



The Life of Spinoza

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Baruch de Spinoza was born into the Jewish community of Amsterdam on November 24, 1632. His parents were Jews who had fled, along with many others, from the vicious intolerance of the Inquisition to the limited and hesitant freedom of Holland. At the time Spinoza was born, the Jewish refugees had already established themselves to a certain extent in their new home. They had won, for example, the important right to build a synagogue. Still, they did not enjoy the complete freedom and peace of mind of an independent and securely protected people. Although one could be a Jew in Amsterdam, one had to be a Jew with considerable circumspection. Whatever might prove in any way offensive to the political authority had to be scrupulously eschewed. For, as is always the case, minority groups which are simply tolerated have to suffer for the offenses of any of their members. The Jews of Amsterdam thoroughly understood this. They knew that any significant default on the part of one member of their community would not, in all likelihood, be considered by the authorities to be a default of that one person alone—a failing quite in the order of human nature; they knew it would be considered a manifestation of an essential vice characteristic of the whole community. And the whole community would have to suffer, in consequence, an exaggerated punishment which the individual delinquent himself may well not merit.

It was inevitable that the intellectual life of the Jews of Amsterdam should bear the marks of their inner and outer social constraints. Their intellectual life was cramped and ineffectual. Indiscriminate erudition, not independent thought, was all the Jewish leaders, connected in one way or another with the Synagogue, were able to achieve. It was far safer to cling to the innocuous past than it was to strike out boldly into the future. Any independence of thought that was likely to prove socially dangerous as well as schismatic was promptly suppressed. The humiliation and excommunication (circa 1640) of the indecisive martyr Uriel da Costa when he ventured to entertain doctrines that were not orthodox, were prompted as much by political as by religious considerations. It is true, many of the faithful were attracted by Cabbalistic wonders and the strange hope of being saved from a bitter exile by a Messianic Sabbatai Zevi. But these wayward deviations, in reality not so very far removed from orthodox tradition, exhibited only the more clearly the fearsome inner insecurity which a strained formalism in thought and habit bravely attempted to cover.

In such social and intellectual atmosphere Spinoza grew up. Of his early life, practically nothing is known. His parents, we know, were at least fairly well-to-do, for Spinoza received a good education. And we know that he was, when about fifteen years of age, one of the most brilliant and promising of Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira's pupils. Everyone who then knew Spinoza expected great things of him. He proved himself to be a very acute rabbinical student; at that early age already somewhat too critical, if anything, to suit the orthodox. But all felt reasonably confident he would become a distinguished Rabbi, and perhaps a great commentator of the Bible. Of course, of the orthodox sort.

But the Rabbis were early disillusioned. Spinoza soon found the learning of the Synagogue

insufficient and unsatisfactory. He sought the wisdom of secular philosophy and science. But in order to satisfy his intellectual desires it was necessary to study Latin. And Latin was not taught in the Synagogue.

An anonymous German taught Spinoza the rudiments of the language that was to enable him to enter into the important current of modern ideas especially embodied in the philosophy of Descartes. Francis Van den Ende gave him a thorough technical, not literary, mastery of it. And Van den Ende taught Spinoza much more besides. He acquainted him with the literature of antiquity; he gave him a sound knowledge of the contemporary fundamentals of physiology and physics; and it was he possibly, who introduced him to the philosophy of Descartes and the lyrical philosophic speculation of Bruno. He did much also (we may easily infer) to encourage the independence of mind and the freedom in thinking Spinoza had already manifested in no inconsiderable degree. For although this Van den Ende was a Catholic physician and Latin master by profession, he was a free thinker in spirit and reputation. And if we are to believe the horrified public suspicion, he taught a select few of his Latin pupils the grounds of his heterodox belief. As one can easily understand, to study Latin with Van den Ende was not the most innocent thing one could do. Certainly, to become a favorite pupil and assistant teacher of Van den Ende's was, socially, decidedly bad. But Spinoza was not deterred by the possible social consequences of his search for knowledge and truth. He took full advantage of his opportunities and did not hesitate to follow wherever his master might lead.

