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1



“A NEW WAY OF LIFE”

Every day billions of people devote a significant amount of time to worshipping an imaginary being. More precisely, they praise, exalt, and pray to the God of the major Abrahamic religions. They put their hopes in—and they fear—a transcendent, supernatural deity that, they believe, created the world and now exercises providence over it.

In the prophetic writings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, this God appears endowed with familiar psychological and moral characteristics. He—the Abrahamic God is typically conceived as masculine—has knowledge, perception, intention, volition, and desire, and He experiences emotions such as jealousy, disappointment, pleasure, and sadness. God is powerful and free, unconstrained in His omnipotence. He issues commandments that He expects to be fulfilled, and He exercises harsh judgment over those who fail to obey them. God is also good, benevolent, and merciful, and the providential plan conceived and pursued by God is grounded in wisdom and justice.

This all-too-human God does not exist, or so argues the seventeenth-century philosopher Bento de Spinoza.¹ Such a divinity is a superstitious fiction, he claims, grounded in the irrational passions of human beings who daily suffer the vicissitudes of nature. Feeling lost and abandoned in an insecure world that does not cater to their wishes and yet, at the same time, finding in that world an order and convenience that seems more than

accidental, they imagine a governing Spirit that, on the model of human agency, directs all things toward certain ends. Here is how Spinoza describes the common psychological process:

They find—both in themselves and outside themselves—many means that are very helpful in seeking their own advantage, e.g., eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light, the sea for supporting fish. Hence, they consider all natural things as means to their own advantage. And knowing that they had found these means, not provided them for themselves, they had reason to believe that there was someone else who had prepared those means for their use. For after they considered things as means, they could not believe that the things had made themselves; but from the means they were accustomed to prepare for themselves, they had to infer that there was a ruler, or a number of rulers of nature, endowed with human freedom, who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use.²

A comforting thought indeed, but no more true for the consolation it brings. Such people “who feign a God like man . . . wander far from the true knowledge of God.” There is no transcendent deity; there is no supernatural being, no being who is separate or different from or beyond Nature. There was no creation; there will be no final judgment. There is only Nature and what belongs to Nature.

The word ‘God’ is still available, even useful, particularly as it captures certain essential features of Nature that constitute (at least among philosophers in Spinoza’s time) the definition of God: Nature is an eternal, infinite, necessarily existing substance, the most real and self-caused cause of whatever else is real.

(Spinoza defines ‘substance,’ the basic category of his metaphysics, as “what is in itself and conceived through itself,” that is, what has true ontological and epistemological independence.) Thus, God is nothing distinct from Nature itself. God is Nature, and Nature is all there is. This is why Spinoza prefers the phrase *Deus sive Natura* (“God or Nature”).

Early in his philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics*, Spinoza says that “whatever is, is in God,” and “from the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many ways.”³ All things, without exception, are in and a part of Nature; they are governed by the principles of Nature and brought about by other natural causes. Spinoza can be read either as a pantheist—and historically this seems to be far and away the most common interpretation—or as an atheist, as some of his most vehement critics (and fans) have done. Either way, what is non-negotiable is the denial of the personal, anthropomorphic Abrahamic God.⁴

It follows that there is, and can be, no such thing as divine providence, at least as this is typically understood. Everything that happens in Nature and by Nature’s laws happens with blind, absolute necessity. Every thing and every state of affairs is causally determined to be as it is. Neither Nature itself nor anything in Nature could have been otherwise. As Spinoza puts it, “In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way.”⁵ In Spinoza’s view, this is not the best of all possible worlds; it is not even one among many possible worlds. This is the *only* possible world. “Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced.”⁶

Needless to say, there are not, and cannot be, miracles, understood as divinely caused exceptions to the laws of nature. It is not just that miracles are highly unlikely or difficult to detect—they are metaphysically impossible. Nature cannot possibly contravene its own necessary ways. Events we take to be miraculous are simply those of whose natural causal explanation we are ignorant. “Nothing happens in nature which is contrary to its universal laws. . . . The term ‘miracle’ cannot be understood except in relation to men’s opinions, and means nothing but a work whose natural cause we cannot explain by the example of another familiar thing, or at least which cannot be so explained by the one who writes or relates the miracle.”⁷

Teleology, too, is a fiction.⁸ There are no purposes for Nature and no purposes in Nature. Nature itself does not exist for the sake of anything else, and nothing is directed by Nature toward any end. Whatever is, just is; whatever happens, just happens (and had to happen). Neither the universe itself nor anything in the universe was created to achieve some goal.

What is true for teleology is also true of moral and aesthetic values. Nothing is good or bad or beautiful or ugly in itself. “As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, *or* notions we form because we compare things to one another.”⁹ God did not create the world because it was good; nor is the world good because God created it. Again, whatever is, just is and had to be as it is, period.

Such is the universe that Spinoza describes and establishes through the “geometrical method”—a series of definitions, axioms, demonstrated propositions, corollaries, and scholia—in the metaphysical parts of the *Ethics*. It seems, on the face of it, a

rather bleak picture, one worthy of the most radical form of nihilism.

