

Baruch Spinoza *Ethics* Reading Guide

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Spinoza's Life and Works¹

- 1632 Spinoza born to a Portuguese-Jewish family living in Amsterdam
- 1656 Excommunicated from his synagogue and community
- (by) 1661 Leaves Amsterdam and moves to Rijnsburg, works as a lens-grinder and writes drafts of *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and *Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*
- 1663 Publishes his commentary on Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy*
- 1670 *Theologico-Political Treatise* published (pseudonymously)
- 1677 Dies in The Hague.

¹ Much of this is taken from the Spinoza entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/>

Spinoza's *Ethics*, Book One, through Proposition 28

Before doing the reading:

1. In his Reply to the Second Set of Objections, Descartes defends his decision to write the *Meditations* in a “synthetic” rather than an “analytic” or “geometrical fashion.” He claims that the geometrical fashion shows the true way by which a thing has been discovered methodically, and, as it were, ‘a priori,’ so that, were a reader willing to follow it and to pay attention to everything, he will no less perfectly understand a thing ... than had he discovered it himself. However, [it] possesses nothing with which to compel belief in a less attentive or hostile reader. (AW 70) What do *you* think are the pros and cons of the style of writing that Descartes adopted? What might have been some advantages of him laying out his proofs in a more “geometrical fashion”?

2. Read only the Scholium to Book V, Proposition 42 (p. 195b). At the start of the second paragraph of that Scholium, Spinoza talks about “the road leading to this goal.” What is the “goal”?

How does Spinoza's goal compare to Descartes's goal of “establish[ing] something firm and lasting in the sciences” (40b)? Is Spinoza's goal one that you would like to achieve (if it were possible to do so)? How, if at all, do *you* think it can be achieved?

While reading:

For your first reading, just read the text through in order, trying to get the drift of the arguments that Spinoza is presenting. Spend a long time on the definitions and axioms.

1. For each definition, put the definition in your own words, and then try to come up with an example to make the definition intuitive.
2. In 1663, Spinoza wrote a letter to a friend who had been discussing drafts of his *Ethics* with his reading group. The group had a debate about whether it was legitimate to object to a definition in a proof. Spinoza's response, in part, was the following:
“You are in these perplexities because you do not distinguish between different kinds of definition—between one which serves to explain a thing whose essence only is sought...and one which is proposed only to be examined. For because the former has a determinate object, it ought to be true. But the latter does not require this. For example, if someone asks me for a description of the temple of Solomon, I ought to give him a true description of the temple...But if I have constructed in my mind some temple which I want to build, and if I infer from its description that I must buy land of such a kind..., will anyone in their right mind tell me that I have drawn a false conclusion because I have perhaps used a false definition?” (Curley, ed. 1994: 79-80; cf. Nadler 2006:44-48)

In other words, when someone gives a definition of something specified in some other way, they must correctly explain the essence of that thing. But when someone merely defines their terms, “true” and “false” don’t apply to those definitions. As you read Spinoza’s definitions, ask yourself whether he is giving essence-explaining definitions or mere stipulative definitions. As you read through the rest of the text, check whether he seems to be using his definitions as stipulative or as something more. Are there any places where he needs definitions to do anything more than make clear what idea he has in mind?

3. Whatever you end up deciding about what kind of definitions Spinoza gives, think carefully about how one might criticize his definitions. How could you show that an essence-explaining definition is false? And since stipulative definitions can’t be dismissed as “false,” what kinds of criticisms *are* such definitions susceptible to? Can any of Spinoza’s definitions be legitimately rejected? How?
4. Spend time with each axiom. Axioms are supposed to be self-evidently true, so read each axiom carefully and ask yourself, “Is there any way this axiom could be false?” (The best way to show that an axiom is false is to think of a scenario that would make it false. For example, if I offered you the axiom “Presidents are always married to the First Lady,” you might challenge this on the grounds that there might be an unmarried or a female or a gay president.)
5. As you read through the Propositions, start by trying to formulate for yourself some general sense of what the Proposition actually means. Then run through the proof of it, looking back at the relevant definitions, axioms, and prior propositions. If you are going to skip anything, skip the proofs themselves. Don’t skip the corollaries and scholiums, since these are often the most important and easiest-to-read parts of Spinoza.
6. Focusing on Propositions 11, 14, and 28, try to reconstruct Spinoza’s overall conception of the universe. What does Spinoza believe actually exists? How would Spinoza describe, say, a person eating a piece of pizza?

