

Avenues from the Written *Ethics* Back to the Unwritten “Philosophy”

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1 *Philosophy and Articulated Ethics*

First of all, let me express my gratitude to the editors of the *Journal of Spinoza Studies* for the invitation to contribute to the first issue of the journal. I belong to the community of so-called “continental” philosophers, and accordingly, my interpretation of this task may be slightly different from an analytic interpretation. What the authors of this first issue of JSS are expected to do is not to present arguments regarding some well-discussed topics, but rather to map the most exciting avenues for future Spinoza research. My own way of doing this will be to propose a holistic vision concerning Spinoza’s philosophy. The main focus will be on the *Ethics*, but I will also touch upon some general methodological issues along the way.

I will present a vision of Spinoza’s philosophy as a whole, as well as some consequences of this vision. My main contention is that Spinoza’s frame of mind is Neo-Platonic: his system of philosophy presupposes a primordial vision in the sphere of a not-yet-explicated, implied unitary wisdom—i.e., what is *before* any articulation by conceptual and linguistic means. So understood, Spinoza follows the logic of Plotinus’s “On the three primary levels of reality.” I then consider the *articulated Ethics* and distinguish the layers of language-based cognition in Spinoza’s *œuvre*, in order to decipher the proper messages of particular passages more successfully. Basically, the *Ethics sub specie aeternitatis* should be distinguished from the *Ethics sub specie vitae cottidianae*. I compare the corresponding difference of these manners of thought and speech to the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic methods in Descartes. I maintain that Spinoza coupled the “synthetic” argumentation of the propositions and demonstrations with the series of other types of texts; in so doing he integrated the “analytic” part into the “synthetic.” I adopt the distinction of the TTP between Euclidean-style and Biblical-style books. Given that the *Ethics* is not written entirely in the Euclidean-style, I maintain that its major part allows for, and even calls for, investigation via the hermeneutical

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method for the Bible. Of course, the part Spinoza considered to be written in Euclid's style also allows for, and even calls for, being investigated in this way, but the reasons for this are different. The approach I propose can help us find support for a preferred interpretation, or help us rectify false interpretations informed by fashionable contemporary perspectives.

My starting point is the conviction that Spinoza's general frame of mind was Neo-Platonic in character. This statement does not contradict the thesis of the effective presence of Stoic and Epicurean elements in basic layers of Spinoza's thinking, a presence that has been convincingly demonstrated by excellent contributions to the Spinoza-scholarship of the last few decades.¹ What I propose to regard as a Neo-Platonic frame of mind can best be elucidated by way of a perhaps surprising new explanation of Spinoza's hints to an *unwritten* "Philosophy" beyond the *written Ethics*. In his remarks to the TIE, Spinoza famously refers to "his Philosophy" several times.² By traditional definition, what is called "Philosophy" is expected to be more comprehensive than what is called "Ethics." Therefore, we can plausibly think of Spinoza's "Philosophy" as his comprehensive system to be composed, in all probability, in geometric order. From the point of view of a comprehensive philosophy (in the sense of early modern philosophy), what we possess as Part I of today's *Ethics* can only be considered a rudimentary nucleus of the metaphysical or ontological foundation of this comprehensive system. Part II, which contains a rudimentary physics and a theory of cognition, and the other parts of the *Ethics* can also be attached to "elements" of a more comprehensive system.³

In this respect, Part II is of particular importance insofar as the wording of its short preface allows us to infer a comprehensive philosophy independently of the remarks in the TIE:

I pass now to explaining those things which must necessarily follow from the essence of God, or the infinite and eternal Being—not, indeed, all of them, for we have demonstrated (IP16) that infinitely many things must follow from it in infinitely many modes, but only those that can lead us, by the hand, as it were, to the knowledge of the human Mind and its highest blessedness (E2pref/G II 84/C I 446).⁴

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- 1 For the thematic issue of the *Archives de philosophie* dedicated to the triad of Spinoza, Epicurus, and Gassendi, see Pierre-François Moreau, "Spinoza, Épicure, Gassendi," *Archives de Philosophie* 57, no. 3 (1994): 457–458. Concerning the Stoic legacy, see Susan James, "Spinoza the Stoic," in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, ed. Tom Sorell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 289–315; Jon Miller, *Spinoza and the Stoics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
 - 2 Two important examples: "By inborn power I understand what is not caused in us by external causes. I shall explain this afterwards in my Philosophy"; "Here they are called works. In my Philosophy, I shall explain what they are." See notes k and l, respectively, in TIE 31/G II 14/C I 17.
 - 3 This would be the "trunk" of the tree of philosophy which grows out of the "roots" as Metaphysics. For the "tree of philosophy" metaphor, see Descartes's *Lettre-préface* in the French edition of his *Principles of Philosophy* (AT IX, 14) in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume I*, eds. and trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 186.
 - 4 My emphasis. The fact that the ontology outlined in Part I enables a comprehensive physics does not imply, of course, that it presents a comprehensive ontology.