But there is more.

The inviolable necessity of Nature governs not only the world of physical bodies—where apples fall from trees and rocks roll down hills—but also the domain of human activity, including whatever happens in the human mind. Thoughts, ideas, intentions, feelings, judgments, desires, even volitions—our everyday acts of willing and choosing—are all as strictly necessitated by the laws of thought as bodies in motion are by the laws of physics. Indeed, Spinoza boldly proclaims in the beginning of Part Three of the *Ethics*, where he turns to human psychology, “I will treat the nature and powers of the emotions, 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 as if it were a question of lines, planes and bodies.”¹⁰ One mental act or psychological event follows another with the same necessity and deductive certainty with which it follows from the nature of the triangle that its interior angles add up to 180 degrees. In the mind, no less than among bodies, a strict causal determinism rules, and nothing could have been otherwise than as it is.

This means that there is no such thing as freedom of the will. The idea that what one wills or desires or chooses is a kind of spontaneous act of mind—possibly influenced by other mental items, such as beliefs or emotions, or states of the body, but by no means absolutely determined by them—is an illusion. “All men are born ignorant of the causes of things. . . . [They] think themselves free because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think even in their dreams, of the

causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of those causes.”¹¹ There is, to be sure, a kind of freedom available to human beings, and it is in our best interest to strive to attain it; this is what the *Ethics* is all about. But human freedom does not, and cannot, consist in the classic capacity to have chosen or willed or acted otherwise than as one did. “In the mind, there is no absolute, or free, will, but the mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity.”¹²

There is no point in lamenting any of this—the demise of a providential God, the emptying of the world of all meanings and values, our loss of free will—or wishing things were different (since they could not possibly be different). To spend one’s life in a state of passive resignation or bewailing one’s fate and cursing Nature for the hand one has been dealt is not only a waste of time, but irrational and harmful. It is, in effect, to suffer, and to be (in Spinoza’s word) a “slave” to the passions.

But what is the alternative? Is there, within that eternal, infinite, necessary, deterministic, and meaningless world, a way for finite, mortal beings such as we are, subject to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, to flourish? When there is no wise, just, and providential God directing things to some end, when everything is governed by an inviolable, lawlike necessity and nothing could have been otherwise, can we nevertheless hope to achieve, through our own resources and effort, a life of well-being, even “blessedness” and “salvation”?

It is precisely this question that moved Spinoza, around the time of his *herem* (ban or excommunication) from the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish community, to abandon the life of a merchant and begin investigating that deepest and most impor-

tant of moral inquiries: what is human happiness and how can it be achieved?



Much of Spinoza’s life is shrouded in mystery. He was born in Amsterdam on November 24, 1632, to the Portuguese immigrants Miguel de Espinoza and his second wife, Hannah Deborah. Miguel and Hannah both came from “converso” families—ostensible Catholics whose Jewish ancestors had been forcibly converted—and returned to the open practice of Judaism only upon their arrival in the generally tolerant environment of the Dutch Republic. Miguel was a merchant, and the relatively well-off family was prominent among the Amsterdam Sephardim. Spinoza and his brothers attended the Jewish community’s school, and they helped out in their father’s business.

On the whole, however, we know precious little about Spinoza’s youth and early adulthood—including the reasons behind the *herem*, other than that it was for what the ban document calls “abominable heresies and monstrous deeds”—and only slightly more about the years of his maturity before his untimely death on February 21, 1677. When he died, the circle of friends responsible for compiling Latin and Dutch editions of his unpublished writings apparently decided to destroy all correspondence of a personal nature, thus robbing future generations of any insights these letters might have contained about his life and his thoughts on nonphilosophical matters.

Still, what is generally agreed to be the very first piece of writing we have from Spinoza begins with a rare autobiographical narrative. For a brief moment, we witness Spinoza as he reflects on the trajectory of his life in the opening paragraphs of the unfinished *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, which he

probably began around 1658, just a couple of years after his excommunication.

After experience had taught me the hollowness and futility of everything that is ordinarily encountered in daily life, and I realized that all the things that were the source and object of my anxiety held nothing of good or evil in themselves save insofar as the mind was influenced by them, I resolved at length to enquire whether there existed a true good, one which was capable of communicating itself and could alone affect the mind to the exclusion of all else, whether, in fact, there was something whose discovery and acquisition would afford me a continuous and supreme joy to all eternity.¹³

Before the *herem*, which took place in the summer of 1656, Spinoza and his brother Gabriel had been running the importing business that they inherited from their father after his death. Although the business, encumbered with serious debt, was certainly not a great source of “honor and wealth,” the living it afforded Spinoza was sufficient to make him hesitant to give it up “to devote myself to some new and different objective.” Despite feeling some dissatisfaction with the life he was leading, “it seemed ill-advised to risk the loss of what was certain in the hope of something at that time uncertain.” At the same time, he sensed that “supreme happiness” lay elsewhere than in the mercantile life, with its often uncontrollable ups and downs and its imperfect and fleeting rewards, and he was concerned lest he lose the opportunity to achieve that higher good.