While rereading:

1. To an even greater extent than with Descartes, theophobia can interfere with one’s reading of Spinoza. As you read through Spinoza’s argument, choose a benign word (I like “pan” or “It”) and when you reread Spinoza’s *Ethics*, reread it replacing the word “God” with your benign word. See whether it changes your understanding of his text and/or your reactions to his views.
2. Rereading Spinoza should move backwards. Start with Proposition 11, and **focus on the first proof**. Work your way back through that proof. It can even be helpful to rewrite the proof of just this one proposition so that you can see precisely what definitions, axioms, and intermediate propositions are involved in it. As you work your way backwards through the proof, ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. Is this step valid?

- b. Would Descartes agree with this axiom/definition/step? If not, how would he object to it?
 - c. Do I agree with this axiom/definition/step? If not, how can I legitimately object to it? So, for example, the first move in the proof argues from Axiom 7 and the denial of God's existence to the claim that God's essence does not involve existence. So, is this inference valid? That is, can we legitimately move from
 - i. I conceive of God as not existing AND
 - ii. If a thing can be conceived as not existing, its essence does not involve existence TO
 - iii. God's essence does not involve existence?
 If so, is there any grounds for denying Axiom 7 (premise ii, above)? If not, let's keep moving through the proof. (Note that the proof has a distinctive structure, often called "reductio ab absurdum," or proof by contradiction. Spinoza assumes the opposite of what he wants to prove and shows that this generates a contradiction. Thus his assumption is false, so it's opposite is true.)
 - d. You should keep working backwards through the proof until you get back to only definitions and axioms.
 - e. In the end, you should have a list of "pressure points" for the proof, places where steps are invalid, or axioms false, or definitions illegitimate. Come to class having isolated what you think is the most vulnerable pressure point for the argument.
3. Now move on to Propositions 14 and 28, reading these backwards and looking for places where the arguments don't work by Cartesian standards, your own standards, or both. For these propositions, focus on the steps that go *from* 11 to 14 (and 14-28), rather than repeating the same ground you covered when you examined Proposition 11.
 4. Go back and relook at the content of Spinoza's metaphysics, paying particular care not to be confused by his use of the term "God." How would you explain the metaphysics that emerges from this reading, particularly Propositions 11, 14, and 28; without Spinoza's technical vocabulary?

After rereading:

1. Take a step back and try to get a sense for Spinoza's metaphysics as a whole. So much of your reading has focused on the proofs that it can be hard to see just what his picture of the universe is. Try to formulate a concise "elevator speech" (that is, 1-2 minute) explanation of the gist of his metaphysics, with as little of his technical vocabulary as possible.
2. How does Spinoza's metaphysics compare to Descartes? What are the most important similarities? What are the most important differences?
3. How does Spinoza's epistemology compare to Descartes? What are the most important similarities? What are the most important differences?

4. Should Descartes accept Spinoza's arguments for his metaphysics? If not, why not? If so, how important of a change to his overall view would this involve?
5. Should *you* accept Spinoza's arguments for his metaphysics? If not, why not? If so, how important of a change to your overall view would this involve? How would it change your *life* to believe that Spinoza is actually correct about the metaphysics laid out in Book One?
6. What are we to make of Book 1 in the context of Book V, Prop. 42. Does the first part of this book seem like a promising way to get us closer to the "goal" he describes at the end?

Spinoza's *Ethics*, continued: the rest of Book One.

Before doing the reading:

1. Assess Spinoza's metaphysics as a whole.
 - a. What do you find appealing about his metaphysics?
 - b. What do you find unappealing?
 - c. What do you find confusing?
 - d. What are the most serious logical errors or gaps in his reasoning?
 - e. How theological is his metaphysics? In what sense of theological?
2. Briefly compare Spinoza with Descartes. What is the single most important difference between the two? How important is this difference? Why?

While reading:

1. As you read through Spinoza for the first time, pick out at least one of the remaining propositions in Book I and trace back its proof to earlier propositions. Does Spinoza's metaphysics "hang together"?
2. In P33, don't skip the Scholia.
 - a. Regarding the first, do you think that there is a meaningful sense of "contingent" that is different from Spinoza's definition of this term?
 - b. Regarding the second, what position is Spinoza arguing against here? Why might someone hold that position?
 - c. Note too that Spinoza (as usual) puts his claims in P32-33 in terms of "God." Are there people who would defend a claim like the one attacked in the second scholium if we replaced "God" with "Nature"?
3. Particularly in P29 and 33, Spinoza's talks about the "necessity" of things. What sense of necessity does he have in mind? Is this a *logical* necessity? Physical necessity? Something in between? Some other sort of necessity?
4. What is the point of the long "Appendix" on pp. 160 and following? What lessons and warnings, if any, does this appendix raise for those who are not religious? What lessons and warnings does it offer you? Are these lessons you can (and should) take to heart? How would doing so change your reading of Spinoza? (How would it change your life?)