No readers of Part I of the *Ethics* who are familiar with traditional philosophical treatments of God⁵ will have any doubt that its author did not intend a complete and satisfactory treatment of "the essence of God, or the infinite and eternal Being" and the "infinitely many things [that] must follow from it in infinitely many modes." Like Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Part I of his *Principles of Philosophy*,⁶ Spinoza's *Ethics* Part I also presupposes a comprehensive metaphysical treatment of God. In both cases, this comprehensive treatment was unwritten and revealed only when objections were put forward by their contemporaries.⁷

One could certainly argue, however, that nothing prevented Spinoza from formulating a metaphysically comprehensive version of his "Philosophy," except the finitude of human life in general and the hardships of his own life in the midst of political, ideological, and personal turmoil. One can even guess that, most probably, this comprehensive work would have started from definitions, the first being that of the *causa sui*. The other definitions could be conceived to be arranged in a way different from what we now have as the series of definitions of Part I of the *Ethics*, and we could suppose that these definitions could, along with passages from the KV and the CM, provide his comprehensive ontology with its ingredients. If one argues along this line, there will be nothing distinctively Neo-Platonic in the reconstruction of this comprehensive "Philosophy," except randomly occurring elements from its Platonic heritage.

However, while such a fictitious reconstruction of a comprehensive work within the *œuvre* of Spinoza is possible, I have another, more courageous suggestion regarding the primordial version of Spinoza's comprehensive "system" of philosophy. The primordial character of this "system" is not chronological, the "system" is not a text at all, and it could not, even in principle, be written. What I have in mind is the Platonic unity of the not-yet-explicated, i.e., the implied and unarticulated unity of wisdom. As a matter of fact, this unitary wisdom *preceding all* articulation by conceptual and linguistic means would have been presupposed in his comprehensive "Philosophy," had he ever written it. Euclid's *Elements* of Geometry also presupposes this primordial wisdom that Spinoza inherited, as it were, when he took over the geometric order as the model for the systematization of his *Ethics*. This triadic structure consisting of 1) primordial unitary wisdom, 2) its conceptually-articulated form, and 3) its appearance in sense experience and the experienced bodily formations is what I consider profoundly Neo-Platonic in character. This is the logic that Plotinus's treatise "On the three primary levels of reality" (*Enneads* V, 1) describes and prescribes for both philosophers and theologians of Neo-Platonic affinity. These would eventually develop the logic of the double movement of *theophany* and *theosis* in the various forms we see in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the early Greek church fathers, followed by Johannes Scotus Eriugena's work on the divisions of Nature. Eriugena's work has been considered in Spinoza scholarship a possible source of the

5 Examples of such treatments are the *Summae* of Aquinas, Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, Hebreo's *Dialogues of Love*, and the *Metaphysical Disputations* of Suarez.

6 But unlike Hobbes' *Elements of Philosophy*, which deconstructs, rather than transforms, the traditional metaphysical treatment of God.

7 This is not to say, however, that their motives are similar. Descartes's reason for having a metaphysical treatment of God was to prepare the metaphysical foundation for his theory of knowledge and its application in his proto-scientific investigations. See Wolfgang Röd, *Descartes' Erste Philosophie. Versuch einer Analyse mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Cartesianischen Methodologie*. (Bonn: Bouvier, 1971). Spinoza's motivation was quite different, as I hope to show in the following.

distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. I will not attempt to broach the issue of the philological dependence of Spinoza on the Neo-Platonic tradition, although I agree with those who believe he had been influenced, at least indirectly, by it.⁸ Instead of detecting the traces of such an influence, I intend to point out the presence in Spinoza of the logic the thinkers belonging to this tradition employed when developing their systems.