Van den Ende was also something of a political adventurer; he finally paid the unsuccessful conspirator's price on the gallows in Paris. It is not at all unlikely that Spinoza's hard-headed political and ethical realism was, in significant measure, due to his early intimacy with his variously gifted and interesting Latin master. We know that Spinoza was at least strongly attracted, in later life, by the Italian political insurgent Masaniello, for Spinoza drew a portrait of himself in the Italian's costume. Machiavelli's influence, too, upon Spinoza was very great—an influence that would but be a continuation of Van den Ende's.

Spinoza may have been indebted to Van den Ende for one other thing: his only recorded romance. There is some question about this indebtedness because tradition does not speak very confidently, in some essentials, about Van den Ende's daughter Clara Maria. Clara, tradition is agreed, was intellectually and artistically well endowed, although she was not very good looking. In her father's absence on political affairs she took his place in the school, teaching music as well as Latin. But tradition is somewhat disconcerting when it comes[xv] to Clara's age when Spinoza knew her. According to some chronological researches, the fair object of Spinoza's supposed devotion, was only twelve years old. Hardly of an age to warrant Spinoza's love, unless he loved her as Dante loved Beatrice. A somewhat improbable possibility. The tradition that is less sparing of Clara's age is, however, even more sparing of her character: the success of Spinoza's supposed rival—a fellow-student by name, Kerkrinck—is attributed to the seductive powers of a pearl necklace. In spite of the fact that tradition reckons this gift to have been of decisive importance, one does not like to believe that a girl of high intellectual and artistic ability could be so easily and fatefully overcome by a mere trinket. Still less does one like to believe that Spinoza fell in love with a girl whose mind was so far removed from the joys that are eternal and spiritual. But, of course, it is conceivable that the girl took the trinket symbolically; or else that Spinoza, who had given all his time to rabbinical and philosophical studies was, in the circumstances, quite justifiably deceived.

Spinoza had not yet been graduated from his student days when the Synagogue thought him a fit object for official censure and threat. It seems Spinoza was betrayed into overt indiscretion by two fellow-students from the Synagogue, who asked for his opinion regarding the existence of angels, the corporeality of God and the immortality of the soul. Spinoza's answers were

not complete, but incomplete as they were, they yet revealed a mind that was, to the faithful, shockingly astray from the orthodox path. Spinoza was to have elaborated upon his answers at a later date but the students had heard, apparently, quite enough. Instead of returning to Spinoza they went to the authorities of the Synagogue. The authorities were quite disposed by Spinoza's association with Van den Ende and his perceptible neglect of ceremonial observances, to believe him capable of any intellectual villainy. They promptly set about to reclaim the erring soul. Report has it they sought two means: they offered Spinoza an annuity of 1,000 florins if he would, in all overt ways, speech and action, conform to the established opinions and customs of the Synagogue; or, if he did not see the wisdom and profit of compliance, they threatened to isolate him by excommunication. Again social politics as much as established religion demanded the action the Synagogue took. Their experience with Uriel da Costa was still very fresh in their minds and they must have felt fairly confident that Spinoza would be warned by the fate of his heretical predecessor if not counseled by the wisdom of the Fathers. But Spinoza was of a firmness they did not reckon on. He did not hearken to their censure nor cower at their threat. The thirty days or so in which he was given to reform passed without discovering in him any change. Excommunication had to be pronounced. When barely twenty-four years old, Spinoza found himself cut off from the race of Israel with all the prescribed curses of excommunication upon his head.

Spinoza was not present when excommunication was pronounced upon him. He had left Amsterdam to stay with some Collegiant friends on the Ouwkerk road, for, so one tradition relates, an attempt had been made by one of the over-righteous upon Spinoza's life soon[xvii] after he became an object of official displeasure. Although Spinoza was, throughout his life, ready to suffer the consequences of his opinions and actions, he at no time had the least aspiration to become a martyr. When Spinoza heard of his excommunication he sent a spirited and unyielding reply. The spirit if not the words of that reply (not yet discovered) eventually made its way into the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. For the rest of his life, whenever he had occasion to refer to the Jews, Spinoza referred to them as he did to the Gentiles—a race to which he did not belong. And immediately, with the perfect grace and humor of a cultured mind, he changed his name from Baruch to Benedict, quite confident one can be as blessed in Latin as in Hebrew.