While rereading:

Spinoza was born into a community of Jews who fled Portugal in order to practice their faith. During his youth, he excelled in his studies, and some think he was being groomed to be a rabbi. But in his early 20s, Spinoza was expelled from the synagogue where he had worshipped since his birth. This expulsion essentially meant being excluded from his entire community, a deeply religious group of Jews that fled Spain in order to be able to practice their faith. When he was expelled, this was the decree read to the assembly in the crowded synagogue:

The Senhores of the ma'amad [the congregation's governing board] having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, they have endeavored by various

means and promises, to turn him from his evil ways. But having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having for this numerous trustworthy witnesses who have deposed and born witness to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they became convinced of the truth of this matter; and after all of this has been investigated in the presence of the honorable hakhamim, they have decided, with their consent, that the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel. By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day. No one should communicate with him neither in writing nor accord him any favor nor stay with him under the same roof nor within four cubits in his vicinity; nor shall he read any treatise composed or written by him. (quoted in Stephen Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*; For a detailed discussion of his excommunication, see <http://www.tau.ac.il/~kasher/pspin.htm>)

As a result of his excommunication, Spinoza left Amsterdam (and his family business) entirely and spent the rest of his days working as a lens crafter and engaging with leading (non-Jewish) intellectuals, particularly engaging with the philosophical writings of Descartes.

1. As you reread this part of the *Ethics*, think about why Spinoza, given his background, would have been drawn – as he was – to Descartes's philosophy.
2. As you reread this part of the *Ethics*, consider what “abominable heresies” (and perhaps, what “monstrous deeds”) could have led him to be expelled from his community. Why would religious Jews have been so opposed to Spinoza?
3. Finally, after rereading the Appendix, go back and take a look at *all* of the propositions of Book I. How does seeing his perspective on anthropomorphic religion change your conception of his overall metaphysics?

After rereading:

1. Take a step back and try to get a sense for Spinoza's metaphysics as a whole. So much of your reading has focused on the proofs that it can be hard to see just what his picture of the universe is. Try to formulate a concise “elevator speech” (that is, 1-2 minute) explanation of the gist of his metaphysics, with as little of his technical vocabulary as possible.

2. How does Spinoza's metaphysics compare to Descartes? What are the most important similarities? What are the most important differences?
3. How does Spinoza's epistemology compare to Descartes? What are the most important similarities? What are the most important differences?
4. Should you accept Spinoza's arguments for his metaphysics? If not, why not? If so, how important of a change to your overall view would this involve? How would it change your *life* to believe that Spinoza is actually correct about the metaphysics laid out in Book One?
5. What are we to make of Book 1 in the context of Book V, Prop. 42. Does the first part of this book seem like a promising way to get us closer to the "goal" he describes at the end?

Spinoza's *Ethics*, Book Two.

Before doing the reading:

1. **BEFORE YOU LOOK AT THE READING**, Stop and think about what you expect to find in the rest of the book.
 - a. First, think about Spinoza's metaphysics. Given the content of Book I, what makes sense as the next topic of discussion.
 - b. Then, think about the title of the book – *The Ethics* – and about where you know it ends up. What does Spinoza need to talk about to “get there from here”?
2. Look at the title of Book II. What do you think Spinoza's account will look like? Why?

While reading:

For the reading today, I have you skimming *a lot*. These readings notes are going to focus on a few key themes.

1. First, as in the case of Book I, we start with definitions and axioms. Take a look at each definition and axiom. Try to make as much sense of each as possible. Try to construe the axioms in such a way that each seems self-evidently true.
2. Spend some time with Axiom 1. How is this compatible with Propositions 28, 29, and 33 of Book I.
3. Spend some time with Axiom 5. Do you think you perceive any individual things that don't fall into the categories mentioned? What are some examples of things you perceive?
4. What is the significance of Proposition 7? Go back and look at the definitions in Part One. Where do you see traces of II,P7 in those definitions? What is the methodological significance in the *Ethics* of this metaphysical claim?
5. Spend significant time with Propositions 11-14. Spinoza here lays out his account of the nature of the human mind and its relationship with the human body. As you read, answer these questions:
 - a. Most basically, what *is* the human mind? What does it mean to say that it “is basically nothing else but the idea” (P11)? Can this claim actually be taken literally? (Try as hard as you can to take it literally.) *Whose* idea is the mind? How can a mind *be* an idea?
 - b. What makes the human mind “special,” relative to, say, the mind of a slug or a tree? (Do trees even have minds? In what sense(s)?) Are human mind's superior

