

Chapter 1

Prologue

On the morning of July 28, 1670, Philips Huijbertsz¹ said goodbye to his wife, Eva Geldorpis, and left his home on the Nieuwendijk in Amsterdam. On this summer day, however, the fifty-six-year-old silk merchant was not on his way to the shop he had inherited from his father. It was Sunday, and he had more spiritual matters to attend to—matters of grave concern to the religious and moral well-being of his community.

Just four days earlier the consistory, or church council, of Amsterdam's Reformed Church had commissioned Brother Huijbertsz and his colleague, Brother Lucas van der Heiden, also in the silk trade, to represent it at the upcoming meeting of the Amsterdam regional *classis*.² This was the larger district synod at which preachers from local church communities in Amsterdam and surrounding villages would regularly gather to address issues of common interest. (The Amsterdam *classis* was one of fourteen in the province of Holland.) Philips and Lucas were given the responsibility of making the members of the district synod aware of the Amsterdam consistory's worries, expressed at their meeting of June 30, about some recently published materials:

Because some grievances now confront our church, an inquiry was undertaken in order to bring these forward to the district synod and accordingly to the provincial synod, should that be approved by the district synod and it has agreed that there is nothing new in this matter. Our church requests only that, under [the rubric of] the old grievances [*gravamina*], attention should especially be paid to

the impudence of the papacy, Socinian and licentious book publications, and in particular the harmful book with the name *Theological-Political Treatise*.³

The “old grievances” that the consistory is now asking the Amsterdam *classis* to refer to in considering these new publications is an edict that the States of Holland—the chief legislative body of the province, and arguably the most powerful body in the nation—enacted in 1653 forbidding the printing and dissemination of certain “irreligious” books. The Amsterdam church elders would like the preachers sitting in the district synod to declare that the 1653 ban should be applied in this new case. The *classis* should then refer the matter to the Synod of North Holland, the provincial church council—there was another for South Holland—in whose jurisdiction the Amsterdam district, along with five others, lay.

Amsterdam was not the first Reformed consistory to take notice of “a profane, blasphemous book titled *Theological-political treatise concerning the freedom of philosophizing in the state*.” Already by May 1670 the church consistories of Utrecht, Leiden, and Haarlem had asked their town councils to seize any existing copies of the work and to take steps to prevent further publication or distribution. And the book had been published only in January of that year! Amsterdam was a bit slower in responding. However, as the most important city in the Netherlands, an urgent appeal brought forward from its Reformed leaders would certainly have great influence with the *predikanten* in the district and provincial synods.

Philips Huijbertszoon (“Huijbert’s son”) may have been charged with this important diplomatic task because he was a person of some reputation and trust in the community. Twenty years earlier he had acted as warranty for an exchange of Dutch citizens who, while abroad, had been captured as slaves and were being ransomed for a large sum of money.⁴ Or, as a member of the local church leadership, he may have been among those who were particularly upset by the writings in question. He was familiar with at least some of the contents of the *Theological-Political Treatise*

that the consistory was asking the synod to consider. Soon after his arrival that day in the Nieuwe Kerk, where the Amsterdam *classis* held its meetings in the same room as the local consistory, he would read to its members some of the particularly offensive passages, in the hope of getting them to see the danger.

The presentation had its desired effect. That very afternoon, the Amsterdam district synod came to the conclusion that

licentious book publishing and especially the harmful book titled *Theological-Political Treatise* should be dealt with under the old grievances [i.e., those covered by the 1653 edict]. . . . The *classis*, having heard from its committee various enormous and abominable samples contained in that book, has proclaimed that book to be blasphemous and dangerous.⁵

It then forwarded the matter to the North Holland Synod, which was due to meet one week later. On August 5, the provincial body issued its own judgment:

