

Interpretation

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Spinoza's *Ethics* is among the most difficult books to teach because it is one of the most difficult books to read. Unlike Hobbes's *Leviathan* or Spinoza's *Tractatus* or Descartes's *Meditations*, the *Ethics* does not begin by explaining the scope or purpose of the work, nor even the motivation for writing it. Instead, the book begins with eight definitions and seven axioms. The only clue in our investigation is the title of the book, *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata* or *Ethics according to the Geometric Method*. Presumably, the author thinks that living a good life can be deduced from assertions about the nature of God.

From such a sparse beginning, Eugene Garver uncovers "a drama with a complex plot" (1). Most surprising of all, the key mover in the plot is not reason at all, but rather the imagination. Garver is uniquely suited for this kind of study. The author of four books on Aristotle and several others on prudence and rhetoric, Garver spent much of his career at St. Johns University in Minnesota teaching Greek philosophy and philosophy of law. This background is particularly important for the study of an author like Spinoza, who uses ancient and medieval philosophical terminology even as he changes the meaning of these terms. As Martin Yaffe has put it, Spinoza "puts new wine in old bottles." Garver's work displays the sure hand of a careful reader and, moreover, one who is versed in thinking through difficult arguments.

How then should we read the *Ethics*? A good place to start is Spinoza's own instructions for reading. In the *Theological Political Treatise (TTP)*, Spinoza

explains how to read the Bible by contrasting it with Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*. The meaning of the Bible does not disclose itself immediately to reason but requires knowledge of the historical context, languages, and the opinions of the authors. Once we have excavated the literal meaning of the text, we can determine whether it is true. In sharp contrast, Euclid's *Elements* does not require sophisticated scholarly tools to determine the meaning of its claims. Rather, the propositions are demonstrated and clear in both their meaning and truth. Perhaps Spinoza's oeuvre can be read in a similar fashion: his analysis of the Bible in the *TTP* should be interpreted in light of the common theological beliefs of his time, while the *Ethics* discloses itself to reason without any scholarly apparatus.

Unfortunately, this attractive solution proves to be facile. For one thing, as Leo Strauss points out in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Spinoza grapples with a third alternative throughout the *TTP*, namely, the art of writing practiced by Maimonides. Here, the surface of the text does not disclose the whole truth because the author's explicit claims are not consistent and, in some cases, contradict one another. Strauss exposed at least a dozen instances in the *TTP* where the literal claims contradict each other and force the reader to develop a hermeneutic for working out the meaning of these contradictions. As a hypothesis, he suggested that we begin by taking the more radical claims as the true ones. This makes sense if the goal of the method is to conceal propositions that undermine the theological and political basis of the community. Thus, Spinoza follows Maimonides's guidelines, but only up to a point, since he hopes to create a new type of regime with an unprecedented degree of freedom of thought.

Like Strauss, Garver finds inadequate the hermeneutical alternatives presented by Spinoza in the *TTP*. Spinoza's method for reading the Bible focuses our attention on uncovering the meaning of the text so that we may never get to the question of truth; and unlike Euclidean propositions, Spinoza's claims in the *Ethics* are not "immediately comprehensible to reason" (16). However, Garver does not begin with Spinoza's political project in order to explain the reasons for the peculiar presentation of the *Ethics*. Garver eventually argues that the *Ethics* does present a political teaching, but it is certainly not central to its overall project. Nonetheless, Garver makes plain that there are a host of contradictions or "reversals" at the heart of the *Ethics* that must be explained in order to make sense of the work: man is fully determined, yet can be free; the mind is an inadequate idea that can grasp adequate ideas; the finite and infinite are commensurable, and so forth. Garver's formidable catalog of such

contradictions at the beginning of his study will impress even veteran readers of the *Ethics* and cause them to wonder about its coherence.

At the heart of these contradictions is the opinion that the world as it discloses itself to reason leaves no basis for ethics: “Spinoza goes out of his way to make ethics impossible—free will is an illusion; the mind cannot act on the body; neither people nor God nor nature acts for an end” (12). In other words, the first two parts of the *Ethics* appear to make impossible the pursuit of an ethical life, the very purpose of the subsequent three parts of the book. The dramatic shift in part 3 of the *Ethics* toward individuals and their emotional lives rooted in their imagination reveals the categories, however illusory, that make an ethical life possible and meaningful. From the perspective of the individual striving to persist, reason and imagination are not at odds with each other because while the imagination might lead us astray, it is also our only means for empowering reason.