The subsequent course of Spinoza's life was almost completely untroubled, though it was unmitigatingly austere. He took up the trade of polishing lenses as a means of earning his simple bread. He was somewhat influenced in his decision by the advice in the *Ethics of the Fathers* that every one should do some manual work. But it was also quite the fashion at that period for learned men, interested in science, to polish lenses, as a hobby of course, not as a means of support. Spinoza's choice was not altogether wise in spite of its learned associations and the fact that he soon gained an enviable reputation as a young scientist. The early recognition Spinoza received from men like Henry Oldenburg, the first secretary of the Royal Society, from Robert Boyle and Huyghens, was hardly adequate recompense for the fine dust he ground which aggravated his inherited tuberculosis and undoubtedly considerably hastened his death. Spinoza's accomplishment in his chosen trade was not merely practical. Many looked forward, with warranted confidence, to the time when Spinoza would make a distinguished contribution to the science of optics. But the only strictly scientific work Spinoza left behind (long considered to have been lost) was a short treatise on the rainbow.

All Spinoza's intellectual energy went into service of his philosophy. His earliest philosophical work (rediscovered (1862) in translated Dutch manuscript) was a *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*. It is a fragmentary, uneven work, chiefly valuable for the insight it gives into the workings and development of Spinoza's mind. The *Ethics*, in the completed form in

which we have it (no manuscript of it is extant) has the incredible appearance of a system of philosophy sprung full-grown from an unhesitating mind. Even a most cursory reading of the *Short Treatise* completely dispels this preposterous illusion. The *Ethics* was the product of prolonged and critical toil.

But just how prolonged it is difficult to say. For already as early as 1665 almost four-fifths of the *Ethics* seems to have been written. We learn as much from a letter Spinoza wrote to one of his friends promising to send him the “third part” of his philosophy up to the eightieth proposition. From the letter it is fairly clear that at that time the *Ethics* was divided into three, not five, parts. Also, in letters written that same year to William Blyenbergh one finds expressed some of the chief conclusions published five years later in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. And Spinoza[xix] wrote, at this early period, not conjecturally or speculatively, but as one writes who knows the firm and tested grounds of his belief. Why the *Ethics*, in final form, began to circulate privately only two or three years before Spinoza’s death, and why his work on *The Improvement of the Understanding* and his *Political Treatise* were left unfinished, must remain something of an insoluble philosophico-literary mystery.

The only book Spinoza published in his own lifetime above his own name was his *Principles of Descartes’ Philosophy Geometrically Demonstrated* with an appendix of *Cogitata Metaphysica* which he had dictated to a youth (one “Cæsarius”) “to whom (he) did not wish to teach (his) own opinions openly.” Discretion, as he had already learned and later formally stated and proved, was not inconsonant with rational valor. The only other book Spinoza published in his lifetime—the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*—bore on its title page Spinoza’s initials only, and the name of a fictitious Hamburg publisher. When Spinoza heard, some time later, that a Dutch translation of this work was being prepared, he earnestly beseeched his friends to forestall its publication (which they did) because only its Latin dress saved it from being officially proscribed. It was then an open secret who the author was. Spinoza’s personal rule to incur as little official displeasure as possible made him abandon his final literary project entertained in 1675. When he began negotiations for the publication of the *Ethics* a rumor spread that he had in press a book proving that God does not exist. Complaint was lodged with the prince and magistrates. “The stupid Cartesians,” Spinoza wrote Oldenburg “being suspected of favoring me, endeavored to remove the aspersion by abusing every where my opinions and writings, a course which they still pursue.” In the circumstances, Spinoza thought it wisest to delay publication till matters would change. But, apparently, they did not change, or change sufficiently. The *Ethics* was first published about a year after Spinoza’s death.

In spite of the consensus of adverse, and somewhat vicious opinion, the author of the *Tractatus* did find favor in the eyes of some. The Elector Palatine, Karl Ludwig, through his secretary Fabritius, offered Spinoza the chair of philosophy at Heidelberg (1673). But Spinoza graciously declined it. Although a more welcome or more honorable opportunity to teach could not be conceived, it had never been his ambition to leave his secluded station in life for one involving public obligations. Even in his secluded corner, he found he had aroused more public attention and sentiment than was altogether consonant with the peace and retirement he sought. Besides, he did not know how well he could fulfill the desires of the Elector by teaching nothing that would tend to discomfit established religion.