- to slug minds? In what ways? Are there any ways in which slug minds are superior?
- c. What is the relationship between the human mind and God?
 - d. And now whatever answer you wrote down for 5c, translate it into terminology that does not refer to “God.”
 - e. What, in the end, does Spinoza think human minds *are*?
6. We aren’t going to dwell on the physics in P13, but don’t completely skip over it. Note a few things:
- a. What is a body?
 - b. How do bodies differ from each other?
 - c. What features of the human body explain why human minds are able to think in different ways, that, say, cat minds or tree minds? (Here look especially at page 170a, the postulates on 172a, and P14.
 - d. Don’t miss Spinoza’s claim that “the whole of Nature [i]s one individual whose parts ... vary without any change in the individual as a whole.” How does this follow from the preceding discussion? Why is it significant (think back here, e.g., to Book I, P28).
7. As you read through the propositions in the rest of Book II, add at least six additional insights about the nature of the human mind, including your best guess at Spinoza’s *claim* as well as your comments on the *importance* of that claim. E.g., what do you think he means by P16, and particularly the claim that “The idea...must involve the nature of the human body together with...”? Why is/would this be significant?
- a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
 - e.
 - f.
8. As you read through the rest of Book II, note that Spinoza is making a transition from metaphysics to epistemology through his reflections on the nature of the human mind. Based on Book II, what is the best basis for human knowledge? Why?

While rereading:

1. Start your rereading of Book II by closely reading Propositions 40-44, especially P40. List out the three kinds of knowledge, with the key characteristics (and subcategories) of each kind of knowledge. Try to give a few examples for each type of knowledge.
2. Now go back and reread Book II with an eye towards making sense of why human beings are capable of each of the three kinds of knowledge.

- a. What (especially about our bodies) makes it possible for us to have knowledge of the first kind? What makes it possible to have knowledge of the second and third kinds?
 - b. Given what Spinoza says in the rest of Book II, which of these kinds of knowledge is most likely to truly describe its objects? Why?
3. Work your way back up to an understanding of the proofs of Proposition 41 and 44.
4. Now look back at Books I and II. Does this understanding of the nature of knowledge help make sense of definitions, axioms, or proofs that did not make sense before? If possible, give at least one example.
5. What kind of knowledge does the *Ethics* provide? What is the *best* that it can provide to the most attentive reader? And what will it do “for those who judge things confusedly” (I, P8.Sch2)? Does Spinoza’s account of knowledge clarify what it would mean to judge confusedly? Does this accurately describe (any of) your reading of the *Ethics*?
6. Be sure to read at least the main propositions for the rest of Book II (P47 is particularly provocative). You needn’t work through the proofs.

After reading:

1. Spinoza’s *Ethics* can be quite exciting or quite frustrating in part because of its argumentative (deductive) style. Does Spinoza’s explicitly articulated epistemology make sense of that style? How? Could he have written the *Ethics* in a more “synthetic” style, more like the *Meditations*?
2. For Spinoza, what is a human being?
 - a. Are human beings free?
 - b. What is the relationship between the human mind and the human body?
 - c. What, if anything, can humans know *with certainty*?
3. Step back again and take a look at Spinoza’s metaphysics, trying to get past the jargon and technical terms. Is there anything in Spinoza’s metaphysics that differs from scientifically literate common sense today? Start by listing two or three important similarities between Spinoza and contemporary common sense.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.

Now where, specifically, does Spinoza’s metaphysics differ from contemporary common sense?

- a.
- b.
- c.

Spinoza's *Ethics*, Book V.

1. Start by going back to Book V, P 42, and listing out the characteristics of the “wise man.”
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
 - e.
 - f.
2. Before reading any of the rest of Book V, try to make sense of each characteristic of this wise man based on your reading of Books I and II. How are these things humanly possible? What is the best way to achieve them? How does the *Ethics* help?
3. Now read through the rest of Book V, starting with the Preface. Note that we are skipping two very important Parts of the *Ethics*, Part III, “Concerning the Origin and Nature of Emotions,” and Part IV, “Of Human Bondage, or The Strength of Emotions.” (For a complete and hypertexted *Ethics*, see <http://capone.mtsu.edu/rbombard/RB/Spinoza/ethica-front.html>.) As you read Book V, remember that Spinoza has also explained in detail the nature of emotions. (One claim in those earlier books that can help with P42 a bit is Spinoza’s explanation of love as “nothing else but *pleasure accompanied by the idea, of an external cause*” (BkIII, P13Sch.)
4. Use the propositions you read from Book V to make as much sense as you can of the wise man. Look both for clarification about what the wise man actually *is* (e.g., in what sense does he “never cease to be”?) and also for how one *becomes* a wise man.
5. In what sense might the *Ethics* itself help one to become wise? Have you become wiser through reading the *Ethics*? If so, how? If not, why not?