In truth, for most people, there is no dramatic discovery or self-development. The *conatus* (or striving to persist) remains mired in various imaginings or superstitions, such as free will, final causes, and providence. The stubborn stability of the imagination “constructs an emotionally objective world” and an account of human nature to support it that few individuals can escape (14). The problem of ethics is exacerbated by the fact that Spinoza rejects all traditional accounts of the path from imagination to knowledge: “there is no impetus that leads from inadequate ideas to adequate ones, no desire to know, and no mechanism for moving from inadequate to adequate ideas” (137). However, because the struggle to persist involves the desire to increase one’s power, some individuals desire to know the actual causes of their emotions and imaginings. For these blessed few, the imagination liberates them from their individual point of view toward knowledge of the existence and nature of the whole. Such blessings are hardly the result of grace but of the *conatus* guided by the imagination to a desire for adequate ideas. Garver’s point is that only the imagination can encourage finite individuals to understand the causes of their passions and transform them in favor of adequate ideas. The title of the book is meant to reinforce the claim that only the imagination—not reason (as Hegel would have it)—guides us toward an ethical life. The reversals or contradictions in the *Ethics* are deliberate. They are a kind of therapy which forces a careful reader to think and, in doing so, to become free.

The first half of Garver’s book deals with the subtle and fascinating ways that the imagination directs some individuals beyond itself toward adequate ideas. The analysis culminates in chapter 4, where Garver presents

a thumbnail sketch of Spinoza's argument via a curious and highly original reading of the story of Jacob and Rachel in Genesis 29. Readers will recall that Jacob, driven by his extraordinary romantic love for Rachel, agreed to work seven years for his uncle Laban for her hand in marriage. The cunning Laban tricks Jacob into marrying Rachel's sister Leah instead and thus secures an additional seven years of Jacob's labor. Garver retells the story from Spinoza's point of view, beginning on the morning after Jacob discovers he had enjoyed his splendid wedding night with the wrong bride. Paraphrasing Bentham, Garver observes: "Jacob went to bed with poetry, only to wake up and find it was pushpin" (111).

Jacob's disappointment is primarily the result of his notion of romantic love. In the language of the Bible, Jacob fell in love with Rachel the moment he saw her at the well. According to the *Ethics*, what actually happened was that Jacob was struck by Rachel's beauty and had the corresponding idea that such an object will also increase his power and vitality. Although Spinoza is well known for his concept of *amor dei intellectualis*, he has a far dimmer view of romantic love. In contrast to Plato, he teaches that eros has nothing in common with romantic love; it is "not a stepping-stone to devotion to God but a distraction from it" (18). Garver uses the story of Jacob to catalog the illusions that undergird romantic love, that is, that "pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause" (*Ethics* III.13 cor.). The fundamental confusion is that an external body is the cause of an idea; only ideas cause other ideas.

Jacob's idea of love suggests that Rachel embodies the good. His love of her, therefore, is an exclusive attachment and, at the same time, an expression of devotion to something beyond that attachment. For Spinoza, as for Hobbes, what we call good is nothing more than the expression of our momentary desire. No rational person would develop exclusive attachments. As Garver observes: "the rational person would be indifferent to the sources of pleasure. Nothing prevents Jacob from loving both Rachel and Leah, except for the human imagination that leads to commodity fetishism, and to loyalty" (119). Even if we can rescue Spinoza from the charge of encouraging promiscuity above loyalty, exclusive attachments to individuals or communities along with the experiences of wonder, veneration, and devotion remain problematic. At best, rooted in the imagination of an external cause as the source of our pleasure, such attachments are, according to Spinoza, obstacles to a rational life.

Thus far, Garver's argument has explained the ways in which the imagination leads us astray from the pursuit of knowledge and ethics. In the second

half of his book, Garver pays particular attention to Spinoza's solutions, that is, his recommendations for achieving an ethical and free life. Garver makes a convincing case for the possibility of an ethical life for those rare individuals who are able, thanks in part to their environment and in part to their own acumen, to ascend to knowledge and adequate ideas. As for the rest of us, Garver argues that there is still hope for redemption because social life forces us to appreciate "the empowering pleasures of the community" (153). Of course, our desire for the agreement and approval of others, a desire based on imagining that there exists an objective good, invariably leads to conflict. But here, too, we may be led by the "cunning of imagination" in the form of religious images related to "obedience and pious action" (158).

Here, we return to the question of the relation between Spinoza's political project and his account of philosophy. Garver argues that the universal dogmas that constitute Spinoza's creed in the *TTP* "are things that people must believe in order to be members of the community" (158). Yet these very principles are undermined by Spinoza's larger account of revelation in the preceding chapters. Is it possible for people to pledge allegiance to principles and images that they believe to be false? Spinoza insists that all "decent men" (*honestos*), including presumably philosophers, will embrace the dogmas even if they later interpret them in ways that contradict their literal meaning. Garver too insists that "philosophers make the best citizens" (140). In part thanks to Garver's own efforts to expose the incompatibility of philosophy and politics, the reader may wonder about the philosopher's allegiance to any community. This criticism notwithstanding, Garver's excellent study will undoubtedly attract many new students to the study of Spinoza's *Ethics*.