The *classis* of Amsterdam desires that . . . licentious book publishing and especially the harmful book titled *Theological-Political Treatise* should be dealt with under the old grievances. . . . Regarding the blasphemous book, the *Theological-Political Treatise*, the deputies have taken all the necessary steps against that book with the first council in the Court [of Holland], and are awaiting the outcome. The Christian Synod, heartily abominating that obscene book, gives its thanks to the honorable gentlemen from Bennebroeck for their offer to suppress this writing as much as they can, and to the Brothers from Amsterdam for their reading of their extracts from the book. Thanks also to the deputies for their performed service, and [the synod] entrusts them together with the deputies from South Holland to present all this to their honorable Mightinesses [the States of Holland] and to seek their help against [the book] with powerful suppression of it, and also to seek an edict to forbid this and all other blasphemous books.⁶

It was just the result Philips Huijbertszoon and his colleagues from Amsterdam's consistory were hoping for.



While these machinations were taking place in Amsterdam, the author of the scandalous book that so troubled the city's church leaders was leaving behind life in the peaceful countryside and relocating to the city of The Hague, the administrative and legislative capital of the Dutch Republic. There, in some rooms on the upper floor of a house owned by the widow Van der Werve on a back wharf called *De Stille Verkade* (the Quiet Ferry Quay), he would quietly continue his philosophical and political writing.

Bento de Spinoza was born on November 24, 1632, to a prominent merchant family among Amsterdam's Portuguese Jews.⁷ This Sephardic community was founded by former New Christians, or *conversos*—Jews who had been forced to convert to Catholicism in Spain and Portugal in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries—and their descendants. After fleeing harassment by the Iberian Inquisitions, which doubted the sincerity of the conversions, many New Christians eventually settled in Amsterdam and a few other northern cities by the early seventeenth century. With its generally tolerant environment and greater concern for economic prosperity than religious uniformity, the newly independent Dutch Republic (and especially Holland, its largest province) offered these refugees an opportunity to return to the religion of their ancestors and re-establish themselves in Jewish life. There were always conservative sectors of Dutch society clamoring for the expulsion of the “Portuguese merchants” in their midst.⁸ But the more liberal regents of Amsterdam, not to mention the more enlightened elements in Dutch society at large, were unwilling to make the same mistake that Spain had made a century earlier and drive out an economically important part of its population, one whose productivity and mercantile network would make a substantial contribution to the flourishing of the Dutch Golden Age.

The Spinoza family was not among the wealthiest of the city's Sephardim, whose wealth was in turn dwarfed by the fortunes of the wealthiest Dutch. They were, however, comfortably well-off. Spinoza's father, Miguel, was an importer of dried fruit and nuts,

mainly from Spanish and Portuguese colonies. To judge both by his accounts and by the respect he earned from his peers, he seems for a time to have been a fairly successful businessman.

Bento (or, as he would have been called in the synagogue, Baruch) must have been an intellectually gifted youth, and he would have made a strong impression on his teachers as he progressed through the levels of the community's school. He probably studied at one time or another with all of the leading rabbis of the Talmud Torah congregation, including Menasseh ben Israel, an ecumenical and cosmopolitan rabbi who was perhaps the most famous Jew in Europe; the mystically inclined Isaac Aboab da Fonseca; and Saul Levi Mortera, the chief rabbi of the congregation, whose tastes ran more to rational philosophy and who often clashed with Rabbi Aboab over the relevance of kabbalah, an esoteric form of Jewish mysticism.

Spinoza may have excelled in school, but, contrary to the story long told, he did not study to be a rabbi. In fact, he never made it into the upper levels of the educational program, which involved advanced work in Talmud. In 1649, his older brother Isaac, who had been helping his father run the family business, died, and Spinoza had to cease his formal studies to take his place. When Miguel died in 1654, Spinoza found himself, along with his other brother, Gabriel, a full-time merchant, running the firm Bento y Gabriel de Spinoza. He seems not to have been a very shrewd merchant, however, and the company, burdened by the debts left behind by his father, floundered under their direction.