If we apply this logic to the interpretation of the *Ethics*, definition 1 of Part I will appear as unitary wisdom's entrance into the world of human language-based cognition, the foundation-stone upon which the articulation of the unarticulated will be based, while the systematic-ontological (not textual) end of Part V (E5p40s⁹) will appear as its vanishing point, a return to the state of unarticulated unity: the world of separated particular beings (the individual intellects in E5p40s) becomes transcended towards the supra-particular unity (God's intellect in E5p40s). The entrance into and the exit from the world of articulations into both particular individuals and their differing habits and acts of conceptualisation occur in mutual dependence with their differing linguistic habits and acts. The so-called "definitions" of Part I, and especially the opening definition, serve the same purpose as those of the geometrical systematisations which they are taken over from formally. The function of both the geometrical and the Spinozan definitions is to begin articulating, in a form accessible to human language-based cognition, what is not and cannot in principle be articulated in its original form, namely, the primordial sphere of unitary wisdom.

In normal usage, a "definition" is taken to circumscribe a concept and thus prevent those who are in some dispute over it from missing each other's point from the very beginning. In Spinoza, however, the otherwise formal-logical tool is provided with an ontological meaning that precedes the formal-logical meaning. The definition becomes delimitation, setting limits in two directions: first, limitless unarticulated unitary wisdom (God's intellect, as it is called in 5p40s) is given limits through the employment of discrete linguistic-conceptual units prepared by the human intellect in order to grasp something of the unarticulated, which is otherwise out of reach; second, there is the *non plus ultra*, the utmost achievement of the highest-level human intellect considered as an articulating spiritual automata, as it were, the achievement reached in E5p40s, which "reveals" what it grasps. From this point of view, the verb *intelligo* of at least Definition 1 of Part I is essentially more than a routinely used, contingently-deployed, linguistic expression of a formal-logical statement. It is rather the act of the intellect whereby it creates concepts—an intellect, which, although human, is in its utmost achievement capable of reaching, even "constituting" "God's eternal and infinite intellect" (Ibid.). This act opens up or "reveals" the spheres of adequate cognition: in the (logically, not chronologically) first step, the intellectual, and in the (again, logically) second step, the rational. They are the backbone of the *Ethics*, the "ethics for eternity," so to speak, within the treatise that

8 After Freudenthal it became common to maintain some sort of influence of Eriugena, G. Bruno, and Leone Hebreo on Spinoza's crucial terms and teachings with respect to his immanentism or pantheism. See Jakob Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's in Quellenschriften, Urkunden und Nichtamtlichen Nachrichten* (Leipzig: Veit & comp., 1899).

9 Especially the passage that follows: "[...] our Mind, insofar as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is determined by another eternal mode of thinking, and this again by another, and so on, to infinity; so that together, they all constitute God's eternal and infinite intellect." E5p40s/G II 306/C I 615.

also contains the age-bound views of Spinoza, a self-identical mind-body unit living in a particular age.¹⁰

In my view, the most exciting avenues for future Spinoza research are the ones that lead us right to, but vanish before reaching, *das Unbetretene, nicht zu Betretende*—to give the floor for a moment to Goethe, an admirer of Spinoza.¹¹

2 Consequences for this Interpretation

It may seem that I wish to revive a mystical interpretation of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Against all appearance, however, there is nothing especially mystical in what I propose for future Spinoza research when emphasising the importance of the unwritten "counterpart" of the *Ethics*, or, more precisely, of Spinoza's "Philosophy." Having stated the pertinence of presupposing a "primordial" *Ethics*,¹² the task is not to submerge ourselves in it, gradually going mute as we reach deeper and deeper layers, as in the tradition of early Neo-Platonic and Christian concepts of *theosis*. Instead, I propose to have a fresh look at the *articulated Ethics* and Spinoza's other writings, in order to distinguish the various layers of language-based cognition and articulation in Spinoza's *œuvre* from sense-experience through reason to intellect as the main layers (while not forgetting such intermediary layers as the "provisional ethics" described in E5p10s or the complex biblical exegesis in TTP 7). If we take care not to confound the layers, we are in a better position to decipher the proper messages of particular passages.

When I talk about "messages" what I have in mind is not so much the intended message of Spinoza the particular person.¹³ Rather, I mean that a text can convey different messages if assigned to different layers of language-based cognition at different distances from unarticulated wisdom. Finding the "proper" message of a passage involves figuring out what layer of language-based cognition we are in. For it is clear that not all sentences of the *Ethics* are equally intended by Spinoza to be part of the line of the geometric order construed to make conceivable the inconceivable for those who are capable of looking at things *sub specie aeternitatis*. There are many particular individuals who are incapable of elevating their minds in this way. And for them, Spinoza mobilises an even larger apparatus than that of the propositions and demonstrations.

