Brother Tomas that they had been observant of Jewish law but "changed their mind," and that they were expelled from the synagogue because of their views on God, the soul, and the law. They had, in the eyes of the congregation, "reached the point of atheism."[10] According to Tomas's deposition, they were saying that the soul was not immortal, that the Law was "not true" and that there was no God except in a "philosophical" sense.[11] Maltranilla confirms that, according to Spinoza and Prado, "the law . . . was false."[12]

[9] Freudenthal 1899, p. 7.

[10] Revah 1959, pp. 32–3.

[11] The text of Brother Tomas's deposition (in Revah 1959, p. 32) reads as follows:

> He knew both Dr. Prado, a physician, whose first name was Juan but whose Jewish name he did not know, who had studied at Alcala, and a certain de Espinosa, who he thinks was a native of one of the villages of Holland, for he had studied at Leiden and was a good philosopher. These two persons had professed the Law of Moses, and the synagogue had expelled and isolated them because they had reached the point of atheism. And they themselves told the witness that they had been circumcised and that they had observed the law of the Jews, and that they had changed their mind because it seemed to them that the said law was not true and that souls died with their bodies and that there is no God except philosophically. And that is why they were expelled from the synagogue; and, while they regretted the absence of the charity that they used to receive from the synagogue and the communication with other Jews, they were happy to be atheists, since they thought that God exists only philosophically . . . and that souls died with their bodies and that thus they had no need for faith.

[12] The original text of Maltranilla's testimony is in Revah 1959, p. 67.

The community poet-historian David Franco Mendes is our final witness on this matter. Although he was writing many years later, his work undoubtedly represents a repository of communal record and memory. He insists, in his brief report on the case, that Spinoza not only violated the Sabbath and the laws governing the festivals, but also was filled with "atheistic" ideas, and was punished accordingly.[13]

"God exists only philosophically," "The Law is not true," and "The soul is not immortal." These are rather vague and indeterminate propositions, particularly the first two. Ordinarily, there is no more telling what is intended by them than what is meant by the notoriously ambiguous charge of "atheism." But in Spinoza's case we have some fair basis for knowing what he would have meant, for they are likely just the views that he would at least begin elaborating and arguing for in his written works within five years. To be sure, we cannot be certain that what we find in those writings is exactly what he was saying *vive voce* within the community. But the report by Lucas and the testimony by Brother Tomas indicate that the metaphysical, moral, and religious doctrines that are to be found in his mature philosophical works were already in his mind, and not necessarily in only an embryonic form, in the mid-1650s.

According to Lucas, Spinoza took his expulsion in good stride. "All the better," he quotes Spinoza as saying, "they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own accord if I did not dread scandal . . . I gladly enter on the path that is opened to me."[14] By this point, he was certainly not very religiously observant, and must have had grave doubts about both the particular tenets of Judaism and, more generally, the value of sectarian religion. Besides the opportunity it afforded him to maintain the family business and earn a living, membership in good standing in the community seems to have mattered little to him.

A PHILOSOPHER IN THE COUNTRY

Contrary to yet another myth about Spinoza's life – and, given the dearth of extant biographical information, there are many – after the

[13] Mendes 1975, pp. 60–1.

[14] Freudenthal 1899, p. 8.

ban the city magistrates did not exile him from Amsterdam at the urging of the rabbis. Although we do not know his exact address, and he almost certainly no longer resided in Vlooienburg, he seems to have continued to live in the city or just outside it from 1656 until 1661, when his surviving correspondence begins. He is also reported to have passed some time during this period studying philosophy (most likely of the Cartesian variety) at the University of Leiden, although his name does not appear on the list of matriculated students there.

There is also a widely accepted view that Spinoza was a loner, a solitary figure who just wanted to be left alone with his work. Nothing could be further from the truth. While he greatly valued his time and independence to pursue his studies, he did indeed have some very dear friends and a wider circle of admirers, acquaintances, and correspondents. Many of his closest and most lasting personal relationships developed in the period of his life immediately before and after the ban. The medical doctor Lodewijk Meyer, a liberal humanist with a strong interest in the arts; Jarig Jellesz and Pieter Balling, fellow-merchants whom Spinoza may have met at the Amsterdam Exchange; the grocer Simon Joosten de Vries; the radical thinker Adriaen Koerbagh; Jan Rieuwertsz, the bold publisher from whose press came many politically and religiously incendiary works, including those of Spinoza; and the physician-philosopher Johan Bouwmeester were perhaps his most devoted friends. What these men had in common, besides a taste for philosophy, was a suspicion of political and ecclesiastic authority and a heterodox approach to religion. Many were members of the dissident Reformed sects – Mennonites, Collegiants, Anabaptists, Quakers – that flourished in the laissez-faire environment of Amsterdam; a few probably had no religious beliefs whatsoever. They found in Spinoza a charismatic figure who could express with some sophistication the doubts they felt about the value of sectarian worship (and the major Christian denominations in particular) and the truths about God, nature, the human being, and politics that informed their intellectual outlook.

In the late 1650s, Spinoza, Meyer, Jellesz, and others formed the core of a reading group in Amsterdam that met regularly to discuss Cartesian and other philosophical matters. Later, after Spinoza's

departure from Amsterdam, the group changed its focus and began to study Spinoza's own ideas as these emerged slowly from his writings in progress. They would forward to Spinoza questions about some difficult aspects of the manuscript he had sent them and that they had recently discussed, and he would reply with helpful clarifications. Writing to Spinoza in 1663, when the philosopher was no longer living in the city, De Vries informs him that as they go through the manuscript of the *Ethics*,

> if it happens that one [of us] cannot satisfy the other[s], we have thought it worthwhile to make a note of it and to write to you, so that, if possible, it may be made clearer to us, and under your guidance we may be able to defend the truth against those who are superstitiously religious and Christian, and to stand against the attacks of the whole.[15]

Sometime in the late 1650s, Spinoza began work on a treatise on philosophical method, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*). His first extant original philosophical work, it was conceived as the preliminary part of a larger project. In the *Treatise*, Spinoza addresses some basic problems concerning the nature and varieties of knowledge and the proper means to achieving true understanding, all in the context of a broad conception of what constitutes "the good" for a human being. The way to emend the intellect, to "heal" and "purify" it and "render it capable of understanding things," Spinoza insists, is to discover a methodical and reliable way of distinguishing clear and distinct true ideas from the inadequate ones that so often mislead us. In this way, one can come to perceive how all things depend on fixed and eternal principles and, our ultimate goal, apprehend "the union that the mind has with the whole of nature."

Many of these issues would receive a deeper treatment in the more substantive remainder of the work, which at this point Spinoza calls simply "our Philosophy." Not yet written at the time he was composing the *Treatise*, this "Philosophy" (the envisioned core of which almost certainly constitutes much of the content of the *Ethics*) was to be an extensive and systematic inquiry into the mind, metaphysics, physics, morality, and other subjects. What seems to

[15] Letter 8, G IV.39/C I.190.

have happened, however, is that, for one reason or another, Spinoza decided in late 1659 or early 1660 to abandon the *Treatise* altogether and start over, this time working on what would become the *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being* (*Korte Verhandeling van God, de Mensch en des Zelfs Welstand*),[16] whose own methodological chapters overlap with much of the material in the *Treatise*. The *Short Treatise* contains in embryonic form many themes and ideas that will reappear in more mature versions and in a more orderly and perspicuous format in the *Ethics*. Despite its obvious shortcomings, the work represents Spinoza's first serious attempt to lay out what he takes to be the metaphysics of God and nature; the proper conception of the human soul; the nature of knowledge and freedom; the status of good and evil; and the human being's relationship to nature and the means to true happiness.

Spinoza began the *Short Treatise* while he was still living in Amsterdam. Sometime during the summer of 1661, however, he moved to Rijnsburg, outside of Leiden. He may have been directed to this small village by his Collegiant friends, since there was a vibrant practicing community of these "churchless Christians" there.[17] More likely, though, Spinoza chose Rijnsburg because it was a quiet place to pursue his occupations, yet close enough to Leiden for him to be able to travel there easily and keep up with acquaintances and developments at the university.

In the back room of the house in which he lodged in Rijnsburg, Spinoza set up his lens-grinding equipment. (The house still stands today, and its interior has been re-fitted with the accoutrements of Spinoza's residence, including his library and lens-grinding machine.) This was a craft he must have begun working on while still in Amsterdam, for by the time he settled in Rijnsburg he was fairly skilled at it. As early as the fall of 1661, he was known for making not just lenses but also telescopes and microscopes. Spinoza's friend Christian Huygens, the Dutch scientist and mathematician, commented in a letter to his brother that "the [lenses] that the Jew

[16] This treatise was not included in the Latin or Dutch collections of Spinoza's writings published by his friends after his death, and was only rediscovered in Dutch manuscripts in the nineteenth century.

[17] The phrase is from Kolakowski 1969.

of Voorburg has in his microscopes have an admirable polish."[18] Spinoza may initially have taken up the production of lenses and instruments to support himself – it was now, besides loans and gifts from his friends, his chief source of income – but it also served his own scientific interests. With his general enthusiasm for the new mechanistic science of nature, Spinoza was fascinated by the latest detailed explanations of the microphenomena of biology and chemistry and the ever-improving observations of the macrophenomena of astronomy, as well as by the mathematical principles of optics that made such discoveries possible. Writing in 1665 to his friend Henry Oldenburg, corresponding secretary to the Royal Society in England, with evident delight about some new instruments he had heard of from Huygens, Spinoza notes that "he has told me wonderful things about these microscopes, and also about certain telescopes, made in Italy, with which they could observe eclipses of Jupiter caused by the interposition of its satellites, and also a certain shadow on Saturn, which looked as if it were caused by a ring."[19]

Spinoza kept up with his friends in Amsterdam, who were soon asking him for an accessible general introduction to the philosophy of Descartes, on which they considered him an expert. Thus, in 1663, shortly after moving from Rijnsburg to Voorburg, a small village not far from The Hague, he composed for their benefit the only work that would be published in his lifetime under his own name, *Parts One and Two of the Principles of Philosophy of René Descartes Demonstrated According to the Geometric Method* (*Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I. & II.*, 1663). This was based on some tutorials on the *Principles* that Spinoza had been giving to a young man who was living with him for a time in Rijnsburg, Johannes Casearius. In the written version, Spinoza reorganized the metaphysics, epistemology, and basic physics of Descartes's "textbook" of philosophy into a geometrical method involving axioms, definitions, and demonstrated propositions. (By this point, he had decided that the Euclidean format was the best way to present these parts of philosophy.) To the published edition

[18] Huygens 1893, VI.181.

[19] Letter 26 G IV.159/C I.394.

of his lessons Spinoza added an appendix of "Metaphysical Thoughts" (*Cogitata Metaphysica*). In this he provides explanations of "more difficult questions" in metaphysics, occasionally revealing glimpses of some of his own ideas that he offers as corrections to the views of his philosophical mentor. The *Principles* brought Spinoza fame as an expositor of Cartesian philosophy, and (misleadingly, and much to the later chagrin of the Cartesians) earned him a reputation as a leading Cartesian himself.

FROM ETHICS TO POLITICS

The exposition of Descartes temporarily distracted Spinoza from what was now his main occupation, a rigorous presentation of his own highly original philosophical thoughts. The *Short Treatise* clearly did not satisfy him, and by early 1662 he had aborted the incomplete manuscript in order to make yet another fresh start. Thus, most likely in the spring of 1662, Spinoza took up his pen to begin what would be his philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics* (*Ethica*). Still, in essence, a treatise on "God, Man and His Well-Being," the *Ethics* was an attempt to provide a fuller, clearer, and more systematic layout in "the geometric style" for his grand metaphysical and moral philosophical project. He worked on it steadily for a number of years, through his move to Voorburg in 1663 and on into the summer of 1665. He envisioned at this point a three-part work, and seems to have had a fairly substantial draft in hand by June 1665. He felt confident enough of what he had written so far to allow a select few to read it, and there were Latin and even Dutch (translated by Pieter Balling) copies of the manuscript circulating among his friends.

We do not know how close to a final product Spinoza considered this draft of the *Ethics* when he put it aside, probably in the fall of 1665, to turn his attention to another, immediately more relevant project. At the time, he probably saw it as mostly complete but in need of polishing. It would be a good number of years, though, before Spinoza returned to his metaphysical-moral treatise to put the finishing touches on it, which included significant additions and revisions, no doubt in the light of further reading and reflection. This delay was due in part to circumstances of a political and

personal nature that had begun to disturb the peace at Voorburg and in the United Provinces as a whole.

These were difficult years in the life of the young Dutch Republic. The long war for independence from Spain had finally come to a formal conclusion only in 1648, with the Peace of Münster. But this was quickly followed by a series of wars with England, from 1652 to 1654 and again from 1664 to 1667; increased tensions on other fronts, particularly with France and the German states; a virulent outbreak of the plague in 1663–4; and, perhaps most ominous of all, a heating up of the internal political squabbling that seemed constantly to rile the republic throughout the century.

Dutch politics in the seventeenth century can basically be characterized by two broadly drawn positions. On the one hand, there was the States General or republican party. The relatively liberal members of this camp favored a decentralized federation of quasi-sovereign provinces, each of which was in turn a federation of quasi-sovereign cities and towns. Real power on this scheme devolved to the local regents governing each municipality, such as the members of the wealthy professional and merchant families that took turns ruling Amsterdam for decades. The republicans tended to favor a laissez-faire attitude in politics, culture, and religion, including a general (but not unlimited) toleration in matters of faith. On the other hand, there were the Orangists, who sought a more centralized state under the leadership of the Stadholder, a quasi-monarchical position usually occupied throughout a number of provinces by the Prince of Orange. The Stadholder, in the Orangist scheme, would be the supreme ruler of the land and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The supporters of a strong Stadholdership also tended to be more conservative when it came to religion and cultural and social mores, and sought to impose a higher degree of conformity not only among the members of the Reformed Church, but in the Republic at large.

The passions behind this political division were fed by a corresponding battle in the ecclesiastic domain between two irreconcilably opposed factions of the Dutch Reformed Church. The Arminians were followers of Jacobus Arminius, a liberal theology professor at the University of Leiden; they were also called "Remonstrants"

because of the remonstrance they had issued in 1610 setting forth their unorthodox views on certain sensitive theological questions, including a rejection of the strict Calvinist doctrines of grace and predestination. Because of their unwillingness to toe the party line, the Remonstrants were expelled from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1619 at the Synod of Dort. The representatives to the gathering reiterated their commitment to freedom of conscience in the Republic, but nonetheless insisted that public worship and office holding be restricted to orthodox Calvinists. There was a purge at all levels of the Church, and for a time the Counter-Remonstrants, as the conservative group came to be called, had the upper hand in the religious affairs of most provinces. The harassment of Remonstrants continued for a number of years, and although by the mid-1620s things had quieted down somewhat, there would be occasional flare-ups over the next five decades. By the middle of the century, Amsterdam itself had gained a reputation as a city favorable to Remonstrants.

The history of public affairs in the Dutch Golden Age is a series of pendulum swings back and forth between the two politico-theological camps, with the States General party finding its natural allies among Remonstrant sympathizers, and the Orangists getting support from the more orthodox Calvinists. Throughout the 1650s and 1660s, the liberals were in the ascendancy – the last dominant Stadholder in the major provinces, William II, had died in 1650, and would not be replaced until 1672, by William III – but there were troubling clouds on the political horizon.

What seems initially to have disturbed Spinoza's peace at Voorburg and occasioned his putting the *Ethics* aside in the fall of 1665 to begin composing a work on theology and politics was a dispute over succession in the local church. When the Reformed preacher in Voorburg died, the committee appointed to select his replacement chose a candidate who, if not himself of Remonstrant inclinations, was perceived to be at least tolerant of the Arminians. This angered the conservatives in town, who accused their colleagues of deliberate provocation. Spinoza seems to have sided with the liberal group, and may even have played a role in the controversy. Dutch politics being what they were, religious disagreements bled into political grievances and the dispute grew all out of proportion

and became a rather nasty and divisive experience for the community. Spinoza himself was resentful of the whole affair, both of how he had been talked about and treated by a number of important people in town – he says they called him an atheist and a troublemaker – and more generally of the way in which Reformed ministers, for whom he had never had much respect, tried to dominate civic matters in Voorburg and elsewhere.