Spinoza had, in his young days, learned what extreme dangers one must expect to encounter in a righteous community become inimical. In his last years, he experienced a stern and tragic reminder. Two of Spinoza’s best friends, Cornelius and Jan de Witt, who had by a change in political fortune become the enemies of the people, were brutally murdered (1672). Spinoza for once, when this occurred, lost his habitual philosophic calm. He could restrain neither his tears nor his anger. He had to be forcibly prevented from leaving his house to post a bill, at the

scene of the murder, denouncing the criminal mob. A somewhat similar crisis recurred shortly afterwards when Spinoza returned from a visit to the hostile French camp. The object of his mission is not unequivocally known. Some think it was to meet the Prince of Condé solely in his private capacity of philosopher. It is certain Spinoza was advised the French King would acknowledge a dedicated book by means of a pension—an advice Spinoza did not act upon. Others think his mission was political. His reputation as a distinguished man would have made him a very likely ambassador. This conjecture would seem more probable, however, if the de Witts, his intimate friends, had been still in political power, instead of in their graves. But whatever Spinoza's mission was, when he returned to the Hague, the populace branded him a French spy. Spinoza's landlord feared his house would be wrecked, by an infuriated mob. This time Spinoza exerted the calming influence. He assured Van der Spijck that if any attempt were made on the house he would leave it and face the mob, even if they should deal with him as they did with the unfortunate de Witts. He was a good republican as all knew. And those in high political authority knew the purpose of his journey. Fortunately, popular suspicion and anger dissipated this time without a sacrifice. Still, the incident showed quite clearly that though Spinoza did not desire to be a martyr, he was no more afraid to[xxii] die than he was to live for the principles he had at heart.

Spinoza's character, manifested in his life, has won the high admiration of every one not bitterly hostile to him. And even his enemies maintained and justified their hatred only by inventing calumnious falsehoods about him. Unfounded rumors of an evil nature began to circulate during his lifetime, and naturally increased in virulence and volume after his death. At that period in human history, it was popularly recognized that nothing good could be true, and nothing vile could be false of an atheist—which was what Spinoza, of course, was reputed to be. Oldenburg even, for years unflinching in expressions of devoted friendship and humble discipleship, an eager and fearless advocate (supposedly) of the truth, a friend who lamented the fact that the world was being denied the invaluable products of Spinoza's unsurpassed intellect, and who, therefore, constantly urged Spinoza, by all the advice of friendship, to publish his work without delay, irrespective of popular prejudice—even Oldenburg began to conceive a far from complimentary opinion of Spinoza after the publication of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*! So prevalent were the groundless rumors that the Lutheran pastor, Colerus—the source of most of our information—felt obliged in his very quaint summary biography to defend the life and character of Spinoza. To his everlasting credit, Colerus did this although he himself heartily detested Spinoza's philosophy which he understood to be abhorrently blasphemous and atheistic. Colerus' sources of information were the[xxiii] best: he spoke to all who knew Spinoza at the Hague; and he himself was intimate with the Van der Spijcks with whom Spinoza had lived the last five years of his life, and with whom Colerus was now living—in Spinoza's very room.

Spinoza's courage and strength of mind are as impressively manifested in the constant daily life he lived as in the few severe crises he resolutely faced. For the twenty years of his excommunication he lived in comparative retirement, if not isolation. The frugality of his life bordered on asceticism. All his free time and energy Spinoza dedicated with unusual single-hearted devotion to the disinterested development of a philosophy he knew would not be very acceptable to the general or even special philosophic reader. His mode of life is all the more remarkable because it was not determined by embittered misanthropy or passionate abhorrence of the goods of the world. It was dictated solely by what he understood to be, in his circumstances, the reasonable life for him. Although he was an eager correspondent, and had many friends whom he valued above all things that are external to one's own soul, his interest in his own work kept him from carrying on, for any length of time, an active social

life. He believed, too, that it is part of the wisdom of life to refresh oneself with pleasant food and drink, with delicate perfumes and the soft beauty of growing things, with music and the theater, literature and painting. But his own income was too slender to allow him much of these temperate riches of a rational life. And always, rather than exert himself to increase his income, he would decrease his expenditure. Still, he no doubt enjoyed the little he had. He found very palatable, most likely, the simple food he himself prepared in later life; and he must have gained additional satisfaction from the thought that he was, because of his own cooking, living more safely within his means. The pipe he smoked occasionally (let us hope) was fragrant; the pint of wine a month very delectable. For mental recreation he read fairly widely in literature, observed the habits of insects, with the microscope as well as the naked eye. He also sometimes drew ink or charcoal sketches of his visitors and himself. A fairly plausible rumor has it that Rembrandt was his teacher. Unfortunately, all of Spinoza's sketches were destroyed.

