

**12. Spinoza's Ethics**

**I**N his *History of Western Philosophy* Bertrand Russell states that Spinoza is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. He adds that as a natural consequence of this inherent goodness he was considered, during his lifetime and for a century after his death, a man of appalling wickedness.

Baruch Spinoza was born in Amsterdam in 1632, the son of Portuguese Jewish parents who had fled from Spain to avoid Catholic persecution. Spinoza spent all his short life in the Netherlands. As a young man, he ran an optical lens business with his brother. But the Jewish community cursed and excommunicated him for his heretical views, and he was eventually forced to leave Amsterdam. He lived for some years in Rijnsburg, near Leiden, and then later at The Hague. He finally moved back to Amsterdam, where in 1677 he died of consumption, aggravated by the glass-dust in his lungs.

Spinoza published only two works during his lifetime, *The Principles of Descartes's Philosophy* (1663) and the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). The latter was published anonymously and was banned in 1674 for its controversial views on the Bible and Christian theology. Once he became known as its author, he was much reviled by Christians for producing an instrument 'forged in hell by a renegade Jew and the devil'. In the work he advocated complete freedom of thought and religious practice and that there should be a strict historical approach to the interpretation of Biblical sources. What was really important in the Bible, he suggested, was its moral message – its implied science and metaphysics were merely imaginative symbols for teaching ethics to the multitude. He also argues, more dubiously, that there is nothing in the Bible which should sanction intolerance within Judaism or Christianity, or between them. In this he anticipated modern liberal theology.

He also anticipated the modern sociology of religion in arguing that myths make a society possible in the first instance. Religion is a binding force which promotes civic virtue and social solidarity; but it also constitutes the greatest danger to society itself when priests gain political influence and myths are taken literally.

Politically, too, Spinoza is a very modern philosopher. As Professor Sprigge suggests, his political theory owes a great deal to Hobbes, utilising similarly the idea of a social contract, 'but deriving a more liberal and democratic lesson from it' (*Oxford Companion to Philosophy*). In his day, democratic institutions were an ideal because they require a people disposed towards moderation, with a strong civic culture and reasonable standards of living and education. Nevertheless, democracy is the 'most natural' form of government and he also argues that freedom of opinion is important – two of the basic assumptions of modern liberal democratic theory. He was himself personally committed to the republican policies of the De Witt brothers in Amsterdam, was outraged by their murder, and opposed the royalist ambitions of the House of Orange.



Spinoza's most important work was the *Ethics*, published posthumously in 1677. It begins with metaphysics, then proceeds to an analysis of the emotions and ends with an ethic based on them. In his metaphysics, Spinoza rejects the Cartesian dualism of mind and body (the 'ghost in the machine' in Ryle's memorable phrase) in favour of a monistic view that there is only one substance: God, or Nature (*Deus sive natura*). God did not create but is nature.

Thus it is Spinoza who can legitimately be described as the first modern western pantheist. In

his view there can be no such personal immortality as Christians and Jews believe in, but only that impersonal sort which consists in becoming more and more one with nature, or God, which is infinite. Is Spinoza saying that God is simply the universe? Well, he does say that God is at least partly physical – itself a shocking claim in his day. But he also says that God is an infinite thinking thing, as well as an infinite number of other infinite things the nature of which is hidden from us. All this amounts to saying that the universe is an infinite mystery, which again is a very modern claim.

Spinoza is essentially a moral philosopher, and his ethical theory is based upon the assumption that our species is 'a part of nature, not a kingdom within it'. It is our biological nature which explains and justifies human values. In each individual there is a desire for self-preservation against hostile forces – Spinoza called it 'conatus' (striving or endeavour). Our passions derive from it, and when we react merely under the sway of our passions we are passive. To be active, we must understand our passions in the wider context of causes and effects – in the infinite causal system of nature, if you like. Only by understanding ourselves and thus rationally mastering our emotions can we become free. Knowledge and self-control are the key to happiness, and co-operation and friendship between rational men is not only a means to, but an essential part of, the individual's true good.

Spinoza practised what he preached. By all accounts, he was an honest, noble and courteous man. When his father died, there was litigation over the estate, as Spinoza's only surviving stepsister claimed it all. Spinoza won the lawsuit, but allowed her to retain nearly everything. Afterwards, he had to fend for himself. He even refused a chair of philosophy at Heidelberg because it was an official position and that implied accepting official ideas and limitations.

A precursor of 'death-of-god' theology, democracy, ecology, sociobiology and, yes, even modern Humanism, Baruch Spinoza was well ahead of his time and deserves to rank among the wisest thinkers.

In commenting on his stoical philosophy, Russell ends by saying that there are times when "it is comforting to reflect that human life, with all that it contains of evil and suffering, is an infinitesimal part of the life of the universe. Such reflections may not suffice to constitute a religion, but in a painful world they are a step towards sanity and an antidote to the paralysis of utter despair".

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