Spinoza thus undertook to compose a treatise in which he would, in effect, argue for the separation of the secular and the sectarian, of reason and religion, and defend "the freedom to philosophize and to say what we think," which, he believes, "is in every way suppressed by the excessive authority and egotism of preachers."[20] It seems, in fact, to have been not so much a new project that Spinoza was beginning as a return to an old one, since we have some reason to believe that "theological-political questions" had already occupied his attention in the late 1650s and that he may even have written at that time an early draft of some of the material that would appear in what he was now calling the *Theological-Political Treatise* (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*).

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza intends to show that the Bible is not literally the work of God – or, more precisely, of Moses serving as God's amanuensis – but rather a very historical document composed and edited by ordinary human beings and transmitted in a very natural way over many generations. What we now have is, therefore, most likely a highly corrupt human product that has no greater claim to historical, philosophical, or theological truth than any other work of literature. What Scripture does contain that is "divine" are some very simple moral truths – that we should love God and our fellow human beings – that will guide us toward happiness and well-being.

Spinoza insists, moreover, that the proper method for interpreting Scripture is the same as that used to investigate nature. Following the Baconian procedure, one should examine the evidence immediately at hand – that is, the text itself – compile the relevant data by comparing passages, and draw justified general conclusions

[20] Letter 30.

from them. He believes that grasping the true meaning of Scripture requires one to study its language, the personalities of its authors, editors, and audiences, the context of its composition, and the record of its transmission. The real touchstone for understanding Scripture is Scripture itself and its history, not what reason (i.e., philosophy and science) or authority dictates as true.

In this way, Spinoza sought to undermine the general authority of Scripture and, consequently, to weaken the position of those ecclesiastics who elevate Scripture into a sacred object and worship its every word and who, claiming to be the sole and specially gifted interpreters of Scripture, rely on it to bolster their own pretensions to power. The conclusion of Spinoza's argument is that religion is one domain, where the concern is with faith and obedience, and philosophy and science a completely separate domain, where the goal is truth and knowledge. Religion, therefore, has no right to prescribe limits to philosophy, much less to interfere with the secular affairs of the state. On the contrary, the secular leaders of the state are to exercise control over religious worship so as to insure that it poses no harm to civic well-being. The treatise offers as strong and eloquent a plea for toleration and secularism as has ever been expressed.

As he argues for these general principles, Spinoza, showing great erudition, addresses a number of important questions about Jewish religion and history, including the status and validity of Jewish law (which he claims is no longer binding upon contemporary Jews); the divine election of the Jewish people (it consists only in what was natural political good fortune for an extended period of time, and not any kind of metaphysical or moral superiority over other peoples); and the virtues, vices, and devolution of the Hebrew state, from Moses down to the destruction of the Second Temple. He also looks at the nature of prophecy (he believes that the prophets just happened to be gifted storytellers with particularly vivid imaginations) and of miracles (he denies that, if by 'miracle' one means a supernaturally caused event that is an exception to the course of nature, there are any such things). Finally, Spinoza considers the origins of the state and the grounds of political obligation. At the basis of any legitimate polity is a convention – a social contract – by which people unite and agree to give up the unbridled pursuit of self-interest for the sake of peace and security. Political power and

ecclesiastic authority are to remain distinct, and while the political sovereign is to regulate the public practice of religion, religious leaders are to play no role whatsoever in political affairs. This is the clear lesson to be learned from the downfall of the ancient Hebrew kingdom, wherein power was ultimately divided between the king and the priests, who usurped secular prerogatives, and it was one which Spinoza felt his Dutch contemporaries would do well to heed.

If Spinoza sincerely thought that his "treatise on Scripture" would, as he said to Oldenburg in 1665, allow him to silence those "who constantly accuse me of atheism" and dispel the impression that he denied all religion, then he was in for a rude awakening.[21] In fact, he can have been under no illusions about the reception his ideas would face. The *Theological-Political Treatise* is an astoundingly bold and radical work. When it was published in 1670 – anonymously, and with a false publisher and city on the cover – it generated an enormous outcry in the Netherlands and elsewhere. The book, the identity of whose author was no real secret, was attacked by theologians, political leaders, academics, and lay people. Calvinists, Remonstrants, Collegiants, Lutherans, and Catholics all agreed that it was a subversive and dangerous work. There were formal condemnations and bannings from city councils, provincial assemblies, and church bodies. The delegates to the Synod of South Holland concluded that it was "as vile and blasphemous a book as the world has ever seen." Even Thomas Hobbes, not one to be squeamish when it came to political and theological controversy, was taken aback by Spinoza's audacity. According to his biographer, the English philosopher claimed that the *Treatise* "cut through him a bar's length, for he durst not write so boldly."[22]

The *Treatise* is also a very angry work. The decision to publish it sooner rather than later came from a personal loss that Spinoza suffered in 1669. His friend Adriaan Koerbagh, in a series of provocative books with remarkably Spinozistic themes, had undertaken to attack the irrationality of most religions, with their superstitious rites and meaningless ceremonies. Taking a swipe at trinitarianism,

[21] Letter 30. [22] As reported in Aubrey 1898, I.357.

Koerbagh had argued that God is one being, not three. He also insisted, however, that God is nothing but the substance of the universe. In Koerbagh's view, the real teaching of God, the "true religion," is simply a knowledge of and obedience to God and a love of one's neighbor. Koerbagh was also a radical democrat and warned of the dangers of the ecclesiastic encroachment upon civic political power.

Despite the fact that Koerbagh offered a strong defense of the republican principles of Johan de Witt, the Grand Pensionary of the States of Holland and, in the absence of a Stadholder, the effective political leader of the Dutch Republic, there was little De Witt could do – or may even have wanted to do – to protect him from the counter-attack of his conservative opponents. One of Koerbagh's mistakes, besides putting his name on the covers of his books, was to write in Dutch rather than, like Spinoza in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, hide behind the veneer of academic Latin. Koerbagh was arrested and, after a short trial, sentenced to ten years in prison, to be followed by ten years in exile. He did not last long in confinement, however. His health took a serious and rapid turn for the worse, and he died in October 1699, just nine months after being sentenced.

This was an enormous blow to Spinoza. It represented not only the loss of a close friend, but also a violation of the highest principles of freedom and toleration to which his homeland was dedicated. Koerbagh's treatment at the hands of the magistrates and the religious authorities who pressed them to prosecute him was a dangerous collusion between church and state. It gave Spinoza the impetus he needed to put the final touches on the *Theological-Political Treatise* and begin preparing it for publication. To his mind, putting forth his case on the proper relationship between religion and the state had become a matter of pressing personal and public importance.

CALM AND TURMOIL IN THE HAGUE

When work on the treatise was behind him and the book in press, Spinoza moved from Voorburg to The Hague. He may have begun to tire of life in the country, and desired easier access to the intellectual and cultural life of the city. With his many friends and

acquaintances in town, he would have found it much more convenient to live there rather than commute in from the village. Once settled in the house of Hendrik van der Spyck, a painter, Spinoza went back to work on the *Ethics* and his expanding correspondence, and dealt calmly with the storm generated by the *Theological-Political Treatise*, including halting the publication of a Dutch translation that his friends were preparing.

He seems to have had a friendly, even intimate relationship with his landlord's family. They had many good things to say about Spinoza to Johannes Colerus, the Lutheran preacher of their congregation and another early biographer of the philosopher. Spinoza apparently spent a good deal of time in his room, working on either his lenses or his writing, or perhaps just reading. "When he was at home, he was troublesome to no one . . . When he tired of his investigations, he came down and spoke with his house companions on whatever was going on, even about trivial matters." For diversion, he liked to collect spiders and have them fight each other, or throw flies into their webs, creating battles, which so entertained him "that he would break out laughing." Far from being the morose, anti-social recluse of legend, Spinoza was, when he put down his work, gregarious and possessed of a pleasing and even-tempered disposition. He was kind and considerate, and enjoyed the company of others, who seem in turn to have enjoyed his. He appears, in fact, to have lived just the kind of reasonable, self-controlled life – involving moderating the passions rather than letting them overwhelm one – that he presents in the *Ethics* as the ideal for human flourishing.

> His conversation and way of life were calm and retiring. He knew how to control his passions in an admirable way. No one ever saw him sad or merry. He could control or hold in his anger and his discontent, making it known only by a sign or a single short word, or standing up and leaving out of a fear that his passion might get the better of him. He was, moreover, friendly and sociable in his daily intercourse.

If the housewife or other members of Van der Spyck's household were sick,

> he never failed to console them and to encourage them to endure that which, he told them, was the lot assigned to them by God. He exhorted the

children of the house to be polite and to be respectful of their elders and to go to public worship often.[23]

Even Pierre Bayle, the czar of the seventeenth-century Republic of Letters who excoriated Spinoza for his "atheistic philosophy," took note of the virtues of Spinoza's personal character and his blameless lifestyle, using this as evidence of the fact that someone who remains unconvinced of Christian truth can still lead a good and upright existence.[24]

What Spinoza earned from his lens-grinding had always been supplemented by the generosity of his friends. But all the evidence suggests that Spinoza's personal needs were not very great to begin with and that he led a frugal life. "Not only did riches not tempt him, but he even did not at all fear the odious consequences of poverty . . . Having heard that someone who owed him two hundred florins had gone bankrupt, far from being upset by it, he said, while smiling, 'I must reduce my daily needs to make up for this small loss. That is the price,' he added, 'of fortitude.'"[25] His daily meals were simple – he liked a milk-based gruel with raisins and butter and preferred to drink beer – and his furnishings "sober and humble." He dressed plainly and without much fuss (at least according to Colerus, who notes that "in his clothing he was simple and common"[26]). He did not have many expenses, and, Lucas says, although he did not oppose "honest pleasures," those of the body "touched him little."[27]

While deeply engaged in his main metaphysical-moral and theological-political projects, Spinoza nonetheless found time for a number of less philosophical undertakings in the last decade of his life. He composed a short treatise on the rainbow, examining the geometry of the optics behind the phenomenon, and also produced for the benefit of his friends an introductory grammar of Hebrew, the *Compendium grammatices linguae Hebraeae*. The dating of these works is uncertain, and neither was published until after his death.

[23] See Freudenthal 1899, pp. 57–61.
[24] See the article on Spinoza in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.
[25] This is from Lucas's biography; see Freudenthal 1899, p. 16.
[26] Freudenthal 1899, p. 59.
[27] Freudenthal 1899, p. 20.

Without question, however, his major preoccupation during his early years in The Hague, from 1670 to 1675, was revising the *Ethics* and readying it for publication. He concentrated especially on reworking material from what had been an extensive Part Three but that he was now organizing into Parts Three, Four, and Five. This included much of his moral psychology, his account of human bondage to the passions, and the picture of the "free human being." It is almost certain that much of what Spinoza has to say in the *Ethics* of a political and social nature and on religion and true freedom underwent significant revision after 1670. The latter parts of the manuscript that he picked up after a hiatus of at least six years now had to be recast in the light not just of his reading in the intervening period – including Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which was translated into Dutch and Latin in the late 1660s (Spinoza could not read English) – but, more importantly, of the theory of the state and civil society that he himself set forth in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. On the other hand, given what appears to be a general continuity in his metaphysical, moral, and political thinking between the early 1660s and the early 1670s, it is unlikely that the additions or changes made to the work after his move to The Hague represented any significant revision of his basic underlying doctrines. The political implications of his theory of the human being and human motivation may have become clearer and more elaborate after his completion of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, but they could never have been very far from his mind even when he began the geometrical presentation of his system in 1662.

In the midst of this work, Spinoza saw the United Provinces experience what was undoubtedly the worst year of its brief existence, the *annus horribilis* of Dutch history. Disaster struck in 1672 in the form of an invasion by the army of Louis XIV. France and the Netherlands had participated in an uneasy alliance ever since the Franco-Dutch treaty of 1662. Louis was initially useful to the Dutch in their second war against England, and had even helped to restrain threats to the Republic from the east from the prince-bishop of Münster. But always lurking in the background behind the professed amity were tensions over French ambitions toward the Spanish Netherlands. Louis sought to expand his dominion into the southern Low Countries, which, two centuries earlier, had belonged to

the Duke of Burgundy. When, in the mid-1660s, a substantially weakened Spain began withdrawing its forces from its Flemish and Wallonian possessions, the King of France saw that the opportunity was ripe to make his move. In addition to these territorial issues between the two nations, there was a low-level campaign of hostilities on the economic front. The French, concerned by the increasing share that Dutch exports – such as cloth, herring, tobacco, and sugar – were assuming in their market, imposed harsh tariffs on all foreign imports, which greatly antagonized Dutch producers and traders and had them clamoring for retaliatory measures. The intense competition between the recently founded French East and West Indies Companies and their more established Dutch counterparts served only to push the anger and resentment, not to mention the anxiety, of the Dutch public to the breaking point.

Through a series of French alliances, by 1672 the Dutch found themselves surrounded by hostile states. Louis seemed intent not just on taking the Spanish Netherlands but also in defeating the Dutch Republic itself and transforming it into a monarchy. In April, Louis declared war on the Republic; he was soon followed by England, the prince-bishop of Münster, and the Elector of Cologne.

There had always been great division among the Dutch over how to respond to France's threatening behavior. De Witt believed that nothing could be gained by war, and all along argued against military intervention. His Orangist opponents, on the other hand, insisted on a strong response and clamored for the return of the Stadholder to take command of the armed forces. On the eve of the French invasion, they effectively won the debate and William III, now reaching his majority, was appointed Stadholder in Holland and other provinces.

Things did not go well for the Dutch in the early months of the war. As a consequence, De Witt was in serious trouble. Public sentiment was running strongly against him, as he was accused of military incompetence, financial improprieties, and even of plotting to hand the Republic over to its enemies so that he could rule it on their behalf. By June, after an assassination attempt, he had resigned the position of Grand Pensionary. Soon thereafter, his brother, Cornelis, was arrested, allegedly for plotting against the life of the Stadholder. Although Cornelis was acquitted, when Johan came to

retrieve him from prison, the brothers found themselves trapped inside by an angry mob. By the end of the day, they were dead, hung up and literally torn apart by the crowd.

Spinoza was stunned and outraged by these acts of barbarity, perpetrated not by some roving band of thieves but by a crowd of ordinary citizens. He had to be restrained by his landlord from rushing out into the street and placing a placard – reading *Ultimi barbarorum* [roughly translated: "You are the greatest of barbarians!"] – near the site of the atrocity.

Spinoza also mourned the sudden end of the period of "True Freedom," with its liberal republican principles and generally tolerant atmosphere. Regents seen as sympathetic to the De Witts were replaced by individuals who were unequivocally Orangist and favorably disposed to the aims of the orthodox Calvinists. Seemingly overnight, political power became more centralized as it moved back from the towns and the provincial States to the Stadholder and the States General, over which William had great influence. Consequently, it became easier for the authorities to exercise a broader and more consistent control over what was said and done in the Republic.

These changes in the political winds probably account for the fact that, after 1672, Spinoza found himself once again the object of attack. He was now vilified not only by political, academic, and theological conservatives, especially the Voetian camp in the Reformed Church – so-called because it was united behind the orthodox firebrand Gisbertus Voetius, dean of the University of Utrecht and one of Descartes's most implacable foes – but also by those from whom he might have expected some support. The Voetians' doctrinal opponents in the Church, known as Cocceians (because they were followers of Johannes Cocceius, a theology professor at Leiden who was fairly liberal in his interpretation of the demands of Calvinism), were equally vociferous in condemning the *Theological-Political Treatise*. They were joined by their natural intellectual and political allies among the moderate Cartesians in the universities, who turned on Spinoza and other like-minded individuals (such as his friend Lodewijk Meyer, whose book *Philosophy, Interpreter of Scripture* was often condemned in the same breath as Spinoza's *Treatise*). It was, in part, a defensive maneuver, as Spinoza

and Meyer were generally perceived to be nothing more than radical Cartesians. Thus, through their attacks, the academic Cartesians, afraid that the backlash against Spinoza would undermine their own tenuous position, hoped to distance themselves from Spinozistic ideas and distinguish themselves in the minds of their enemies from the more "dangerous" strains of freethinking infecting the Republic. Spinoza saw through their strategy. He notes in a letter to Oldenburg that "the stupid Cartesians" denounce his opinions "in order to remove suspicion from themselves."[28]

In the midst of the campaign against him that began after De Witt's murder, Spinoza must have been pleased to learn that some people, at least, appreciated his philosophical talents. In February, 1673, Spinoza was invited by Karl Ludwig, Elector of Palatine, one of the German imperial states, to take up a chair in philosophy at the University of Heidelberg. Spinoza was flattered by the invitation, and gave it serious consideration. He was, however, reluctant to make such an extreme change in his living situation and to interrupt his work by taking on formal duties. Moreover, while the letter of offer had promised him "the most extensive freedom in philosophizing," it also stipulated that he not abuse this "to disturb the publicly established religion." Spinoza was troubled by this ambiguous phrase, and expressed his reservations in a letter to Johann Fabricius, Karl Ludwig's adviser, a stern Calvinist and the holder of a chair in theology at Heidelberg.