The things which for the most part offer themselves in life, and which, to judge from their actions, men regard as the highest

good, can be reduced to these three headings: riches, honor, and sensual pleasure. With these three the mind is so distracted that it is quite incapable of thinking of any other good. With regard to sensual pleasure, the mind is so utterly obsessed by it that it seems as if it were absorbed in some good, and so is quite prevented from thinking of anything else. But after the enjoyment of this pleasure there ensues a profound depression which, if it does not completely inhibit the mind, leads to its confusion and enervation. The pursuit of honor and wealth, too, engrosses the mind to no small degree, especially when the latter is sought exclusively for its own sake, for it is then regarded as the highest good.¹⁴

Like many thinkers before him, the young Spinoza came to realize that the alleged benefits of material and social success tend to be short-lived and unpredictable. Moreover, they are invariably accompanied by a variety of evils, including anxiety, envy, and unfulfilled desire. Seeking a more enduring source of satisfaction, he concluded that it was time “to embark on a new way of life.” Despite the risk and uncertainty involved, he was convinced that doing so was in his own best interest. “I should be abandoning a good that was by its very nature uncertain . . . in favor of one that was uncertain not of its own nature (for I was seeking a permanent good) but only in respect to its attainment.” In fact, he reasoned, “I should be abandoning certain evils for the sake of a certain good.” Thus, he gave up a conventional life guided by mundane values and devoted to the pursuit of transitory goods for the life of philosophy and the pursuit of “the supreme good”—true happiness.

What Spinoza reveals in these opening lines of his earliest work is that his intellectual project was, from the start, fundamentally

and essentially a moral philosophy in the broadest sense of the term.



Classical moral philosophy was about the achievement of personal well-being. For ancient philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as the Cynics, Skeptics, and Stoics, the concern of ethics was primarily with how a human being was to lead the good life. Their discussions of virtue were geared toward revealing how one might achieve *eudaimonia*, often translated as “flourishing” or “happiness” (with the understanding that such a life also involved treating other human beings in certain considerate ways). For medieval Latin philosophers in the Christian tradition and thinkers writing in Hebrew and Arabic in the Jewish and Muslim traditions, the goal was much the same, although it was now understood as blessedness and salvation in a context that included a providential God. (As some scholars put it, ancient and medieval ethics are more “egocentric” than modern conceptions—more focused on “the good” than on “the right.”¹⁵)

Spinoza fits well in this broad eudaimonistic tradition. It is certainly tempting, when reading Spinoza, to concentrate on his shockingly “heretical” account of God and Nature in the *Ethics*, as well as on his rejection of miracles and the divine authorship of the Bible and on his unforgiving critique of what commonly passes for religion in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, published to great alarm in 1670. After all, it was these bold and radical views that so scandalized his contemporaries, and they have been the focus of scholarly and popular attention over the centuries.¹⁶ However, the overriding goal of Spinoza’s philosophy—what all

of his metaphysical, epistemological, political, theological, and religious theories are in the service of—is nothing less than demonstrating the path to true well-being, to a condition of human happiness that is stable, complete, and not subject to the vagaries of chance. The question that, above all else, moved him in the first place to abandon the apparent security of the family business—and just as importantly, a comfortable place in his community—and devote himself to philosophy was a very ancient one: what is the good life?

What Spinoza discovered, and what he wants us to know, is that there is a particular way of living that represents a kind of perfection of our human nature. It is, in fact, a condition that constitutes true human flourishing, and it even makes us somewhat like God or Nature itself.

If there is one theme that runs throughout and unites Spinoza's writings, it is freedom. The *Theological-Political Treatise* is about freedom of thought and expression—a personal, civic, and religious liberty whereby neither the political nor the ecclesiastical powers-that-be may interfere with one's “freedom to philosophize.” The treatise, in fact, concludes with perhaps the most remarkable statement of toleration of the early modern period:

Nothing is safer for the republic than that piety and religion should include only the practice of loving-kindness and equity, and that the right of the supreme powers concerning both sacred and secular matters should relate only to actions. For the rest, everyone should be granted the right to think what he wants and to say what he thinks.¹⁷

The *Ethics* is concerned with a related but different kind of freedom: not so much the freedom to think or say or do what one

wishes, but rather the freedom that consists in being an active and self-governing agent. One can live at the mercy of circumstances, rashly pursuing and avoiding things whose comings and goings are well beyond one's control. The free person, by contrast, is in control of his life. He *acts* rather than reacts. He will certainly do what he wishes, but what he wishes—and thus his behavior—is guided from within, by knowledge rather than by imagination, sentiment, or feeling. The free person is led by reason, not by passion. The life of the free person is, in short, the model life for a human being.

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Note: Some terms and concepts central to Spinoza's moral philosophy appear regularly throughout the book. These include: reason, virtue, joy, knowledge, freedom, the free person, adequate and inadequate ideas, affect, passion and *conatus*. These items receive page indexing only when it is a matter of either their first presentation or special treatment.

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