This aspect of the *Ethics* that we can call the aspect *sub specie vitae cottidianae* is what Curley's following description can be taken to hint at, even if he himself may have intended it otherwise:

10 This is to justify (within some limits) Leo Strauss's thesis, according to which the *Ethics* is written for eternity. See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 154 *et passim*. The line of the formal instruments borrowed from geometric order is written for eternity, but the other types of text obviously aim at Spinoza's contemporary readers. See below in the main text.

11 *Faust*, Part II: "(Mephistopheles) Kein Weg! In's Unbetretene, / Nicht zu Betretende; ein Weg an's Unerbetene / Nicht zu Erbittende. Bist du bereit? – / Nicht Schlösser sind, nicht Riegel wegzuschieben, / Von Einsamkeiten wirst umhergetrieben. / Hast du Begriff von Oed' und Einsamkeit?" In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke*, Band 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag 1970), 180.

12 This should not be confounded with the chronologically first tripartite version of the *Ethics*.

13 Nor messages concealed "between the lines" (Strauss, *Persecution*, 24ff).

On a first reading it is probably advisable to concentrate on the propositions, corollaries, scholia, prefaces, and appendices, leaving the demonstrations till later. This will make it easier to grasp the structure of the work, and give the reader some feeling for what is central and what is subsidiary. ‘Corollaries’ are often more important than the proposition they follow, and the scholia often offer more intuitive arguments for the propositions just demonstrated, or reply to what Spinoza regards as natural and important objections. The longer scholia, prefaces, and appendices tend to punctuate major divisions within the work and to sum up key contentions. (C I 404)

The propositions taken together with their demonstrations—and the definitions, axioms, and postulates—constitute the first layer of the text, the “*Ethics* for eternity.” The propositions, taken together with the corollaries, scholia, prefaces, and appendices, compose the second main layer, the “*Ethics* for everyday people” that has several sub-layers within it, corresponding to the grades of distance from the view of eternity and to the capacities of particular minds to grasp “eternal truths.” Spinoza intended to talk in various registers to various people, as his answer to Blijenbergh’s first letter and the Preface to TTP attest in a self-reflective way.

The differences of the manners of speech corresponding to these distances and capacities can be compared to the distinction between the analytic and synthetic method in Descartes.¹⁴ Descartes composed the *Meditations* according to the analytic way of demonstration, whereas in the *Principles* he at least intended to proceed synthetically. One can maintain that Spinoza combined the two methods: coupling the “synthetic” argumentation of the propositions and demonstrations with the series of other types of texts, he in turn attempted to integrate the “analytic” part into the “synthetic.”¹⁵

To make my proposal more graspable, we can adopt the famous distinction of the TTP between Euclidean-style¹⁶ and Biblical-style books.¹⁷ Given the obvious fact that not all of the *Ethics* is written in the Euclidean-style, we must uphold the thesis that its major part allows, and even needs to be investigated by way of, the hermeneutical method Spinoza developed for the Bible and all the books not following the Euclidean method.¹⁸ Undoubtedly, the demonstrations in geometrical order

14 See the closing passages of Descartes’s reply to the second series of objections to the *Meditations*, AT VII, 155ff; René Descartes, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume II*, eds. and trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 110–113.

15 This can also become part of an answer to the time-honoured query of why Spinoza did not write a preface to the *Ethics*.

16 “Euclid wrote only about things quite simple and most intelligible. Anyone can easily explain his work in any language. To grasp his intention and be certain of his true meaning we don’t need a complete knowledge of the language he wrote in, but only a quite ordinary [...] knowledge. Nor do we need to know about his life, concerns and customs, or in what language, to whom and when he wrote, or the fate of his book, or its various readings, or how and by whose deliberation it was accepted. What I’ve said here about Euclid must be said about everyone who has written about things by their nature perceptible.” TTP 7.67/G III 111/C II 185.

17 As for the interpretation of the Bible, Spinoza maintains that it “agrees completely” with “the method of interpreting nature” that “consists above all in putting together a history of nature, from which, as from certain data, we infer the definitions of natural things. In the same way, to interpret Scripture it is necessary to prepare a straightforward history of Scripture and to infer from it the mind of Scripture’s authors, by legitimate inferences, as from certain data and principles.” TTP 7.8/G III 98/C II 171.