> I do not know within what limits the freedom to philosophize must be confined if I am to avoid appearing to disturb the publicly established religion. For divisions arise not so much from an ardent devotion to religion as from the different dispositions of men, or through their love of contradiction that leads them to distort or to condemn all things, even those that are stated aright. Now since I have already experienced this while leading a private and solitary life, it would be much more to be feared after I have risen to this position of eminence. So you see, most Honorable Sir, that my reluctance is not due to the hope of some better fortune, but to my love of peace, which I believe I can enjoy in some measure if I refrain from lecturing in public.[29]

[28] Letter 68. [29] Letter 48.

After thinking it over for a month, Spinoza decided – probably wisely – to decline the position.

That summer, Spinoza received another invitation, one that required him to make a trip behind enemy lines. The city of Utrecht had been captured by the French in June, and the highly cultured Prince of Condé, the commanding officer of Louis XIV's forces, set up his headquarters there. While occupying the city, he sought to surround himself with intellectuals and courtiers and recreate the kind of salon atmosphere that he enjoyed back home in Chantilly. His second-in-command, Jean-Baptiste Stouppe, wrote to Spinoza asking him to join the circle in Utrecht, and even offered to get him a pension from Louis if only Spinoza would dedicate one of his books to the French monarch. Spinoza declined the offer of a pension, but did accept the invitation to come to Utrecht. Thus, in July 1673, he found himself traveling through dangerous and ravaged country to enter French-controlled territory. Spinoza probably did not get to meet Condé himself, who had been called away from Utrecht before Spinoza's arrival and may not have returned until after his departure some weeks later, but he nonetheless mingled among the writers and artists whom the Prince had gathered in his entourage.

It was a trip that did not endear Spinoza to his Dutch compatriots. The whole affair only added to their suspicions about his loyalties, and he was now seen not only as blasphemer of religion but also a traitor. "They considered him a spy," Colerus tells us,

> and mumbled that he corresponded with the French over state affairs. Because his landlord became worried about this, and was afraid that they would break into his house to look for Spinoza, Spinoza calmed him with these words: "Do not be afraid! I am not guilty, and there are many people at the highest office who know well why I have gone to Utrecht. As soon as they make any noise at your door, I will go out to the people, even if they should deal with me as they did with the good De Witt brothers. I am an upright republican, and the welfare of the state is my goal."[30]

Spinoza's claim that there were individuals in high places who knew why he had made the trip to the enemy's camp has given rise

[30] Freudenthal 1899, pp. 64–5.

to the speculation that perhaps he was on an official diplomatic mission, possibly carrying some overture to peace negotiations from the government at The Hague to the head of the French army. It seems highly unlikely, however, that Spinoza was in the employ of the Dutch government. These were the days of the Orangists, not the De Witts. Even if the Stadholder or the States were inclined to communicate with the French, they would not have entrusted so sensitive a task to someone they perceived as an enemy of the Republic.

Spinoza was not, of course, an enemy of the Republic. All of his writing is directed toward the virtue and well-being not just of his fellow human beings, but also of the political society they composed and upon which they depended. He had a special affection for the Dutch Republic in particular, similar to Socrates's love for the Athens that put him to death two thousand years earlier. Each state, through its democratic culture and intellectual cosmopolitanism, nourished a philosopher who, once he turned his critical eye upon his own society and the lives led by others, would find himself the object of great ire.

FINAL YEARS

By early July, 1675, Spinoza was sufficiently satisfied with his progress on the *Ethics* to decide it was finally time to publish it. The manuscript of which he had been so protective as to allow only a select few to see it – and even then only on the condition that they not talk about it to others – was, it seemed, about to be revealed to the public. He made the trip to Amsterdam toward the end of the month and handed a fair copy over to Rieuwertsz. It is unclear whether Spinoza was planning to withhold his name from the title page, as he had done with the *Theological-Political Treatise*. It is unlikely, however, that he any longer felt the need to take such precautions. Much had happened in the fifteen years since he began the work, particularly the five years since the appearance of the *Treatise*, and there would be very little mystery about who its author was.

Also, the political situation being what it was, there was very little to be gained at this point by anonymous publication. By the fall of

1674, the Dutch had turned the war around and forced a French evacuation from Utrecht and other towns. This strengthened the hand of the Orangists, and William and his supporters came down hard on those republicans who resisted his consolidation of powers. Whereas liberal regents and much of the merchant class wanted to end hostilities quickly and get back to the political and economic *status quo ante*, the Stadholder party insisted on continuing the war until France was finally defeated and taught a lesson. With the Orangists having their way in most matters political and military, and the Voetians enjoying a similar ascendancy in the theological domain, the rules of the game had changed considerably since 1670. There was no reason to think that simply by publishing a treatise anonymously one would be saved from a fate like that of the more brazen Koerbagh.

Despite the obvious risks he was taking, Spinoza felt confident and everything seemed to be on track during the summer of 1675. He stayed in Amsterdam for two weeks. But no sooner had Spinoza begun overseeing the production of his book than he abruptly stopped the printing. Back in The Hague by early September, he explained to Oldenburg, who had been pressing Spinoza to make public his writings for a long time, the reasons for his decision ultimately not to publish the *Ethics*:

> While I was engaged in this business, a rumor became widespread that a certain book of mine about God was in the press, and that in it I endeavor to show that there is no God. This rumor found credence with many. So certain theologians who may have started this rumor seized the opportunity to complain of me before the Prince and the magistrates . . . Having gathered this from certain trustworthy men who also declared that the theologians were everywhere plotting against me, I decided to postpone the publication I had in hand until I should see how matters would turn out, intending to let you know what course I would then pursue. But the situation seems to worsen day by day, and I am not sure what to do about it.[31]

Part of what must have troubled Spinoza was the resolution against him issued by the consistory in his city of residence in June of that year. The Reformed leaders in The Hague had already

[31] Letter 68.

condemned the *Theological-Political Treatise* five years earlier. But this time their attack seemed more personal and ominous. At an ordinary gathering of the assembly, the members of the consistory, whose discussion was entered into the record of their proceedings under the simple label "Spinoza," noted that

> as the consistory understands that the most blasphemous opinions of Spinoza are beginning to spread more and more, as much in this town as elsewhere, each of the members of this body is earnestly asked to see what they can learn about this, whether there is any other book by him that might happen to be in press, and what danger further lies here, in order to report back about it to this gathering and then, after a finding, to do something about it.[32]

Although this did not deter Spinoza from leaving for Amsterdam a month later with his plans to publish the *Ethics* intact, it must have weighed heavily upon his mind. More worrisome than the occasional broadside from the preachers, which he had come to expect, were, as his letter to Oldenburg indicates, the intimations that the secular authorities might, at the instigation of the theologians, be preparing to act once again. Spinoza was well served by his informants regarding the less-than-friendly murmurings about the content of his forthcoming book. From The Hague, Theodore Rijckius wrote to an influential friend on August 14 that

> there is talk among us that the author of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is about to issue a book on God and the mind, one even more dangerous than the first. It will be the responsibility of you and those who, with you, are occupied with governing the Republic, to make sure that this book is not published. For it is incredible how much that man, who has striven to overthrow the principles of our most holy faith, has already harmed the Republic.[33]

If the point of publishing the *Theological-Political Treatise* before the *Ethics* had been to prepare the way for his extreme metaphysical and moral views by first setting out the arguments for freedom of philosophizing, Spinoza badly miscalculated. In fact, given Spinoza's distaste for controversy and his guarded character – the motto on his signet ring was *Caute*, "be cautious"

[32] Freudenthal 1899, pp. 147–8.

[33] Freudenthal 1899, p. 200.

– the *Treatise* in effect made the publication of the *Ethics* impossible in his lifetime. It would not appear in print until 1677, when his friends brought out his previously unpublished writings in Latin and Dutch posthumous editions, the *Opera posthuma* and *Nagelate Schriften*.

Throughout the years, as he moved from one place to the next, Spinoza continued to visit Amsterdam and, in turn, to receive visitors from his home town and elsewhere, including Oldenburg, De Vries, and Huygens. Among the guests in his lodgings in The Hague in 1676 was the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who was passing through the Netherlands on his way back to Germany after a sojourn of four years in Paris. While in France, Leibniz learned something of Spinoza's ideas from their mutual friend, Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus. Tschirnhaus, in fact, had brought a manuscript copy of the *Ethics* with him when he came to Paris from Amsterdam, with explicit orders not to show it to anyone without first asking Spinoza. Leibniz was anxious to see the work, and he had Tschirnhaus write to Spinoza to get permission to show it to him; Spinoza, unsure of Leibniz's motivations despite the fact that they had briefly corresponded some years earlier, said no. Still, Leibniz and Tschirnhaus clearly talked about the contents of the *Ethics*, and when Leibniz came to see Spinoza in The Hague, he took the opportunity to question Spinoza about his views on philosophical, political, and scientific topics. They met numerous times over the course of several weeks. Leibniz says that

> I saw [Spinoza] while passing through Holland, and I spoke with him several times and at great length. He has a strange metaphysics, full of paradoxes. Among other things, he believes that the world and God are but a single substantial thing, that God is the substance of all things, and that creatures are only modes or accidents. But I noticed that some of his purported demonstrations, that he showed me, are not exactly right. It is not as easy as one thinks to provide true demonstrations in metaphysics.[34]

[34] Freudenthal 1899, p. 206.

Leibniz found his discussions with Spinoza immensely fruitful, and the contact between these two great thinkers of the seventeenth century was clearly of great consequence for Leibniz's own philosophical development.

The meetings with Leibniz, stimulating and pleasant as they were, distracted Spinoza from his work on what would be the last, albeit unfinished project of his short life. Spinoza must have begun the *Political Treatise* (*Tractatus Politicus*) no later than the middle of 1676. It is, in some respects, a sequel to the *Theological-Political Treatise*. If the 1670 treatise establishes the basic foundations and most general principles of civil society, regardless of the form which sovereignty takes in the state – whether it be a monarchy, an aristocracy, or a democracy – the new, more concrete work concerns more particularly how states of different constitutions can be made to function well. Spinoza also intended to show that, of all constitutions, the democratic one is to be preferred. No less than the *Theological-Political Treatise*, the composition of the *Political Treatise* is intimately related to the contemporary political scene in the Dutch Republic. Spinoza treats a number of universal political-philosophical themes with an immediate historical relevance, even urgency.

He had barely begun the section on democracy, however, when his health began to fail him. He seems to have suffered from respiratory ailments for most of his life. These were undoubtedly exacerbated by years of inhaling the glass dust produced by his lens-grinding. Although he took to his bed often during the winter of 1676–7, he was reportedly unprepared for the quickness of his decline; he did not even compose a will. According to Colerus's account of Spinoza's last day, which he learned about directly from the philosopher's landlord, neither Spinoza nor anyone else had a clue that he would not even last the afternoon.

> When the landlord came home [from church] at around four o'clock [on the day before], Spinoza came downstairs from his room, smoked a pipe of tobacco and spoke with him for a long time, particularly about the sermon that was preached that afternoon. He went to bed soon afterwards in the forechamber, which was his to use and in which he slept. On Sunday morning, before church, he came downstairs again, speaking with his landlord and his wife. He had sent for a certain doctor L.M.

from Amsterdam [almost certainly Lodewijk Meyer], who ordered them to buy an old cock and to cook it up that morning, so that Spinoza might, that afternoon, have some broth, which he did. And when the landlord returned with his wife, he ate it with a good appetite. In the afternoon, the landlord's family went back to church, and Dr. L.M. stayed with him alone. But when they came back from church, they heard that Spinoza had died at around three o'clock, in the presence of the doctor, who just that evening returned to Amsterdam by nightboat, not even seeing to the care of the deceased.[35]

Spinoza died quietly on Sunday, February 21, 1677. He was buried four days later in the cemetery at the New Church, in The Hague.

[35] Freudenthal 1899, pp. 95–6.

CHAPTER 2

The geometric method

SEARCH FOR A METHOD

The most striking thing that any reader approaching the *Ethics* for the first time notices is its unusual, even forbidding appearance. Rather than the even-flowing prose broken up into familiar paragraphs and organized into manageable chapters that one expects from a classic, reader-friendly treatise, one finds, instead, an intimidating array of definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations, and corollaries. It is almost as if one has stumbled upon a mathematical or scientific text rather than a philosophical masterpiece. Although it lacks the rigorous symbolic notation of the calculus, the *Ethics* nonetheless at first glance looks more like Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* than Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (all three were originally written in Latin).

It is not just neophytes who have been put off by the format of the *Ethics*. The famous French philosopher Henri Bergson, writing early in the twentieth century, insists that "the formidable apparatus of theorems and the tangle of definitions, corollaries, and scholia, this intricate machinery and this crushing power are such that the newcomer, in the presence of the *Ethics*, is struck with admiration and terror as if standing before an armored dreadnought."[1] More recently, one seasoned Spinoza scholar refers to the work's presentation as a "charmless apparatus of demonstrations,"[2] and suggests that Spinoza would have been better off without such an unnecessarily formal encumbrance.

[1] Bergson 1934, p. 142.

[2] Bennett 1984, p. 16.

In fact, Spinoza thought long and hard about how best to present his philosophical ideas. He experimented with different formats, and his writings exhibit a variety of well-worn styles, including direct exposition, dialogue, and autobiographical meditation. Around 1660, he began serious work on a full-scale treatment of his metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical ideas, the *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*. The work was divided in the traditional way into parts and chapters. But by late 1662, Spinoza abandoned the treatise and started over again, this time with a completely new mode of presentation. What seems especially to have bothered him about the *Short Treatise* was the inadequacy of its relatively straightforward literary approach for making his ideas clear, orderly, and convincing. In fact, in the extant manuscript of the work is found an "Appendix," which contains a small number of the treatise's main metaphysical theses organized into formal propositions and demonstrations, prefaced by seven axioms. This represents Spinoza's first tentative steps toward adopting a more rigorous format, and were probably elements of an early draft of Part One of the *Ethics*.

His ultimate abandonment of the *Short Treatise* is foreshadowed in a letter from September 1661. Writing to his friend Henry Oldenberg, the corresponding secretary of the Royal Society in England, Spinoza speaks of his desire to establish with the utmost certainty the most basic truths about God and substance, and is at this time already insisting that "I can think of no better way of demonstrating these things clearly and briefly than to prove them in the geometric manner and subject them to your understanding" (Letter 2, G IV.8/C I.166). Clearly, by this point Spinoza had come to the realization that the best way to go about communicating his ideas for maximum effect was to use the *mos geometricus*, the "geometrical method," or to present them, as the subtitle of the *Ethics* indicates, *ordine geometrico demonstrata*, "demonstrated in geometric order."

