

**SPINOZA; A
HANDBOOK TO
THE ETHICS**

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Spinoza; a handbook to the Ethics by J. Allanson Picton

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P R E F A C E

THE aim of this work is practical; that is to say, I have endeavoured to avoid discussing the philosophy of Spinoza more than is absolutely necessary to an understanding of his moral code. For ever since I became a humble student of his works I have had a growing impression that a rich vein of common-sense and sound morality runs through all his speculations, though it has often to be digged for as hidden treasure. But the fashion of his writing was determined in large measure by the customs of seventeenth-century philosophy, and he addressed himself only to those who were familiar with them. The result is that in our time, when the decay of old traditions makes a clearer view of the foundation of morals a matter of supreme importance, we lose the immense benefit of his moral and religious teaching because we are perplexed both by his use of familiar words, such as 'God' and 'eternity' and 'mind' and 'body,' in senses to which we are not accustomed; and we are also repelled by his artificial method of so-called 'mathematical proof.' I have endeavoured to relieve these difficulties by a plain

exposition which always keeps in view the moral and religious, rather than the intellectual value of the great Master's teaching. And to make the exposition clearer I have not hesitated to introduce 'modern instances' to show the concrete significance of apparently abstract principles.

My indebtedness to the great and exhaustive treatise of Sir Frederick Pollock on *Spinoza, His Life and Philosophy*, can hardly be sufficiently acknowledged. But I trust it is evident in the following pages. Still my own experience suggests that, for those who are specially interested in the religious evolution of our own day, there is needed a 'Handbook to the Ethics' which shall keep that evolution specially in view. This I have endeavoured to supply, measuring the wants of others by my own needs.

As will be evident, I have continually compared my own translations of Spinoza's Latin—(edition of Van Vloten et Land)—with the admirable work of W. Hale White and Amelia H. Stirling. I have ventured often to differ from their rendering, and sometimes I have preferred to paraphrase the original. But my debt of obligation is the same.



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PART I

CONCERNING GOD

READERS of Spinoza often experience much greater difficulty than they ought to find in making out his meaning, because they bring with them to the study of his writings habits of thought entirely incongruous with his system. And this is especially the case with his 'Ethics.' For in his various tractates on somewhat more popular subjects, particularly in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, one of the very few of his writings printed during his lifetime, he so far condescended to the mental condition of his contemporaries as to use no small amount of conventional language. Thus readers who find him discussing prophecy and its confirmation by signs, or revelation and inspiration, feel at first quite at home, and only gradually discover that these terms must to him have had a very different meaning from that familiar in ecclesiastical circles. But with his *opus magnum*, the Ethics, the case is entirely different. That he wrote for posterity is clear from the fact that he withheld the work from publication during his lifetime, though probably even he had no idea of the remoteness of the posterity for whom he was writing. Perhaps it can hardly be said to have arrived yet, notwithstanding the increasing interest shown during the past half-century both in the man and his ideas. At

Difficulties in reading Spinoza occasioned by bringing to the study incongruous habits of thought.

Not so apparent in the *Tractatus* as in the *Ethica*.

Reasons for this.

The Ethics was for posterity.

any rate in this work he quite abjured any such concessions to contemporary conventions of thought as are found in his other writings, and gave uncompromising utterance to the results of his solitary contemplations of man and the universe.

Influence of precedent and tradition on the Ethics confined mainly to matters of form.

E.g. the adoption of the Euclidean form of proposition and demonstration.

Reasons for its adoption.

Not that even here he was wholly uninfluenced by his times or their traditions. For no such miracle as an entirely new man in this sense has ever appeared—no, not even in the ages of transition from anthropoids to anthropopithecus and anthropos. But the traces of tradition and convention in Spinoza's greatest work are seen mainly in matters of form. Thus the idea of compressing the whole philosophy of the universe into five books of definitions, postulates, axioms, propositions and demonstrations, arranged after the manner of Euclid, seems utterly incongruous both with the physics and the metaphysics of the twentieth century. In the seventeenth century, however, though the plan was a little startling to less daring minds, it did not seem impossible. And the reason for this was two-fold. Firstly, the vastness of the universe was not adequately felt; and next, the difference in precision between doctrines of ideal space, on the one hand, and expressions of concrete experience on the other, was not sufficiently apprehended. Now if the universe, or at least a definite portion of the universe, including man, is completely commensurable with the human intellect, and if every impression received by that intellect from the accessible universe is capable of as precise statement as our ideal notions of space—such as point, line, superficies, square, circle, and so on—there would seem to be no reason why a man of