18 As the well-established practice of thorough philological interpretation of even the *Ethics* attests, that consists in precisely what Spinoza believes appropriate for the interpretation of the Bible (instead of “sacred” we must read

are the closest to eternal truths and unarticulated unitary wisdom, and so they are to be taken to constitute Euclidean-style ethics within the *Ethics*, one that does not need philological-hermeneutical investigations to be understood. In contrast, the prefaces, corollaries, scholia, and appendices represent Spinoza's commitment to supporting, with comments and elucidations of the truths put forward in geometric order, those who are less speculative-minded than the philosopher. No doubt, the comments contain sentences Spinoza considered to be true. Yet they cannot claim the same adequacy and authority as the propositions and demonstrations of Euclidean-style ethics. They even have different grades of adequacy, closely related to the way in which Spinoza distinguishes grades of adequacy when he talks about the advantages of intellectual knowledge as opposed to rational cognition, or when he prefers certain affects of joy—hope, for instance—to the opposite affects of sadness—fear, for instance—for andragogic reasons.

By way of a conclusion, I would like to mention an example of how to apply the proposed hermeneutical method of determining the proper layer of a passage before interpreting it (perhaps) precipitously.

In E3p2s, Spinoza famously and vehemently supports those who believe bodies can act for themselves and even against their souls or minds. A short passage from this scholium suffices to exemplify this view:

And of course, no one has yet determined what the Body can do, i.e., experience has not yet taught anyone what the Body can do from the laws of nature alone, insofar as nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the Mind. For no one has yet come to know the structure of the Body so accurately that he could explain all its functions—not to mention that many things are observed in the lower Animals that far surpass human ingenuity, and that sleepwalkers do a great many things in their sleep that they would not dare to awake. This shows well enough that the Body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its Mind wonders at (E3p2s/G II 142/C I 495).

This quotation can almost be seen as prefiguring Nietzsche's invective in Zarathustra's speech against "the Despisers of the Body."¹⁹

However, Spinoza can in no way be identified with Nietzsche, and he certainly would not have written sentences such as

But the awakened, the knowing one says: body am I through and through, and nothing besides; and soul is just a word for something on the body.²⁰

"canonical"): "this history must describe fully, with respect to all the books [...], the circumstances of which a record has been preserved, viz. the life, character, and concerns of the author of each book, who he was, on what occasion he wrote, at what time, for whom and finally, in what language. Next, it must relate the fate of each book: how it was first received, into whose hands it fell, how many different readings of it there were, by whose deliberation it was accepted among the sacred books." TTP 7.23/G III 101/C II 175.

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. Adrian del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chapter 4, the title of which reads "On the Despisers of the Body".

20 Ibid., 23.

One of Spinoza's main teachings is the identity of body and soul, or mind: both are expressions, modes of one and the same substance conceived under different attributes. According to the complementary theses in E2p7 (G II 89–90/C I 451–452) and E5p1 (G II 281/C I 597, together with its demonstration):

P7: The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.

P1: In just the same way as thoughts and ideas of things are ordered and connected in the Mind, so the affections of the body, or images of things are ordered and connected in the body.

Dem.: The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things (by IIP7), and vice versa, the order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas (by IIP6C and P7). So just as the order and connection of ideas happens in the Mind according to the order and connection of affections of the Body (by IIP1 8), so vice versa (by IIIP2), the order and connection of affections of the Body happens as thoughts and ideas of things are ordered and connected in the Mind, q.e.d.

Spinoza's standpoint is evident from propositions and demonstrations that are part of the *Ethics* for eternity, written in the strict geometric order. Therefore, a scholium that seems to contradict his demonstrated teaching can only be regarded as a text intended to support those who are rendered uncertain concerning this very teaching because of the influence of "idealists" overemphasising the relevance of the soul or mind against the body; Curley refers to Wolfson suggesting the §§ 7–17 of Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* as a possible target (see C I 495). So when Spinoza overemphasises the relevance of the body against the soul or mind, this must be considered as an "andragogic" stratagem, as it were, used to rectify the crooked stick, to counterbalance a false view by leaning to the opposite view (which is equally false if taken in itself, one-sidedly).

I do not maintain that this device of distinguishing the *Ethics sub specie aeternitatis* from the *Ethics sub specie vitae cottidianae* will or would revolutionise future Spinoza scholarship. In fact, I do not think at all that Spinoza scholarship needs to be revolutionised. What it does need is a gradual evolution resulting from the interdependence of historically and systematically-oriented types of doing philosophy mutually fertilising each other. As far as the main doctrine is concerned, Spinoza's philosophy can be understood, and the influential interpretations of even the past generations of Spinoza scholars will not cease to serve as so many inevitable points of orientation for any future generation. The device I propose to adopt can be useful when we strive to support one interpretation over alternative ones, or when facing a trend that relies on a false interpretation on the basis of a fashionable contemporary perspective. As in the above example, I believe we can rectify it by pointing out the subordinated systematic place of the passage that seems to corroborate the unacceptable interpretation.

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