He was aware of the problems that this unusual format would cause for readers who are not used to seeing metaphysical and moral questions so treated. "It will doubtless seem strange that I should undertake to treat men's vices and absurdities in the geometric style" (E, III, Preface, G II.138/C I.492). Oldenberg himself – and this should provide some comfort to the modern reader struggling to

make sense of the *Ethics* – after reading the brief, geometrically formatted sketch of some propositions drawn from the *Short Treatise* that Spinoza sent him in the September 1661 letter, found it difficult to figure out what Spinoza was trying to say. "I have received your very learned letter, and read it through with great pleasure. I approve very much your geometric style of proof, but at the same time I blame my own obtuseness that I do not follow so easily the things you teach exactly" (Letter 3, G IV.10/C I.168). Gottlieb Stolle, a German scholar of the early eighteenth century, even claimed that working with the geometric method was so taxing for Spinoza that it ruined his health and led to his early death.[3] This is, of course, nonsense, but it does create a touching picture of the heroic Spinoza, so committed to discovering the truth and, just as importantly, making it accessible and convincing to others that he is willing to sacrifice his own well-being in the struggle to meet an exacting standard. In a less romantic vein, whatever else one might say about the geometrical format, pro or con, one thing is certain: Spinoza's choice of it was not casual or accidental, but the result of a deliberate calculation.

The model for certain knowledge in the seventeenth century was mathematics. Its propositions or theses were clearly formulated, its demonstrations (when properly attended to) indubitable, and its methods (when properly employed) foolproof. Euclid's *Elements*, the most famous paradigm for the discipline, begins with twenty-three basic definitions ("A point is that which has no part," "A line is a breadthless point"), five postulates ("That all right angles are equal to one another,") and five "common notions" or axioms ("Things that are equal to the same thing are also equal to one another", "If equals be added to equals, the wholes are equal"). With these simple tools in hand as assumed premises, Euclid proceeds to prove a great number of propositions about plane figures and their properties, some of them extremely complex. (The first proposition of Book One, for example, lays out the method for constructing an equilateral triangle on a finite straight line; the fifth proposition states that in an isosceles triangle the angles at the base are equal to one

[3] Freudenthal 1899, pp. 224–8.

another. By Book Ten, he is demonstrating how to find two rational straight lines that are commensurable in square only.) The demonstration of each proposition uses – besides the definitions, postulates, and axioms – only propositions that have already been established. No unproven theorems are introduced into the demonstrations; nothing is presupposed except what is self-evident, accepted as a stipulation or demonstrably known. In this way, the results are guaranteed to be absolutely certain.

With this model in mind, Spinoza hoped to fulfill and even expand upon Descartes's own dream of maximum certainty in the sciences. Like his intellectual mentor, he thought that philosophy (understood broadly to include much that today would more properly fall under the natural and social sciences) could reach a degree of precision and indubitability that approximated if not equaled that achieved by mathematics. Spinoza wanted to do for metaphysics, epistemology, physics, psychology, and even ethics what Euclid had done for geometry. Only in this way could philosophy, the discipline that must prescribe for human beings the path to happiness and well-being, become truly systematic and its conclusions guaranteed to be valid. The means for accomplishing this goal was literally to put metaphysics and the other subjects in the exact same form in which Euclid had organized his material. As Spinoza proclaims in the preface to Part Three of the *Ethics*,

> I shall treat the nature and powers of the Affects, and the power of the Mind over them, by the same Method by which, in the preceding parts, I treated God and the Mind, and I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a Question of lines, planes, and bodies. (G II.138/C I.492)

Despite his passion for extending mathematical certainty to other disciplines, Descartes himself was not very fond of using the geometric order in non-mathematical domains. He is willing to do so to oblige his friend Marin Mersenne, who had asked him to "set out the entire argument [of the *Meditations*] in geometrical fashion." But Descartes notes that "I am convinced that it is the *Meditations*" – with their analytic, not synthetic or demonstrative, method – "which will yield by far the greater benefit."[4] Spinoza had a stronger

[4] Replies to the Second Set of Objections [to the *Meditations*], AT VII.159/CSM I.113.

faith in the "geometrical fashion" than Descartes did, and even went to the trouble of revising substantial parts of Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy* and present them *in ordine geometrico* to help himself tutor a young man and further the studies of his own friends in the Cartesian philosophy.

PHILOSOPHICAL TRUTH AND GEOMETRICAL EXPOSITION

The *ordo geometricus* certainly does not represent the way and order in which Spinoza *discovered* his truths. It was not, that is, Spinoza's *method* of *doing* philosophy (as opposed to his method of presenting philosophical discoveries). To be sure, Spinoza did believe that the proper method of philosophical inquiry will yield necessary and indubitable results. For Spinoza, as for a good number of other philosophers in the period, the search for knowledge must be the search for absolutely certain truths by a systematic and proven method. Descartes, for example, defines 'method' as "reliable rules which are easy to apply, and such that if one follows them exactly, one will never take what is false to be true or fruitlessly expend one's mental efforts, but will gradually and constantly increase one's knowledge until one arrives at a true understanding of everything within one's capacity."[5] His method includes dividing a difficulty into parts and then proceeding in an orderly manner from knowledge of the simpler elements up to knowledge of the most complex. Similarly, Spinoza says that "the true method is the way that truth itself . . . should be sought in the proper order," according to "certain rules as aids," until one arrives at a knowledge of the "objective essences of things" (TIE, G II.15–16/C I.18–19).

But method should be distinguished from the ultimate form taken by the presentation of its results. Spinoza did not go about discovering his principles about God, the human being, and everything else by starting with a few definitions, axioms, and propositions and then seeing what he could deduce from them a priori. The theses of the *Ethics* may be capable of being organized into a purely deductive format, one that reveals the necessary connections between them. But that does not mean that one is to do philosophy

[5] *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, AT X.372/CSM I.16.

just as one does mathematics. Rather, what Spinoza believed was that, at the very least, with the geometric format the products of rule-guided philosophical inquiry could be convincingly presented, with maximum persuasive force and (ideally) leaving no room for reasonable dissent. For no one who accepts the starting points of an argument and then fully grasps the subsequent steps of a rigorous, geometric-like proof could possibly deny the conclusion. The clarity and distinctness of presentation would reveal the truths of metaphysics, psychology, and ethics in a perspicuous and convincing manner.

Does this mean that the geometric format, however valuable it may be for what it can accomplish, is still nothing for Spinoza but a mere manner of presentation, a kind of rhetorical flourish? Could Spinoza just as well have used some other, non-Euclidean format in the *Ethics*? We know that he favored the *mos geometricus* for its perspicuity and persuasiveness, for its ability to show convincingly how one thing follows from another and its efficiency in leading one to a clear and distinct perception of the truth. Having alighted upon the geometrical order and thus abandoning the *Short Treatise* to begin anew with the *Ethics*, Spinoza all but confesses that he found it to be the superior format for making known his ideas. But is that all that recommended it to him? Is there no necessary connection between *what* Spinoza is saying in the work and *how* he is saying it?

This is certainly a possibility. One could argue that the geometrical format is nothing but synthetic window-dressing for ideas that could have – and, some insist, *should* have – been offered in another manner. Indeed, one prominent Spinoza scholar argues that there is no meaningful relationship whatsoever between form and content in the *Ethics*. "There is no logical connection between the substance of Spinoza's philosophy and the form in which it is written, his choice of the Euclidean geometrical form is to be explained on other grounds." What those other grounds are, on this reading, amounts to nothing but a pedagogical choice: "to delineate the main features of an argument and to bring them into high relief. [The geometrical method] was used for the same reason that one uses outlines and diagrams."[6] The *mos geometricus* is thus only a teaching or communicating device, an extrinsic garb that can be used for expositing any

[6] Wolfson 1934, 55. See also Joachim 1901, p. 12.

number of philosophies (as Spinoza surely knew, having himself once dressed Descartes's philosophy in it).

On the other hand, one could argue that there is in fact a close, even *necessary* relationship between Spinoza's subject matter and the format in which he presents it, such that the geometric model is the only one suitable for conveying his ideas. On this interpretation, Spinoza's philosophy *demands* that it be written in the form in which it appears in the *Ethics*, as Spinoza himself discovered in abandoning the *Short Treatise*.[7]

The argument for such an essential relationship between form and content in the *Ethics* must rely on a distinctive and important feature of Spinoza's thought: his necessitarianism. As we shall see, for Spinoza there is no contingency in Nature. Everything is necessitated by causes to be such as it is. Moreover, Spinoza claims that the causal determinism that governs all things in Nature derives "from above," as it were, from Nature's eternal and infinite principles (i.e., from God). All beings in Nature – and there is nothing that is not a part of Nature – follow with an absolute, indeed geometrical necessity from God (or Nature).

> I think I have shown clearly enough that from God's supreme power, or infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things, have necessarily flowed, or always follow, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles.
> (E, IP17s)

This being the case, the argument runs, it would seem that Spinoza has no real choice in how to present his philosophy. If he wants to exhibit the strictly mathematical necessity that (he claims) governs reality and show that all things "flow" from God, he must employ a geometrically formatted series of demonstrations that reveal the logically necessary connections that unite (in the proper order) propositions about those things with propositions about God. If things in Nature really do follow from God just as the properties of a geometric figure follow from the nature of that figure, then the

[7] See Gueroult 1968, 15. Gueroult insists that the "geometric prolixity" of the *Ethics* forms a unity with its doctrines and captures Spinoza's conception of adequate knowledge, a centerpiece of the work.

geometric method applied to metaphysics, physics, and human nature would seem to be uniquely qualified for Spinoza's purposes.

This view of the relationship between geometric order and philosophical ideas is a much more interesting and potentially fruitful way of looking at Spinoza's use of the *ordo geometricus* than the one that sees only a extrinsic connection between the two. It is also a more plausible reading. Since we know that Spinoza gave a good deal of attention to *how* he should communicate his ideas, it is highly unlikely that his adoption of the geometric mode of presentation for his philosophy bears no connection whatsoever with the content of that philosophy, a philosophy whose central metaphysical doctrine is the geometrical necessity that governs Nature itself. Indeed, Spinoza explicitly tells us that the goal of philosophical method is to make the order and connection of ideas in the mind mirror the order and connection of things in reality. This means that one must arrive in one's thought at a proper alignment of truths, and especially perceive the logical dependence that some truths have on others (representing the causal dependence that their objects have on other things).

> As for order, to unite and order all our perceptions, it is required, and reason demands, that we ask, as soon as possible, whether there is a certain being, and at the same time, what sort of being it is, which is the cause of all things, so that its objective essence may also be the cause of all our ideas, and then our mind will . . . reproduce Nature as much as possible. For it will have Nature's essence, order, and unity objectively. (TIE, G II.36/C I.41)

Thus there does indeed seem to be an intimate relationship between form and content in the *Ethics*. The *ordo geometricus* is not just a convenient and particularly persuasive way for Spinoza to present his ideas. If, as Spinoza tells us, Nature is ordered with mathematical necessity, then so must our ideas also be ordered with mathematical necessity. For the most part, a person originally acquires ideas about things haphazardly, by the uncritical means of the senses and everyday experience. The geometric format of the *Ethics* is, by the force of its reasoning, supposed to lead the reader to the correct re-arrangement of his ideas so that they, in their new, geometrically rigorous connections, match up with the order of

reality itself. One who follows the work's arguments carefully will experience the kind of emendative therapy for the mind that one recent scholar has seen as an important function of the geometric method.[8]

I would like, however, to suggest a slight but significant modification to this way of reading the format of the *Ethics*, one that should be regarded as a friendly amendment to the interpretation. I would not go so far as to insist that Spinoza's thought *demands* or *necessitates* a literally Euclidean style. Rather, I would say instead that his philosophy finds its most adequate (but not necessarily only) expression in that mode of presentation. The system elaborated in the *Ethics* requires that the reader come to see the quasi-mathematical necessity inherent among things, and especially the way all things depend on God or Nature. It thus demands that the deductive connections among its truths (mirroring the chain of causes in Nature) be clearly exhibited. While the *ordo geometricus* is especially well suited for this purpose, there is no necessary reason why that format is the only way to convey this information.[9]

Despite the difficulty of the work and the forbidding character of its style, Spinoza clearly believed that anyone – and we are all endowed with the same cognitive faculties – with sufficient self-mastery and intellectual attentiveness can perceive the truth to the highest degree. We may think that the geometric format gets in the way of this goal. Spinoza thought that it brought it closer to realization.

THE ELEMENTS

Like Euclid in the thirteen books of his *Elements*, Spinoza begins each part of the *Ethics* with a set of definitions and axioms. These are followed by a series of propositions and their respective demonstrations. The demonstration of each proposition relies only on the definitions, axioms, and already demonstrated propositions that precede it. Thus, the first proposition of Part One is supposed to

[8] See Garrett 2003.

[9] See Allison 1987, pp. 42–3, for a discussion of this more moderate way of seeing the relationship between philosophical content and geometric form in the *Ethics*.

follow only from two of the definitions of Part One, while proposition five is demonstrated through definition three, axiom six, and propositions one and four. This is intended to guarantee that each proposition is established on a solid foundation, without the importation of any unproven claims and unwarranted assumptions that might weaken its argument. There are also corollaries to many of the propositions, each requiring its own separate demonstration, as well as more discursive scholia meant to explain or comment upon the subject at hand. Let us look at each of these elements in turn to discover the role that it plays in Spinoza's overall project.

Definitions

The definitions are the bedrock of Spinoza's system. They lay down the basic elements of his ontology, or theory of what there is (for example, God, substance, attribute, mode); they explain the items of his theory of knowledge and psychology (idea, affect); they indicate the natures of some of the relations in which those basic things can stand to each other (cause, "conceived through"); and they give the reader an understanding of the general characteristics that may belong to them (infinite, eternal, free, good, evil).

The definitions also serve a dynamic function. They provide the impulse that puts the machine into motion and they are a part of the grease that allows it to keep going. The definitions are the initial point of departure for Spinoza's overall argument, and make it possible for the demonstrations to get started in the first place; without the definitions, proposition one of Part One could never be established. And they are used, along with already demonstrated propositions, in the demonstrations of subsequent propositions.

A definition delineates the essence of a thing – what it is to be a substance; what it is to be a cause, etc. It allows one to deduce the properties that necessarily belong to its object. "We require a concept, or definition, of the thing such that when it is considered alone, without any others conjoined, all the thing's properties can be deduced from it" (TIE, G II.35/C I.40).[10] From the definition of a

[10] See also IP16; and Letter 83.

circle, one can deduce that all the lines drawn from the center to the circumference are equal. From the definition of substance, it must be possible to derive all the properties (eternity, infinitude, uniqueness, existence) that necessarily belong to any substance.

In order to do this kind of work, a definition must spell out its content in a perspicuous manner using accessible terms. It must, above all, be clear and conceivable. "A bad definition," Spinoza says in a letter to his friend Simon Joosten de Vries around 1663, "is one that is not conceived" (Letter 9, G IV.44/C I.194). Definitions must also be relatively simple and basic – simple and basic, that is, relative to the rest of the system. Understanding a definition must not require appealing to any subsequent elements in the system; Spinoza cannot employ in his definitions in Part One terms that are themselves not defined until Part Two.

There are two ways to think about what the status of a definition is. On the one hand, a definition can be purely stipulative, a kind of convention or setup about what something is to mean in a given context. The definitions of words, and most obviously technical terms, are like this. When Euclid says that "a point is that which has no part" or "a line is a breadthless length," he can be read as meaning something like the following: "for my purposes, this is how I shall understand the term." On this conception of definition, it makes no sense to ask whether the definition is true or false. A stipulative definition can, in fact, be purely arbitrary. It simply is to be taken as an explication of the term being defined. The only requirement is that in the subsequent context the term is used consistently.

On the other hand, a definition may purport to describe the way something really is in itself. This is the case with definitions of things, as opposed to definitions of words. Understood in this way, definitions are indeed bearers of truth value. The definition of a dog or a lion will be true just in case it accurately captures what a dog or a lion really is. While stipulative or "nominal" definitions are free and self-contained, so to speak, and do not pretend to be anything other than a kind of agreement that fixes what the meaning of a term will be, "real" definitions are intended to be accurate representations of things that, while not necessarily actually

existing – the unicorn has a definition – are objective beings with a reality outside and independent of the definition itself.

What is the status of Spinoza's definitions in the *Ethics*? Are they real or are they nominal? When Spinoza offers his definition of 'substance' or 'cause,' is he saying that this is what a substance or a cause truly is, and anyone who thinks otherwise is wrong? Or is he instead saying "let us assume, for the sake of argument and without caring whether it really is in fact the case, that a substance is such and such, and a cause is such and such"?