Although Spinoza wanted to be independent and self-supporting he was not irrationally zealous about it. He did not accept all the financial help his friends were eager to give him, but he did accept some. One of his young friends, Simon de Vries, before his early death occurred, wanted to bequeath all of his estate to Spinoza. But Spinoza persuaded him not to deprive his own brother of his natural inheritance. Even the annual 500 florins de Vries finally left him, Spinoza would not altogether accept, offering the plea that so much wealth would surely take his mind away from his philosophy. But he would accept 300 florins, a sum he felt would not be burdensome or dangerous to his soul. This annuity he regularly received until his death. His friends the de Witts, pensioned him too; the heirs to the estate contested Spinoza's claim, whereupon Spinoza promptly withdrew it. This high-minded action corrected their covetousness, and from the de Witts, too, he received financial help until his death.

Spinoza's relations with the humble folk he stayed with exhibited the modesty and grace of character that endeared him to his intimate friends. When he was tired working in his own room, he would frequently come down to smoke a pipe and chat with his landlady and landlord about the simple affairs that filled their lives. His speech was "sweet and easy;" his manner of a gentle, noble, beauty. Except for the occasion when the de Witts were murdered, Spinoza never showed himself either unduly merry or unduly sad. If ever he found that his emotions were likely to escape his wise control, he would withdraw until such danger had passed. We find the same characteristics exhibited in Spinoza's correspondence. Although he found some of his correspondents sometimes very trying, he never failed to be as courteous and considerate as the circumstances would permit. Even when one Lambert de Velthuysen provoked his righteous indignation, Spinoza tempered his caustic reply before sending it off.

Spinoza lived the ethics he wrote. As is the *Ethics*, so is his life pervaded by a simple grandeur. And as he lived, so did he die. He had not been feeling very well, and had sent for his friend and physician Dr. Ludwig Meyer. A chicken broth was ordered for Spinoza of which he partook quite healthily. No one suspected that he was this time fatally ill. He came down in the morning, and spoke for some time with his hosts. But when they returned from a visit that same afternoon (Sunday, Feb. 21, 1677) they learned the sad, surprising news that Spinoza had gently passed away, the only one by his bedside, his doctor and friend.

Spinoza sought in his lifetime neither riches, nor sensual pleasure, nor fame. He wrote and published his books when he could and thought advisable because part of his joy consisted in extending, as he said, a helping hand to others, in bringing them to see and understand things as he did. If they did not see, or obdurately refused to understand, he did not consider it part of his task to overcome them. He was animated by no missionary zeal. He was content to search for the truth and to explain what he found as best he could. The truth, he devoutly believed, would make us free. But it was truth that we understood, not truth that was forced upon us. He was

quite satisfied to leave in his desk the manuscript of his *Ethics*. People in his lifetime did not want to listen to him. If ever they did after his death, they were cordially welcome to. In death as in life they would find him faithful to his ideal.

Spinoza has often been likened to the old Hebrew prophets. He does not, it is true, exhort the people to follow in the path of righteousness; it is the philosopher's task simply to show the way. But the morality Spinoza stands for is the old prophetic morality purified and made consistent with itself. And Spinoza was, in his own time, as the prophets were in theirs, a heretic and a rebel, a voice calling in the wilderness—a wilderness that was later to become the very citadel of civilization. Excommunicated by the Jews and vilified by the Gentiles during his lifetime, Spinoza has, since his death, been canonized by both alike as the most saintly and exalted of philosophers. Like his forerunners of old, Spinoza was a prophet *in* Israel, *for* Mankind.

Joseph Ratner, ed. *The Philosophy of Spinoza*. Tudor Publishing Company, 1926.

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