Spinoza is quite aware of the distinction between the two different kinds of definitions, as is clear in the letter that he wrote to De Vries. De Vries, who was a member of the "Spinoza circle" in Amsterdam that was working through a draft of early parts of the *Ethics*, had asked Spinoza to clarify for the reading group how they should understand his definitions. "We did not agree about the nature of definition," De Vries writes, and they are especially confused as to whether a definition needs to be certain and true or can be arbitrary and even false (Letter 8). Spinoza replies that "you are in these perplexities because you do not distinguish between different kinds of definition – between one which serves to explain a thing whose essence only is sought, as the only thing there is doubt about, and one which is proposed only to be examined. For because the former has a determinate object, it ought to be true. But the latter does not require this." For example, he continues, if someone were to ask for a definition of Solomon's temple, one ought to reply with a true description, one that accurately depicts Solomon's structure. On the other hand, if one is simply forming for oneself the idea of a temple one wants to build, then it would not make any sense to complain that the conception is false. In such a case, one may validly draw all kinds of conclusions from one's "definition" – such as how much wood and stone one would have to purchase in order to build such a temple – even though the conception itself has no basis in reality.

> Will anyone in his right mind tell me that I have drawn a bad conclusion because I have perhaps used a false definition? Or will anyone require me to prove my definition? To do so would be to tell me that I have not conceived what I have conceived, or to require me to prove that I have conceived what I have conceived. Surely this is trifling.

He concludes that "a definition either explains a thing as it is [in itself] outside the intellect – and then it ought to be true . . . or else it explains a thing as we conceive it or can conceive it – and then it . . . need not, like an axiom, be conceived as true" (Letter 9, G IV.42–3/C I.194).

On the face of it, one might think that Spinoza's definitions are of the nominal and arbitrary variety. Most of them begin with the locution "By *x*, I understand . . .", making it seem as though Spinoza is simply stipulating what the meaning of each term is to be, without implying that this is either a true definition or how others understand it. As he says to De Vries, with regard to his definition of substance in Part One, "I say that this definition explains clearly enough what I wish to understand by substance, or attribute" (Letter 9, G IV.45/C I.195). Moreover, in the letter he seems particularly concerned to show that the validity of the conclusions that one draws from a definition (functioning as a premise: "Let us build a temple of such and such dimensions") is not affected by the fact that the definition is arbitrary or even false. Perhaps, then, we should look at the entire structure of the *Ethics* as simply Spinoza's attempt to show what can be derived from some basic but not necessarily true starting points.

And yet, I believe it is fairly clear that Spinoza does not look at the matter this way. He does not take himself only to be showing what are the extended implications of a number of stipulated but not necessarily true definitions. On the contrary, he sees the *Ethics* as laying out the truth. The book is about reality: its nature, its structure, its operations, and the implications of these for human happiness. In Part One, he is not just saying: "If you will assume for the sake of argument that this is what 'substance,' 'God' and 'attribute' are, then it will follow that God is the only substance and is identical with Nature." Rather, he is saying: "This is how 'substance,' 'God' and 'attribute' *should* be understood, if defined truly; and therefore it is the case that God is the only substance and is identical with Nature."

Naturally, one will want to know *how* Spinoza can be so sure – and, more importantly, how he can persuade us – that these definitions are true. Because they are definitions, he does not immediately provide any arguments for them. One possibility is

that the definitions are "proven" by their consequences. Spinoza believes that one acquires greater knowledge of a cause by coming to a greater knowledge of its effects: "Knowledge of the effect is nothing but acquiring a more perfect knowledge of its cause" (TIE, G II.34/C I.39). Thus, the more one sees how much follows from a given set of definitions, which in Spinoza's argument function as causes, and especially how much of reality they can explain, the greater is one's knowledge of those starting points.

Ultimately, however, Spinoza seems not to be troubled by the epistemological worry of how to justify his definitions. In this regard, he is different from Descartes, who believed he needed to validate his clear and distinct ideas by appealing to the benevolence and veracity of the God who created him with his faculty of thinking. For Spinoza, the truth of a true definition, like the truth of any true idea, is something that it wears on its sleeve. "He who has a true idea at the same time knows that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt the truth of the thing" (E, IIP43). It seems that Spinoza thinks that the definitions are self-evidently true.

Axioms

The axioms that Spinoza provides at the beginning of Parts One, Two, Four, and Five of the *Ethics* are, like all axioms, general principles about things. These fundamental and abstract statements express common ontological and epistemological truths. Although, given their broad scope, the axioms apply to all particulars that fall under them, Spinoza is elsewhere careful to warn that from an axiom alone one cannot derive any particular truth about the existence and nature of an individual thing. "From universal axioms alone the intellect cannot descend to singulars, since axioms extend to infinity, and do not determine the intellect to the contemplation of one singular thing rather than another" (TIE, G II.34/C I.39).

While Spinoza says that the axioms include "eternal truths" (Letter 9, G IV.43/C I.194), it is clear that not all of them have this exalted status. Some of the axioms are indeed a priori principles; others, however, are simply matters of fact. A number of the axioms seem to be governed by logic alone: "Whatever is, is either in itself or in another" (IA1), "What cannot be conceived through another

must be conceived through itself" (IA2). Others appear to derive immediately from experience: "Man thinks" (IIA2), "We feel that a certain body is affected in many ways" (IIA4), "Each body moves now more slowly, now more quickly" (IIA2′). There are axioms that offer insight into some basic metaphysical categories – "From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily" (IA3), "If a thing can be conceived as not existing, its essence does not involve existence" (IA7) – as well as axioms that specify the requirements of knowledge: "A true idea must agree with its object" (IA6). Some axioms even state basic laws of nature: "If two contrary actions are aroused in the same subject, a change will have to occur, either in both of them, or in one only, until they cease to be contrary" (VA1).

While foundational for the purposes of Spinoza's deductive demonstrations of his propositions, axioms are not necessarily as basic as the definitions. In fact, the axioms sometimes seem to require the definitions. An axiom from Part Two, for example, "All bodies either move or are at rest" (IIA1′), certainly depends on the definition of 'body' that Spinoza offers at the beginning of that part.

Unlike definitions, which Spinoza concedes in principle may or may not be true, an axiom must be true. For the purposes of demonstration, it may not make much difference whether or not one sees the truth of a definition, as long as one accepts it as a starting assumption; but it certainly does make a difference whether or not one sees the truth of an axiom. As Spinoza insists, again to De Vries, "[a definition] differs from an axiom and a proposition in that it need only be conceived, without further condition, and need not, like an axiom [and a proposition] be conceived as true" (Letter 9, G IV.43/C I.194). There are no stipulative or nominal axioms. To accept an axiom is to accept it as a truth.

Spinoza also believes that the truth of an axiom is not something that requires independent proof, but should be evident to any sufficiently attentive mind. That is to say, an axiom is self-evident, indubitable on its own terms. No one who gives proper consideration to an axiom and its constituent items can reasonably deny it. This may mark another possible difference from definitions, which, as we have seen, can acquire support from the consequences derived from them.

One wonders, though, whether the distinction between definition and axiom is sometimes arbitrary. For example, why could not definition eight of Part One – "By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing" – have been expressed as an axiom: "If the existence of a thing can be conceived to follow necessarily from its definition, then that thing is eternal"? Is it because Spinoza regards such a definition of eternity as potentially contentious, and thus not endowed with the self-evidence of an axiom?

Propositions

The propositions of the *Ethics* are the meat of the system. They are the substantive philosophical conclusions – about God, Nature, and the human being – that Spinoza hopes to establish. The variety and number of propositions in the work is remarkable. There are 259 of them (not counting corollaries) and they range over ontology, epistemology, psychology, political philosophy, and ethics. They are also highly original and, to his Cartesian and other contemporary readers, very unorthodox. Spinoza may have thought that the definitions and axioms are self-evident to the attentive and rational mind, but he most certainly did not believe this to be true of the propositions as well.

Each proposition is essentially a theorem stating a basic, relatively simple (but by no means easily interpretable) claim. "Except God, no substance can be or be conceived" (IP14). "The first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists" (IIP11). "A desire that arises from reason cannot be excessive" (IVP61). Some of the propositions seem eminently plausible, either philosophically ("The essence of things produced by God does not involve existence" [IP24]) or empirically, from ordinary experience ("He who imagines that what he hates is destroyed will rejoice" [IIIP20]; "Love and desire can be excessive" [IVP44]). Other propositions are wildly counterintuitive and require a lot of explaining ("Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God" [IP15]).

Every proposition is accompanied by a demonstration, which is supposed to establish its truth. (The proposition, once demonstrated, is also thereby now fit to be used as a premise in the demonstrations of subsequent propositions.) Some are also followed by corollaries – closely related theorems and their respective demonstrations – and scholia, more informal discussions in which Spinoza, often in a fit of clarity, elaborates on particular themes outside the rubric of "our cumbersome Geometric order" (IVP18s). A good deal of interesting, important and accessible philosophical material is found in the scholia, as well as in the appendices that follow Parts One, Three, and Four of the work. It is in these that the reader can often find a good clue as to what Spinoza is really getting at.

These, then, are the elements of Spinoza's deductive system. By the end of the work, all of Spinoza's propositions are, through their respective demonstrations, to be taken as established not just with a high degree of probability, but with absolute and objective certainty. Spinoza does not pretend to offer merely a valid argument for an internally consistent set of claims. Rather, he believes that the *Ethics* represents a sound argument for what is the philosophical truth.

Although the geometric format serves well to capture the rigorously deductive nature of Spinoza's reasoning, it should not be mistaken for an a priori argument. Many of the elements, as I have noted, have an empirical origin, either in the senses or in the imagination; and it certainly should not be thought that Spinoza believed that he could logically deduce the actual state of the world at a given time from his first principles alone. As we shall see throughout this study, Spinoza's use of the *ordo geometricus* also gives rise to some pressing philosophical questions about what Spinoza is in fact entitled to claim to have proven.

CHAPTER 3

On God: substance

Writing in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza says that our well-being and happiness, indeed our ultimate perfection, consists in a certain state of knowing. Above all, we need to understand ourselves and the nature and powers of the human mind. But, he insists, this will come about only when we understand the natural order of which we are indelibly a part, and especially the highest causes from which all things bodily and spiritual follow.

> Since it is clear through itself that the mind understands itself the better, the more it understands of Nature, it is evident from that that this part of the Method will be more perfect as the mind understands more things, and will be most perfect when the mind attends to or reflects on knowledge of the most perfect Being. (TIE, G II.16/C I.19)

The highest good for a human being is the knowledge of God and Nature.[1]

Establishing this conclusion with demonstrative certainty is the main project of the *Ethics*. And in Part One, Spinoza takes the first step of his project by proving the most general and important metaphysical truths about God and Nature. His startling conclusion is that, in fact, God and Nature are one and the same thing. Rather than speaking of 'God and Nature,' as if they are distinct, we should in fact speak of 'God or Nature,' *Deus sive Natura*, where the two words are simply different ways of referring to one subject. This

[1] In this book, I will use "Nature" (upper case) when referring to what Spinoza identifies as God, that is, the universe considered as a necessarily existing, infinite, eternal substance; I will use "nature" (lower case) when referring to what we ordinarily think of as nature, that is, the items and processes that take place in the empirical world around us, which Spinoza will claim is brought about by Nature and exists at the level of its "modes."

controversial, even (to his contemporaries) incendiary phrase, which appears in the Latin (but not the more accessible Dutch vernacular) posthumous edition of his writings, would confound and incite Spinoza's readers for centuries, as they sought to understand just what exactly he means by this identification. Is he saying that God is the whole of Nature? Is God only certain universal aspects of Nature? Is God somehow hidden within Nature but nonetheless distinct from it, as certain mystics might claim? Spinoza's partisans and critics seem to have found it especially difficult to determine whether what Spinoza is offering is a devious atheism, with God reduced to nothing more than Nature, or the most pious theism of Western philosophy, where God is to be found everywhere. While his contemporary ecclesiastic opponents opted for the former reading and condemned him for blasphemy, the Romantics would favor the latter and see him as a kindred spirit. The German poet Novalis, for example, called Spinoza "a God-intoxicated man"; to Goethe, Spinoza was *theissimus*.

Part One is perhaps the most difficult portion of the *Ethics*, not the least because of its technical vocabulary. Its crucial first fifteen propositions are where Spinoza presents the basic elements of his picture of God. Essentially, Spinoza's goal in IP1–15 is to establish that God is the unique, infinite, necessarily existing (that is, self-caused) substance of the universe. There is only one substance in the universe; it is God; and everything else that is, is "in" God. We will see that, although its metaphysical conclusions are abstruse and the particular demonstrations for the propositions highly challenging, the overall argument of IP1–15 is, in fact, quite simple and elegant.

SUBSTANCE, ATTRIBUTE, AND MODE

The definitions with which Spinoza begins Part One constitute the fundamental metaphysical language of his philosophy. Some of the definitions are idiosyncratic, and thus it is important to understand the particular way in which he will be employing the terms being defined, although the full meaning and implications of each definition do not really appear until they are put to use in the subsequent propositions.

Definition Three is about substance (*substantia*), the most basic metaphysical category of all and one that would be familiar to his contemporary philosophical readers:

> By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.

The notion of substance goes back to ancient Greek philosophy. Aristotle, whose own conception of substance would be of enormous influence in the history of philosophy, defined it as the ultimate subject of predication which is itself not predicated of anything, or that to which properties belong but which is itself not a property of something else. A substance, in this primary sense, is basically a self-subsisting individual thing. "A substance – that which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all – is that which is neither said of a subject nor in a subject, e.g., the individual man or the individual horse . . . a primary substance is neither said of a subject nor in a subject."[2] We predicate things of a horse – that it is strong, or large, or grey – but we do not predicate the horse itself of anything. Aristotle also defines a substance as that which underlies and persists throughout all changes, just as an individual human being is at one time pale and another time (after lounging in the sun) dark.

Descartes, who is Spinoza's most proximate and influential source for his metaphysical framework, inherits the logical and ontological aspects of substance in the Aristotelian conception. A substance for Descartes is the subject and sustainer of properties that is not itself the property of something else. The term substance, he says, applies to "every thing in which whatever we perceive immediately resides, as in a subject, or to every thing by means of which whatever we perceive [properties, qualities, etc.] exists."[3] Descartes often seems more concerned, however, with the fact that a substance is what is self-subsistent: "By substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for

[2] *Categories* 2a10, 3a5.
[3] Replies to the Second Set of Objections, AT VII.161/CSM II.114.

its existence."[4] For Descartes, this means that, strictly speaking, only God is a substance, since only God has the requisite absolute ontological independence: God depends on nothing for His existence, while all other things depend on God for their continued existence. Descartes is, however, willing to grant that finite, created things (such as the human soul) are substances in an "equivocal" or secondary sense, since they "need only the concurrence of God in order to exist."[5]

When Spinoza defines a substance as that which is "in itself," he is clearly employing the self-subsistence criterion of substance. A substance is that which is truly ontologically independent, and that is not in or dependent upon something else for its being. It is, in a word, an individual thing in the truest sense. To use an example that Spinoza himself would ultimately, once the full implications of his definition are clear, have to reject, an individual horse can be seen as a substance because its being is independent of the being of any other creature. (By contrast, the color of the horse cannot exist by itself, without a subject in which to inhere, but is dependent upon the thing whose color it is.) Spinoza also introduces in his definition an epistemological or conceptual component that corresponds to the ontological requirement: a substance is that which can be conceived or understood on its own terms, without any appeal to the concept of anything else. If *x* is a substance, then one can have a complete idea of *x* – one that tells me exactly and fully what *x* is and why it is as it is – without needing also to have an idea of some other substance *y*. The content of my concept of *x* does not include or refer to the concept of any substance *y*. Again, to use what will ultimately prove to be an un-Spinozistic example, I can have a complete concept of any particular horse without having to think of some other horse, or tree, or human being, or any substantial thing.

The example of the horse is un-Spinozistic because Spinoza will go on to say that in fact God is the only substance. In doing so, he is drawing out the full implications of his Cartesian understanding of

[4] *Principles of Philosophy* I.51.
[5] *Principles of Philosophy* I.52.

substance. In effect, he is saying to Descartes: I agree that a substance is essentially what exists in such a way that it depends on nothing else for its existence; but then, as you yourself admit, strictly speaking only God is a substance; and I, in order to be fully consistent, refuse to concede to finite things even a secondary or deficient kind of substantiality.

Definition Four concerns what Spinoza calls 'attributes': "By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence." An attribute is the most general and underlying nature of a thing. It is the thing's principal property – or, better, the nature that underlies all of its properties. Descartes had claimed that the attribute of mind or spiritual substance is thought or thinking, and the attribute of body or material substance is extension or three-dimensionality. The attribute of a substance, as its essence, is the determinable nature of which all of the particular properties of the thing are determinate manifestations. Thought is a determinable nature of which particular thoughts or ideas are determinate expressions. Extension is a determinable nature of which particular shapes or figures are determinate expressions. To speak of the attribute of a substance is to refer to the most general *kind* of thing that it is. In fact, the attribute is so important for making a substance what it is in the most basic sense that if two substances have different attributes, then, as Spinoza states in IP2, they have absolutely nothing in common with each other – neither as the kinds of things they are nor (since all of a thing's properties are simply determinations of its attribute) through their properties.

Two questions are raised by Spinoza's definition of attribute. The first question is whether there is a real distinction between substance and attribute. Is the substance some natureless thing or substratum underlying the attribute, or is it simply the attribute itself? The definition makes it seem as if substance is some featureless *x* to which the attribute belongs. The thinking substance, or *res cogitans* (Descartes's "thinking thing") would then be some unqualified and inaccessible *res* beneath the *cogitans*. Descartes himself is sometimes not clear about this. He does, at one point, suggest that the substance is the underlying subject for the attribute: "In addition to the attribute which specifies the substance, one must think of the

substance itself which is the substrate of that attribute."[6] His considered position, however, is that while there is a *conceptual* distinction between substance and attribute (I can conceive separately what it is to be a substance and what it is to be an attribute), there is not a *real* distinction between them. Substance and attribute are in reality one and the same – the *res cogitans* is not *res* + *cogitans*, but rather *cogitans* itself considered as a *res*. "Thought and extension . . . must . . . be considered as nothing else but thinking substance itself and extended substance itself."[7] The thinking nature *is* thinking substance; extension or material nature *is* matter, the extended substance.

Spinoza, too, identifies a substance with its attribute. In the *Ethics*, he says that "there is nothing outside the intellect through which a number of things can be distinguished from one another except *substances or, what is the same, their attributes*, and their affections" (IP4d, my italics). In an early letter (1661), Spinoza defines 'attribute' in the same epistemological terms that will form a part of the definition of 'substance' in the *Ethics*: "By attribute I understand whatever is conceived through itself and in itself, so that the conception of it does not involve the conception of another thing" (Letter 2, G IV.7/C I.165). In another letter a few years later, in 1663, after he had begun work on the *Ethics*, Spinoza confirms that the more extended *Ethics* definition of substance, now including not just epistemological independence but ontological independence as well, is also applicable to attribute.

> By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., whose concept does not involve the concept of another thing. I understand the same by attribute, except that it is called attribute in relation to the intellect, which attributes such and such a definite nature to substance. (Letter 9, G IV.45/C I.195)

The words 'substance' and 'attribute,' he insists in this letter, are two names for the same thing, just as the names 'Israel' and 'Jacob' refer to the same Biblical individual. Each name simply stresses a different feature of the thing named: 'substance' refers to its ontological

[6] "Conversation with Burman," §25.
[7] *Principles of Philosophy* I.63.

status, its "thing-hood," while 'attribute' refers to the fact that it has a distinctive character or nature.

The second question raised by Spinoza's definition of attribute is not so easy to resolve. Notice that in the definition, Spinoza speaks of "what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence." This has led some commentators to believe that the attribute is not itself a real thing or nature, but rather simply a way of perceiving things. This "subjectivist" reading of 'attribute' would make an attribute nothing more than a perspective upon reality, and not a real ontological feature of reality itself. By contrast, according to the "objectivist" reading, attributes are real aspects of the world, not merely conceptual projections onto it. Things in Nature, on this realist account, truly are distinguished by their different natures. At this point, the question of the status of attributes and the debate between the subjectivist and objectivist readings can only be suggested; a more thorough discussion and proposed resolution will have to wait until we are further along in the examination of Spinoza's metaphysics.

The third category of Spinoza's ontology is 'mode.' ID5 states: "By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived." A mode or affection of a substance is like the property of a thing. It is a particular and determinate way in which the thing exists. The exact shape and size of an individual human body are modes (or modifications) of that body; specific thoughts or ideas in the human mind are modes of that mind. As such, the modes of a thing are concrete manifestations of the attribute or nature constituting the thing. They therefore cannot be conceived without also conceiving the attribute or nature that underlies them. One cannot understand the circularity of a ball without conceiving what it is to be a circle (or extended in a circular way), which in turn cannot be understood without conceiving what it is to be extended, or what extension itself is. In this way, the meaning of IP1 – "A substance is prior in nature to its affections" – becomes clear. What Spinoza has in mind in this, the first proposition of the work, are both the ontological and the epistemological priority of substance over its modes, since modes are dependent upon the substance to which they belong for their being and their being understood.

Two other elements in Spinoza's preliminary materials of Part One need to be highlighted here. First, there is the claim made in IA3 that

> From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow.

The second part of this axiom is simply a claim of universal causality: nothing happens without a determinate cause; there are no spontaneous or uncaused events.[8] The first part of the axiom represents *causal necessitarianism*: the relationship between a cause and its effect is a necessary one. In fact, Spinoza's claim here, as we shall see, will turn out to be quite strong. He believes that the necessity that is found between a cause and its effect is a *logical* necessity. If *x* is the cause of *y*, then if *x* occurs it is logically impossible that *y* not occur.

Second, there is the all-important IA4: "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause." This is the principle of *causal rationalism*. To know something, to have a true and adequate conception of it, is to understand how it came about and why it is as it is and not otherwise. That is, to know something is to know its aetiological history, to have a sufficient explanation of it in causal terms. This axiom plays a crucial role throughout the *Ethics*, as Spinoza will go on to claim that obtaining the most perfect knowledge of things in the world around us – the knowledge that is the key to our well-being – involves knowing their higher causes in Nature, up to and including God itself.

"THERE CANNOT BE TWO OR MORE SUBSTANCES OF THE SAME NATURE" (IP5)

The first fourteen propositions of Part One are meant to establish that God – an infinite, necessary, uncaused, indivisible being – is the only substance of the universe. The overall argument is stunning in its economy and efficiency, with the simple and elegant beauty

[8] It would seem that this claim is evidence that Spinoza subscribes to the principle of sufficient reason; but for a critical discussion of this, see Carraud 2002, chapter 3.

peculiar to a well-crafted logical deduction. First, Spinoza will establish that there cannot be two or more substances having the same nature or attribute (IP1–5). Then, he will prove that there necessarily is a substance with infinite (i.e., all possible) attributes, namely (by definition) God (IP6–11). It follows, in conclusion, that the existence of that infinite substance precludes the existence of any other substance. For if there *were* to be a second substance, it would have to have *some* attribute or essence. But since God has *all* possible attributes, then the attribute to be possessed by this second substance would be one of the attributes already possessed by God. But it has already been established that no two substances can have the same attribute. Therefore, there can be, besides God, no such second substance (IP14).

The first key premise of the argument is IP5: "In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute." If there is a substance having a certain nature, *a*, then there cannot be any other substance having *a* as its nature. In other words, there cannot be two substances of the kind *a*.

On the face of it, this seems odd. We would ordinarily think that there can be many things of the same kind – for example, many things having the human nature. But, Spinoza would reply, the human nature is not what he means by an attribute; it is not ontologically basic enough. What, then, about Thought? Descartes considered it to be a principal attribute or nature of things, and so does Spinoza. And it certainly seems possible that there can be a plurality of thinking substances – in fact, Descartes himself says that there are a great many substances all having the attribute Thought, namely, all the souls that will ever exist. Spinoza agrees that there have been and will be many thinking things, many souls or minds all sharing the same nature, but as we shall see he denies that they are true substances.

Spinoza's demonstration for IP5 relies on the ways in which we can distinguish and individuate things. If there were two or more distinct substances – something he will eventually deny – then (by IP4) there are only two ways they could be distinguished from each other: either they differ in terms of their underlying natures (their attributes) or they differ in terms of their properties that express those underlying natures (their modes or affections). If they differ in

terms of their attributes – with substance *x* having attribute *a* and substance *y* having attribute *b* – then the proposition holds, since there would not be more than one substance having an attribute.

If there were two or more distinct substances, they would have to be distinguished from one another either by a difference in their attributes or by a difference in their affections. If only by a difference in their attributes, then it will be conceded that there is only one [substance] of the same attribute.

It is worth noting an important objection that the philosopherGottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, one of Spinoza's contemporaries, made to Spinoza's argument at this point. Spinoza is assuming that if two substances have an attribute in common, then they cannot be distinguished from each other by their attributes; and thus, conversely, that if they can be distinguished from each other by their attributes, then they must not have an attribute in common. Leibniz insists, in his 1678 comments on the posthumous edition of Spinoza's writings, that this train of reasoning is valid only if one is also assuming that a substance cannot have more than one attribute. "There seems to be a concealed fallacy here. For two substances can be distinguished by their attributes and still have some common attribute, provided they also have others peculiar to themselves in addition."[9] If a substance is limited to one attribute, then it can be granted that if two substances are distinguishable from each other by a difference in their attributes, it must be because they do not (and cannot) have an attribute in common. On the other hand, if substance *x* has only attribute *a* and if substance *y* has only attribute *a*, then of course by attributes alone there is no way to distinguish *x* from *y*. But, Leibniz insists, if a substance can have two or more attributes, then it would seem possible for two substances both to be distinguishable from each other *and* to share an attribute. For example, if substance *x* has attributes *a* and *c* and substance *y* has attributes *b* and *c*, then although *x* and *y* have an attribute in common (i.e., *c*), they are still distinguishable from each other (by virtue of their possessing, respectively, *a* and *b*).

[9] Leibniz 1999, VI.4b, p. 1768.

Leibniz is right, it would seem, and Spinoza can reply only that he is indeed assuming that a substance has only one attribute. This is Descartes's view, and it would be perfectly reasonable for Spinoza to appeal to such a principle. This would be problematic for Spinoza's project, however, since very soon (IP9) he will need to claim that substance can have many – in fact, infinite – attributes.

The second way that substances can be distinguished from each other is by means not of a difference in their attributes but a difference in their modes or properties – the way we might distinguish, for example, one horse from another not by virtue of their being horses but by their "accidental" characteristics, such as their color or size. Spinoza then goes on to argue that

> since a substance is prior in nature to its affections (by IP1), if the affections are put to one side and [the substance] is considered in itself, i.e. (by ID3 and IA6), considered truly, one cannot be conceived to be distinguished from another, i.e. (by IP4), there cannot be many, but only one [of the same nature or attribute], q.e.d.

The reasoning here is not entirely clear, but with some work I think Spinoza's meaning comes through. Assume for the sake of argument that there are indeed two substances that have the same nature or attribute (since we are now dealing with a distinction between substances based not on attributes but on modes). The way they are supposed to be distinguished, then, is by the different ways in which that nature is modified or manifested in each thing – the affections. But what does it mean to take the affections and "put [them] to one side," and why should it be permissible in the context of this argument to do that? That would seem, on the face of it, to be a clear case of begging the question. If you can simply "put to one side" those aspects by which two things are supposed to differ, well, then, of course there will no longer be any distinction between them. Is Spinoza here guilty of such spurious reasoning?

In fact, what Spinoza seems to have in mind is that since the modes or properties of a substance are only ways in which the attribute or nature is being expressed, then it is really the attribute that we should be looking at. Any difference at the level of modes/affections can be explained and understood only at the more basic level of attributes, since modes are conceived through the substance

or attribute of which they are the modes. Notice from the demonstration of IP1 that the "priority" of substance over its affections to which Spinoza appeals in the demonstration of IP5 is supposed to follow from ID3 and ID5. ID3 says that substance is conceived through itself, and ID5 says that the modes or affections of a substance are "in" the substance (or, which is the same thing, its attribute) and conceived through it. But if the modes can be conceived only through the substance/attribute of which they are the modes, then any distinction at the level of modes must be a function of a "prior" distinction at the level of attribute. This is why the affections can be "put to one side and [the substance] considered in itself." But in the argument for IP5, we are assuming that *there is no difference of attribute* under the difference of modes; and so, when the modes are put to the side, what remains is undifferentiated attribute, one single nature devoid of any numerical or qualitative variety. Thus, contrary to our initial assumption, there cannot be two substances having the same attribute and differing only in their modes, since (with the modes put aside) there are no grounds for claiming that what we have are *two* substances.[10]

With IP5, Spinoza has established the uniqueness of any substantial nature. Every substance is unique in its kind; there is no other substance like it. If there is a thinking substance, then there is only one thinking substance. If there is an extended or material substance, then there is only one extended or material substance. In the end, there will be only one substance, period, constituted by an infinite number of attributes. It will be a thinking substance, an extended substance, and so on, for all other possible (but to us unknown) natures.

SUBSTANCE IS NECESSARILY EXISTING, ETERNAL, AND INFINITE

Spinoza now turns to a number of essential features of substance. Some of these are traditional, such as the claim that substance has true ontological independence; some are novel, such as the claim

[10] IP5 is so important that Spinoza offers a second demonstration for it, in the second scholium to IP8.

that substance necessarily exists and is infinite. When put together, they add up to a highly idiosyncratic picture of reality, one that has posed difficulties for Spinoza's interpreters for centuries.

IP6 says that "one substance cannot be produced by another substance," and its corollary concludes – on the basis of the claim already established that there is nothing in nature except substances and their affections – that therefore "a substance cannot be produced by anything else." Substance, in other words, must be totally uncaused. This is because two things can be causally related to each other only if they have something in common (IP3 – this is what might be called a "causal likeness principle"); for if they have nothing in common, one could not be understood through the other, and Spinoza's causal rationalism demands that if one thing is the effect of another, then the former must be able to be understood through the latter. But IP5 has already established that no two substances can have the same nature or attribute. And this means that no two substances can have anything whatsoever in common, since everything about a substance is explained by its attribute. Two substances that differ in essential attribute certainly cannot have anything in common at the level of affections, since affections just are modes of the attribute. A causal relationship with something outside itself is thus ruled out for substance. (The causal rationalism lies behind a second argument that Spinoza provides for IP7: if a substance were caused by another substance – or by anything else whatsoever – then the knowledge of it would depend on the knowledge of something else. But then the substance would be conceived not through itself, as ID3 demands, but through something else, i.e., its cause.)

Like Descartes before him, Spinoza thus makes ontological independence the hallmark of substance. Unlike Descartes, however, Spinoza is not willing to compromise and say that there is a secondary degree of substantiality, whereby a finite thing can be caused by an infinite substance and still qualify as a substance, just as long as it is not dependent for its being on some other finite thing. Spinoza will stand by the most rigorous understanding of this aspect of what it is to be a substance.

Now if substance is not caused by something outside itself, and if there must always be some cause or reason for the existence of a

thing (as we know from Spinoza's commitment to the principle of universal causality), and if the cause or reason for the existence of anything must lie either in some external circumstances or in the nature of the thing itself,[11] it follows that the cause of the existence of substance must be the nature of substance itself. Or, as Spinoza puts it in IP7: "It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist." Substance exists because such is its nature. But this is just to say that substance *necessarily* exists.

It might be objected that all that Spinoza has proven here is that *if* a substance exists, then it exists necessarily, but not that necessarily, substance exists. However, given its ontological independence from anything else, the only reason why a substance would not exist would have to lie in its nature – that is, its nature would have to contain some inherent contradiction, such as is contained in the nature of a square circle. But we are assuming all along that, whatever else may be true of a substance, at the very least its nature is a self-consistent and possible one. Therefore, since there is no reason either within or outside the substance that prevents it from existing, it necessarily exists.

Substance, then, is self-caused. Spinoza's proof for the (necessary) existence of substance recalls St. Anselm's (and Descartes's) famous ontological proof for God's existence, which starts from the concept of God and concludes, in a completely logically deductive or a priori manner, that God necessarily exists because it cannot be conceived as not existing. Like that theological proof, Spinoza argues that anyone who truly conceives of substance and recognizes all of the proper implications of that conception must conclude that substance exists.

> If someone were to say that he had a clear and distinct, i.e., true, idea of a substance, and nevertheless doubted whether such a substance existed, that would indeed be the same as if he were to say that he had a true idea, and nevertheless doubted whether it was false (as is evident to anyone who is sufficiently attentive). (IP8s2, G II.50/C I.414)

It follows, as well, that substance must be eternal. If substance is not caused to be by something else but its existence is a necessary consequence of its own nature; and if, as Spinoza insists, there is

[11] Spinoza makes this claim in IP8s2 (G II.50/C I.415).

nothing either within or outside that nature that can prevent its existence, then for substance there is no beginning or end to its existence. In fact, Spinoza's definition of 'eternity' explicitly links it to necessary existence: "By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing" (ID8). The existence of substance is not just everlasting or "sempiternal" – that is, a durational existence or an existence in time that simply has no beginning or end. Since existence follows from the nature of substance just as having three angles follows from the nature of a triangle, the existence of substance is "conceived as an eternal truth," a truth that is outside all time and duration.

At the level of substance, then, there is no coming-to-be or ceasing-to-be. Substance abides eternally and indivisibly beneath all the motions and changes and beginnings and endings that take place among things and their properties in the observable world. Spinoza cautions the reader not to make the common and tempting mistake of ascribing to substance features that belong only to the realm of its modes or affections.

> I do not doubt that the demonstration of IP7 will be difficult to conceive for all who judge things confusedly, and have not been accustomed to know things through their first causes – because they do not distinguish between the modifications of substances and the substances themselves . . . So it happens that they fictitiously ascribe to substances the beginning which they see that natural things have . . . But if men would attend to the nature of substance, they would have no doubt at all of the truth of IP7. Indeed, this proposition would be an axiom for everyone, and would be numbered among the common notions. For by substance they would understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that the knowledge of which does not require the knowledge of any other thing.
> (IP8s2, G II.49/C I.412–13)

It may seem that Spinoza has gone well beyond anything that previous philosophers had been willing to say about substance. Descartes's finite thinking substances, including human minds, are created and exist in time, but are no less substantial for all that. But, again, Spinoza's conclusions about substance result only from taking the traditional conception of substance – "what is in itself" – to its logical limits.

In IP8 and IP9, Spinoza turns to the infinitude of substance. But before we look at these propositions, it will be helpful to refer to a distinction that Spinoza introduces in the definitions of Part One. In ID2 and ID6, Spinoza distinguishes between that which is infinite in its own kind and that which is absolutely infinite. Something can be limited only by something else of the same kind or nature; and something is infinite in its own kind if there is nothing else of the same kind or nature that limits it. Thus, a bodily substance can be limited only by another bodily substance. But if, as IP5 implies, there is just one bodily substance, then that bodily substance is unlimited and is thus infinite in its kind. It does not follow, however, that the bodily substance is absolutely infinite or unlimited, since there may be much of reality that does not belong to its nature (or, in Spinoza's terms, "we can deny infinite attributes of it"). By contrast, something is absolutely infinite if every possible positive reality belongs to its nature ("if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence"). An absolutely infinite being encompasses everything that is real.

In the proof for IP8 – "Every substance is necessarily infinite" – Spinoza argues that a substance cannot be finite, because then it would have to be limited by something else of the same attribute or nature. But we know from IP5 that there is nothing else of the same attribute or nature as any substance. Therefore, any substance "exists as infinite". This is fine as it stands, and the demonstration is relatively straightforward. But the proposition is, for Spinoza's purposes, relatively weak. For it should be clear that all that he has established by this is that a substance with one attribute is infinite only in its own kind, since there is no other substance of the same nature or attribute to limit it. And this means that it is still possible that there are a great many substances, each with one attribute, each necessarily existing, each eternal, and each infinite in its own kind (because each is unique in its kind). What Spinoza intends ultimately to show, however, is that there is, in fact, only one substance, and that all attributes or natures belong to or constitute this one substance. The infinitude of substance that Spinoza wants and needs to do this is not relative infinitude but absolute infinitude. He must establish that there is a substance that is not just

infinite in its own kind, but absolutely infinite. This will be undertaken in IP9-11.

In a letter to his friend Lodewijk Meyer in 1663, Spinoza addresses some "difficulties" and ambiguities in the notion of infinitude. He contrasts those things that are "infinite by their nature and cannot in any way be conceived to be finite" with other things that are infinite "by the force of the cause in which they inhere", and with still other things that are really only "indefinite, because they cannot be equated with any number, though they can be conceived to be greater or less" (Letter 12, G IV.60–1/C I.205). The true infinitude of substance, once Spinoza has established that there is an infinite substance, will be of the first kind, what medieval philosophers referred to as absolutely infinite being. For Spinoza, this means that an infinite substance will have infinite attributes or natures, that is, all possible attributes or natures.

> Nothing in nature is clearer than that each being must be conceived under some attribute, and the more reality, or being it has, the more it has attributes which express necessity, or eternity, and infinity. And consequently there is nothing clearer than that a being absolutely infinite must be defined . . . as a being that consists of infinite attributes, each of which expresses a certain eternal and infinite essence. (IP10s)

Each attribute is infinite in its own kind, since there is no other attribute like it to limit it. Substance itself, however, is absolutely infinite, and thus possesses an (absolute) infinity of attributes, each of which is infinite in its own kind.

Now we have cognizance of only two of these attributes, Thought (the nature of mental things) and Extension (the nature of material things). Thus, if we take Spinoza at his word, and I see no reason why we should not, then when he speaks of infinite attributes he is saying that there are an infinite number of attributes that are unknown (and perhaps in principle unknowable) to us. As hard as it is for us to conceive what these other attributes might be, and as odd a position as this appears, I believe it is, nonetheless, Spinoza's view. To be sure, it is possible that by "infinite attributes" Spinoza means not "infinitely many", but simply "all."[12] On this reading, it

[12] See Allison 1987, p. 58.

would be compatible with Spinoza's conception of the infinitude of substance that there are only two attributes – namely, the two known to us – and that they all (i.e., both) belong to substance. But while for Spinoza "infinite attributes" clearly does imply "all attributes," and while this is, as we shall see, all that he needs for his argument for the uniqueness of God as substance to go through, much of what he says strongly suggests that he also holds the more robust thesis that there are infinitely many attributes, all but two of them unknown to us.[13]

Spinoza goes out of his way to insist that although each of these attributes or natures is or exists "in itself" and is conceivable by itself and independently of any other attribute or nature – for example, Extension or Matter does not depend on Thought, and one does not need to conceive of Thought in order to conceive of Extension or Matter, and vice versa – it is not the case that each attribute is a distinct substance. It is by no means absurd, he says, to attribute many attributes to one substance. If substance is (absolutely) infinite, then it has infinite natures or attributes. Or, since substance is not some featureless substratum distinct from its attributes, perhaps it is better to say that substance consists in or is constituted by infinite natures or attributes.

This does not mean that substance is an aggregate or complex whole of which the attributes are parts into which it can be divided. Spinoza argues explicitly against the divisibility of substance (IP12, IP13). Among other reasons, he insists (in IP13s) that if substance could be divided into parts, then each part of a divisible infinite substance would have to be a finite substance; and this would be inconsistent with the demonstrated truth (IP8) that every substance is infinite.[14] The attributes are indeed elements making up the

[13] See KV, I.7 (G I.44/C I.88). For an extended discussion of why only two of the attributes are known to us, see the correspondence between Spinoza and Tschirnhaus (through Schuller, in Letters 63–64). I discuss this issue on pages 141–2 below.

[14] Here the ambiguity of 'infinite' comes back to haunt Spinoza. IP8 says only that substance is infinite in its own kind, whereas the argument in IP13 against the divisibility of substance seems to rely on a premise (falsely attributed to IP8) that substance must be absolutely infinite. The division of an infinite substance into finite substances contemplated by IP13 would presumably be a division of an absolutely infinite substance into substances each of which is, while not absolutely infinite, at least infinite in its own kind, and this is not ruled out by IP8.

absolutely infinite substance, but none can be removed or separated from the totality that is the substance itself, not even in principle. Each attribute is in itself and is conceived through itself. But for Spinoza this implies that each attribute necessarily exists, and from this it follows that no attribute could exist without the others. Thus, the division of substance is absolutely impossible and the unity of the attributes as substance is guaranteed.[15]

Substance thus encompasses all possible realities or ways of being and unifies them into one system. Spinoza will identify this infinite substance with Nature itself, and with God.

"EXCEPT GOD, NO SUBSTANCE CAN BE OR BE CONCEIVED"

With the exception of ID6, God has not yet made an appearance in the *Ethics*. God is completely absent from the first ten propositions. And there is certainly nothing in these propositions that even hints at the theologically bold – and, to Spinoza's critics, shocking – culmination toward which we are heading. Everything so far has been about substance and attribute, basic metaphysical categories that would have been very familiar to Spinoza's contemporaries (especially those schooled in Cartesian philosophy) and all fairly abstract. Even Spinoza's definition (ID6) of God as "a being absolutely infinite" would not have aroused any concerns among the more conservative members of his audience. However, with IP11, the careful reader will begin to get a clearer (and, if he is wedded to the traditional conception of God and its relationship to the world, perhaps troubling) sense of the direction things are about to take.

In IP11, Spinoza offers a series of proofs of God's existence. All three of the proofs piggy-back on what has already been demonstrated about substance, and each makes its case by identifying God with an absolutely infinite substance – that is, "a substance consisting of infinite attributes."

[15] See Curley 1988, pp. 27–30. However, it still remains somewhat mysterious how Spinoza believes the unity of substance to be compatible with the plurality of attributes, something that Margaret Wilson calls simply "a very difficult problem" (1999a, p. 166).

The first proof takes the ontological proof for the existence of substance and transforms it into a proof for God's existence simply by substituting 'God' for 'substance,' a substitution permitted by the definition of God as an infinite substance. God necessarily exists, this proof concludes, because it is impossible to conceive that God does not exist. For to conceive that God does not exist is to assert that God's essence does not involve existence. But it has been shown by IP7 that the nature of substance involves existence, and God is a substance, albeit one that happens to be (by definition) infinite.

The second proof also argues to the claim that God necessarily exists and similarly relies on what has already been established about substance, along with the principle of sufficient reason. For everything there must be a cause or reason why it either exists or does not exist, and this cause or reason must lie either in the nature of the thing or outside it. If there is no cause or reason, either within the nature of the thing or outside it, to prevent it from existing, then the thing necessarily exists. Now there can be nothing outside of God's nature to prevent God from existing, since any such thing would either have to have the same nature as God – in which case it is being conceded that God exists – or it would have to have a different nature from God. And a substance that has a different nature from God can neither cause God to exist nor prevent God from existing (presumably because of IP3, the causal likeness principle, although Spinoza does not cite this proposition in the proof). Nor can there be something about God's nature itself that prevents God from existing, since that would mean that God's nature involves a contradiction. And Spinoza insists that "it is absurd" to think that the nature of an "absolutely infinite and supremely perfect Being" involves a contradiction, for then it most certainly would not be a supremely perfect being. Therefore, since there is no cause or reason either within or external to God's nature that prevents God from existing, it follows that God necessarily exists.

The third proof in IP11, unlike the first two, takes as one of its premises the claim that something actually exists – namely, ourselves. Thus, as Spinoza acknowledges, this proof proceeds a posteriori, although it is not your typical a posteriori proof from effect to cause. And although it works from a premise about a matter of fact,

Spinoza believes that that proof still establishes that God necessarily exists. The proof as it appears in the text is somewhat too compact for its own good, and so I shall try to add some clarity to the reasoning I believe he has in mind.

To be able to exist is, Spinoza says, to have power; to be able not to exist is to lack power. He offers this as a self-evident maxim. Moreover, if something exists, then it necessarily exists, either because it is necessary in itself (because existence follows from its essence) or because its existence is necessitated by some external cause: either way, if something exists, then it is not able not to exist. Now if finite beings presently (necessarily) exist but an absolutely infinite being does not, then finite beings would be more powerful than an absolutely infinite being. For the non-existing absolutely infinite being would obviously be able not to exist (which is to lack power), while the presently existing finite beings (either by virtue of their natures or their causes) would not be able not to exist. But it is absurd to think that finite beings are more powerful than an absolutely infinite being. So either nothing presently exists or an absolutely infinite being also presently exists. We know that the former is not the case, since we ourselves, who are finite beings, exist. Therefore, an absolutely infinite being – by definition, God – necessarily exists.

Fortunately, Spinoza does not seem to regard this third proof as being as important to his overall argument as the first two proofs.

By the end of IP13, Spinoza has established that there is an absolutely infinite substance (i.e., a substance consisting in infinite attributes); that this substance necessarily exists; that it is, as substance, indivisible; and that it is eternal. He has also reminded the reader that this infinite eternal substance is just what we understand by 'God.' Everything is now in place for Spinoza to establish that God is the *only* substance in Nature. In fact, what he is going to conclude is that God just *is* the one, necessarily existing, eternal, infinite substance of Nature (IP14), and that everything else is "in" this substance, which he calls God or Nature (IP15).

The demonstration of the first of these two propositions, which represents a culmination of sorts of the first stage of Spinoza's metaphysical project, is brief and neat. IP14, "Except God, no substance can be or be conceived," follows directly from IP5

(according to which no two substances can have the same attribute) and IP11 (which says that there is a substance with infinite attributes). For a substance with infinite attributes is a substance to which all possible natures or realities belong. Its existence, which has been determined to be necessary, therefore precludes the existence of any other substance. This is because any substance other than God would have to have *some* nature or attribute, and it would have to be a nature or attribute that is already possessed by God (since God possesses all attributes); but this would violate IP5, since two substances would then have the same attribute. In the corollary to IP14, Spinoza clarifies for the reader just what he takes himself to have established: "God is unique, i.e., in Nature there is only one substance."

The demonstration of IP15 – "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God" – is equally short. Modes or affections, by definition, must exist in and be conceived through the substance which they modify. And there is and can be nothing that is neither a substance nor a mode. But because God is the only substance, whatever else exists besides God/infinite substance must be a mode, and therefore must exist in God. Thus, whatever is "can be in the divine nature alone, and can be conceived through it alone." Everything, that is, is "in" God.

And this is where our troubles begin.

GOD AND THINGS

The idea that God is the only substance in Nature, and in fact is identical with Nature itself (or some fundamental part of Nature) is something that had been a part of Spinoza's thinking for some years, although he struggled with ways to express this most basic metaphysical truth. In the *Short Treatise*, we find him claiming that "Nature consists of infinite attributes, of which each is perfect in its kind. This agrees perfectly with the definition one gives of God . . . [A]ll these attributes which are in Nature are only one, single being, and by no means different ones." This is what explains "the unity which we see everywhere in Nature" (G I.22–23/C I.68–70). Nature is one because the substance of it is one, and everything in Nature is a mode or affection of that one substance. "Nature," he

says, "which comes from no cause, and which we nevertheless know to exist, must necessarily be a perfect being, to which existence belongs."

The various strands in this doctrine are more clearly laid out and argued for in the *Ethics*, and to that extent the later work represents a vast improvement over the aborted *Short Treatise*. But even in the *Ethics* it is still exasperatingly unclear what Spinoza means by saying that "whatever is, is in God." What can it mean to say that something is *in* God? There are many ways in which something can be *in* something else: it can be the way in which parts are in the whole that they compose, or the way in which an object is in a container that holds it (which is akin to the way in which Newton, for example, conceived of things to be in absolute space), or the way in which properties or qualities belong to a subject (such as wisdom is in Socrates or hardness is in the rock).

It is important to keep in mind the "things" about which we are speaking. The things that are supposed to be *in* God or Nature precisely as modes or affections are *in* substance just are all of those familiar items that populate our world and that we, in our pre-Spinozistic and unphilosophical way of thinking, took to be substantial in their own right: physical objects (trees, chairs, human bodies) and human minds or souls. Like Aristotle (and, to a degree, Descartes), we believed that these were things that were "in themselves," things in which other items (such as properties) existed but which themselves did not exist in anything else. Now Spinoza seems to be telling us that, in all metaphysical rigor, we were wrong. But then what is the correct way to conceive of the ontological status of these items?

One popular interpretation of Spinoza's conception of the relationship between substance (God or Nature) and its modes (everything else that exists) is perhaps also the most natural way to think of it. According to this interpretation, for Spinoza things are in God in the sense of being properties or states or qualities of God. They inhere in God as in a subject or substratum. This makes Spinoza's account of the substance–mode relationship similar to that of Descartes, for whom the modes of a substance are the properties that inhere in it – or, more precisely, in its principal attribute or nature – and for that reason are predicable of it. For Spinoza, then, just as

motion is a state of the moving body, so the moving body itself would be a property or state of God (in one of God's infinite attributes, Extension). And just as my thought at this moment is a property or state of my mind, so my mind is a property or state of God (in another of God's infinite attributes, Thought). The moving body and my mind just *are* God's nature (or, more precisely, nature*s*) existing or expressing itself in one way (mode) or another. As Spinoza says in IP25c, "Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way."

This is how the prominent seventeenth-century intellectual Pierre Bayle read Spinoza. Bayle admired Spinoza's character, but abhorred his philosophy, "the most monstrous that could be imagined, the most absurd, and the most diametrically opposed to the most evident notions of our mind." Bayle was offended in particular by what he took to be Spinoza's conception of God and of God's relationship to things. According to Spinoza, Bayle says,

> There is only one being, and only one nature; and this nature produces in itself by an immanent action all that we call creatures . . . It produces nothing that is not its own modifications. There is a hypothesis that surpasses all the heap of all the extravagances that can be said. The most infamous things the pagan poets have dared to sing against Venus and Jupiter do not approach the horrible idea that Spinoza gives us of God.[16]

Bayle objected that if things and their properties are themselves nothing but properties of God and therefore predicable of God, then a number of unacceptable conclusions follow. First, there is the logical problem that God would have incompatible properties. The happy person and the sad person would equally be states of God, and thus God would itself be both happy and sad; this, Bayle insists, is absurd. Second, there is the theological problem that God itself would be subject to change, division, and motion, since the things that are modes of God are divisible and are constantly changing and moving. Spinoza's God is thus "a nature actually changing, and which continually passes through different states that differ from one another internally and actually. It is therefore not at all the

[16] Bayle 1965, p. 301.

supremely perfect being, 'with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning' (James 1:17)."[17] This is not just a theological problem, but also a question of philosophical consistency in Spinoza's system, since Spinoza himself seems to say that God is immutable and not subject to change (IP20c2). Finally, and (in Bayle's eyes) most problematic of all, God would be the ultimate subject of all the thoughts and intentions and actions of human beings, including not only all of our loves, hates, and desires, but also the most evil thoughts and deeds conceivable. "Here is a philosopher who finds it good that God be both the agent and the victim of all the crimes and miseries of man."[18] When one person kills another, God is, on Spinoza's account, the true author of the crime, or so Bayle would have it.

Bayle, seeing these as the necessary implications of Spinoza's view of God, basically concluded "so much the worse for Spinoza."[19] Other, more recent commentators have said "so much the worse for that reading of Spinoza." Surely, one might think, Spinoza could not have held a theory that had such clear and obviously problematic philosophical and theological consquences. Moreover, one scholar has claimed, it is simply odd to regard the items that we think of as "things" and as real individuals (houses, chairs, human souls) as actually being properties or states of something else. That seems to be quite a serious category mistake, one of which Spinoza should not be accused.

> Spinoza's modes are, prima facie, of the wrong logical type to be related to substance in the same way Descartes' modes are related to substance, for they are particular things, not qualities. And it is difficult to know what it would mean to say that particular things inhere in substance . . . What it would mean to say that one thing is predicated of another is a mystery that needs solving.[20]

For those who would reject Bayle's reading, a second interpretation of what Spinoza means by saying that "whatever is, is in God" is made possible by a subtle but important change in his approach as

[17] Bayle 1965, p. 308.
[18] Bayle 1965, p. 311.
[19] A more recent (but idiosyncratic) version of this way of reading Spinoza can be found in Bennett 1984.
[20] Curley 1969, p. 18.

of IP16.[21] The language so suggestive of properties inhering in a substratum gives way to a new kind of model. IP16 says that "from the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes." The relationship between God and things, or substance and modes, is now described in causal terms. The shift is not total, since Spinoza will continue to refer to particular things as "affections of God's attributes" (for example, in IP25c), but it is something that cannot be ignored. In the demonstration of IP18, God is described as "the cause of all things"; in IP24, we are told that things are "produced" by God; and IP28 describes the ways in which things have been "determined" by God or by God's attributes. On this model, God or substance is not the subject in which things inhere as properties, but rather the infinite, eternal, necessarily existing (uncaused) cause of all things. More particularly, God's attributes can be seen as the universal causal principles of everything that falls under them – which, as we now know, is absolutely everything. The attribute of Extension just is the nature of extension and involves the laws governing all material things (including the truths of geometry, since geometrical objects just are extended objects); and the attribute of Thought just is the nature of thought and involves the laws governing all thinking things (understood, perhaps, as the laws of logic). Nature is governed by a necessary order as the active ground of all things, and to speak of God or substance just is, on this second interpretation, to refer to that universal causal framework. Support for this kind of reading can be found in texts like IP15s, where Spinoza seems to identify being *in* God with being causally generated by certain laws: "All things, I say, are in God, and all things that happen, happen only through the laws of God's infinite nature and follow (as I shall show) from the necessity of his essence." In a letter to Jacob Ostens, in which Spinoza replies to charges made against him by Lambert Van Velthuysen, he seems to reduce the ontological relationship between God and the world to a causal claim when he says that "it is the same, or not very different, to

[21] This interpretation was first offered in Curley 1969, and reiterated in Curley 1988. See also Allison 1987, chapter 3.

assert that all things emanate necessarily from God's nature and that the universe is God" (Letter 43, G IV.223/SL 239).

There is something to be said for both of these readings of the relationship between substance and mode (or God and things) in Spinoza's metaphysics. Each of them must also face some difficult although not necessarily insuperable questions. There are, of course, the puzzles that Bayle raises for the "subject/property inherence" model. But Spinoza could reply to the first objection that it is certainly not the case that God has the incompatible properties in absolutely the same respects, which is what would be required in order to generate the alleged contradiction. Just because God is happy in so far as God is one person and God is sad in so far as God is another person, it does not follow that God itself is both happy and sad in the same respect – for it is explicitly specified that God is happy and sad in *different* respects. And while Spinoza does indeed say that "God, or all of God's attributes, are immutable" (IP20c), this does not mean that there is and can be no change in God; rather, it is a claim about the permanence of the existence and the nature of each attribute. Spinoza is saying that despite the variability at the level of modes, the attributes themselves do not change. As for Bayle's third objection, based on the apparent impiety of making God the cause of evils, Spinoza, as we shall see, both argues that 'good' and 'evil' do not refer to anything real in nature and refuses to concede that God has any moral characteristics that need to be respected in the first place; therefore, he would not be very troubled by this objection. Nor may Spinoza have been bothered by the oddity of thinking of ordinary things as properties of something else.

The second, causal interpretation must take care to do justice to Spinoza's understanding of the precise nature of God's causal relationship to things. God (or Nature) is, above all, the ultimate and general efficient cause of all things, the active agent whose power explains their coming into being. This much is absolutely true, certain, and non-negotiable about Spinoza's account. No matter which interpretation of the substance/mode relationship that one adopts, one must preserve the special *causal* relationship that exists between God and things. The question that divides the two interpretations is, is it also a relationship of *inherence*?

The second interpretation says no to this question. But – and here is the problem – Spinoza insists that God or substance is also the *immanent* cause of its modes. "God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things" (IP18). An immanent cause is ordinarily understood to be a cause whose effects belong to or are a part of itself (much as the mind can be said to be the cause of its own ideas). A transitive cause, on the other hand, brings about effects that are ontologically distinct from itself (as the baseball is the cause of the broken window and the sun is the cause of the melted ice). It might seem that unless we think of the things causally brought about by God as properties or states of God – that is, unless we adopt the first, "inherence" interpretation – we will be unable to explain God's causation of things as an immanent causation, as Spinoza demands.

The demonstration for God's immanent causation in IP18, however, relies exactly on the claim that our competing interpretations are fighting over: "Everything that is, is in God." Thus, it would seem, we cannot use the immanence of IP18 itself to argue for one interpretation of that problematic phrase over another; that would be begging the question. But can the second interpretation, which rejects the inherence model, still make sense of immanent causation? Perhaps it can, if it can interpret immanence in such a way that it does not imply that the effect belongs to the cause as its state or property.

One important and distinguishing feature of immanent causation is the inseparability of cause and effect. Without the continued existence and operation of the cause, the effect would cease to exist. Medieval philosophers called this *causalitas secundum esse*, or causality with respect to being, and contrasted it with *causalitas secundum fieri*, or causality with respect to becoming (or coming into being).[22] The sun is a *causa secundum esse* of its light and heat; when the fusion reactions in the sun stop, so will their effects. By contrast, a builder is a *causa secundum fieri* of a house. Once the house is built, the builder does not need to continuously work to keep the house in being; rather, the completed house (the effect) has an ontological independence from the activity of the builder (the cause). Now

[22] See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 104, a1.

Spinoza certainly does think that God stands to all things in a relationship of *causalitas secundum esse*. In the corollary to IP24, he insists that "God is not only the cause of things' beginning to exist, but also their persevering in existing, or (to use a Scholastic term) God is the cause of the being [*causa essendi*] of things." It may be, then, that all that Spinoza means by calling God the immanent cause of all things is to stress that it is a relationship of *causalitas secundum esse*, and that God's causal activity is ongoing and necessary with respect to the continued existence and operation of everything else, without also implying that everything else is *in* God in the way in which properties inhere in a subject.[23]

There may also be another way to have immanence without inherence. If, as the second interpretation stresses (but the first interpretation must accept as well), God is the cause of all things, it follows – from IA4: "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause" – that everything must ultimately be conceived through God. This, in fact, is one of the ultimate conclusions of the *Ethics*. And given what Spinoza sees as the logical relationship between the concept of the effect and the concept of the cause through which it is conceived (as we shall examine in chapter 4), it also follows that the concept of the effect is logically contained in and follows from the concept of the cause. But then this means that everything is *in* God just in the way in which the consequent is *in* its antecedent(s) or logical ground. The immanence in question is therefore logical immanence. *A* is in *B*, in this sense, just in case *A* is logically implied by *B*.[24] This is a rather weak understanding of the way in which things might be *in* God, however, and may not capture the intended ontological boldness of Spinoza's claim. Moreover, given Spinoza's discussion of immanence in the *Short Treatise*, where he says that "[God] is an immanent and not a transitive cause, since he does everything in himself, and not outside himself" (G I.35/C I.80), it may appear difficult to sustain immanence without inherence.

[23] It is not clear to me how Curley intends to preserve immanence. He does say that, on his view, we should think of God as producing and acting "on things other than God" (Curley 1988, p. 38).

[24] See Curley 1969, chapter 2.

GOD OR NATURE

Something very important hinges on this question of how to interpret the *in* of IP15, "Whatever is, is *in* God." One of the most difficult and persistent questions raised by Part One of the *Ethics* is just how to understand Spinoza's identification of God with Nature. There can be no question that the identity he has in mind is a literal and numerical one. He is denying that God is anything distinct from Nature, whether one understands this to mean "distinct from and outside Nature" (as a transcendent God is ordinarily conceived) or even "distinct from but within Nature," as a kind of supernatural element within nature. As Spinoza says in a letter to Henry Oldenburg of April 1662, "I do not separate God from nature as everyone known to me has done" (Letter 6, G IV.36/C I.188). When he is well along in the *Ethics*, Spinoza will employ his infamous phrase: "That eternal and infinite being we call God, or Nature" (IVP4, G II.213/C I.548). The *sive* of *Deus, sive Natura*[25] is clearly the 'or' of identification: "God, that is, Nature", or "God, or – which is the same thing – Nature."

But what is the extent of the identification of the two? This is what is not clear. Is God the whole of Nature, the entire universe and everything in it? Or is God just some fundamental, unchanging, eternal, and universal aspects of Nature? On the first interpretation of the relationship between God/substance and modes, whereby all things inhere in God as properties, God must be identical with the whole of Nature, including all of its contents. This is because the properties or states of a thing *are* the thing, existing in particular manner. Thus, God is both the universal elements of Nature – substance, its attributes, and whatever they involve – as well as all of the things that are (immanently) caused by and belong to those natures, right down to the lowest level of particularity. God is material nature (Extension) and its most general features, as well as every particular material thing and state of a material thing that expresses that nature; God is thinking nature (Thought) and its most general features, as well as every individual "idea" or mind that

[25] At IV, Preface (G II.206/C I.544), Spinoza says *Deus, seu Natura.*

expresses that nature, and all of the particular ideas had by these; and so on for every attribute.

On the second interpretation, whereby the relationship between God and particular things is a more external one, God/substance is identified only with the attributes, the universal natures and causal principles that govern all things. Particular things are not literally and numerically identical with God, since they are not *in* God in the way in which properties are in a subject, but only necessarily and eternally causally generated by (and thus perpetually dependent upon) God. God is the invisible but active dimension of Nature, its essences and laws. All of the rest, including the visible furniture of the world, is but an effect of God's powers.

Now Spinoza certainly does recognize active and passive aspects of Nature. There is, in fact, an important distinction that he draws in IP29s, one that shows that the term 'Nature' is, when left unqualified, ambiguous.

> I wish to explain here . . . what must be understood by *Natura naturans* [literally: naturing Nature] and *Natura naturata* [natured Nature] . . . [B]y *Natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, i.e., God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause.
> But by *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature, or from any of God's attributes, i.e., all the modes of God's attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.[26]

According to the purely causal interpretation of God's relationship to things, God is to be identified not with all of Nature, but solely with *Natura naturans*. God is only substance and its attributes. Everything that follows from or is caused by – or, to use the passive participle employed by Spinoza, *natured* by – substance (that is, absolutely everything else) belongs to *Natura naturata*, and is thus distinct from (albeit dependent upon) God. According to the

[26] To refer back to my earlier remark about the use of the terms 'Nature' and 'nature,' when Spinoza is speaking of *Natura naturans*, he is referring to Nature (God or substance), whereas when he is speaking of *Natura naturata*, he is referring in part to nature (the things and processes in the world around us).

substance/property inherence interpretation, favored by Bayle, God is both *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*.

Despite the neatness and sophistication of the causal interpretation, it must be granted that, in the light of this distinction between *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*, there is certain advantage to the reading according to which God is identical to the whole universe, in both its active invisible and passive visible aspects. Spinoza identifies *Deus* with *Natura*. Thus, when he tells us that *Natura* includes both a *naturans* aspect and a *naturata* aspect, the natural conclusion would seem to be that *Deus* is to be identified with both of these. God is both the active and the passive dimensions of Nature, what causes (or "natures") and what is caused (or "natured"). If, as IP29s claims, *Natura naturans* just is God, "insofar as he is considered as a free cause," it would seem to follow that *Natura naturata* is also God, in so far as he is considered in some other way.

With his identification of God and substance and the consequent doctrine of immanence, Spinoza has departed a good way from the traditional conception of God. The Judeo-Christian God is a transcendent being. It is ontologically distinct from the world. Even after bringing the world into being, and despite various trends of immanency in Jewish and Christian mystical thought, the Judeo-Christian God essentially stands outside its creation. For Spinoza, on the other hand, whether we identify God with the whole of Nature or only with certain fundamental and universal features of Nature, God literally *is* Nature. Or, to put it another way, God is in Nature not as something distinct from Nature but contained within it, as some forms of pantheism may hold, but just as elements of Nature itself are, by definition, in Nature. As we shall see in the next chapter, this is only the beginning of Spinoza's theological radicalism in the *Ethics*. His campaign against the anthropomorphizing of God takes an even more extreme – and, to his critics, disturbing – turn when he addresses the details of God's causal relationship to the modes of Nature's attributes, or particular things.