Spinoza did not have much of a taste for the life of commerce anyway. Financial success, which led to status and respect within the Portuguese Jewish community, held very little attraction for him. By the time he and Gabriel took over the family business, he was already distracted from these worldly matters and was devoting more and more of his energies to intellectual interests. Looking back a few years later over his conversion to the philosophical life, he wrote of his growing awareness of the vanity of the pursuits followed by most people (including himself), who gave little thought to the true value of the goods they so desperately sought.

After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected—whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity.

He was not unaware of the risks involved in abandoning his former engagements and undertaking this new enterprise.

I say that “I resolved at last”—for at first glance it seemed ill-advised to be willing to lose something certain for something then uncertain. I saw, of course, the advantages that honor and wealth bring, and that I would be forced to abstain from seeking them, if I wished to devote myself seriously to something new and different; and if by chance the greatest happiness lay in them, I saw that I should have to do without it. But if it did not lie in them, and I devoted my energies only to acquiring them, then I would equally go without it.⁹

By the early to mid-1650s, Spinoza had decided that his future lay in philosophy, the search for knowledge and true happiness, not in the importing of dried fruit.

Around the time of his disenchantment with the mercantile life, Spinoza began studies in Latin and the classics. Latin was still the *lingua franca* for most academic and intellectual discourse in Europe, and Spinoza would need to know the language for his studies in philosophy, especially if he planned on attending any university lectures. He had to go outside the Jewish community for instruction in these disciplines, and found what he needed under the tutelage of Franciscus van den Enden, a former Jesuit and political radical whose home seemed to function as a kind of salon for secular humanists, arch-democrats, and freethinkers. (Van den Enden himself was later executed in France for his participation in a republican plot against King Louis XIV and the monarchy.) It was probably Van den Enden who first introduced

Spinoza to the works of Descartes, who would prove so important to Spinoza's philosophical development, and of other contemporary thinkers. While pursuing this secular education in philosophy, literature, and political thought at his Latin tutor's home, Spinoza seems also to have continued his Jewish education in the yeshiva (or academy) Keter Torah (Crown of the Law), run by Rabbi Mortera. It was probably under Mortera that Spinoza first studied Maimonides and other Jewish philosophers.

Although distracted from business affairs by his studies and undoubtedly experiencing a serious weakening of his Jewish faith as he delved ever more deeply into the world of pagan and gentile letters, Spinoza kept up appearances and continued to be a member in good standing of the Talmud Torah congregation throughout the early 1650s. He paid his dues and communal taxes, and even made the contributions to the charitable funds that were expected of congregants.

And then, on July 27, 1656, the following proclamation was read in Hebrew before the ark of the Torah in the crowded synagogue on the Houtgracht:

The gentlemen of the *ma'amad* [the congregation's lay governing board] hereby proclaim that they have long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, and that 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 ever more serious information about the abominable heresies that he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having numerous trustworthy witnesses who have reported and borne witness to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they have become convinced of the truth of this matter.

The board, having consulted with the rabbis, consequently decided that the twenty-three-year-old Spinoza

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.

The document concludes with the warning that “no one is to communicate with him, orally or in writing, or show him any favor, or stay with him under the same roof, or come within four cubits of his vicinity, or read any treatise composed or written by him.”¹⁰

It was the harshest writ of *berem*, or religious and social ostracism, ever pronounced on a member of the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam. The community leaders sitting on the *ma'amad* that year dug deep into their books to find just the right words for the occasion.¹¹ Unlike many of the other bans issued in the period, this one was never rescinded.

We do not know for certain why Spinoza was punished with such extreme prejudice. That the punishment came from his own community—from the congregation that had nurtured and educated him, and that held his family in high esteem—only adds to the enigma. Neither the *berem* itself nor any document from the period tells us exactly what his “evil opinions and acts” were supposed to have been, or what “abominable heresies” or “monstrous deeds” he is alleged to have practiced and taught. He had not yet published anything, or even composed any treatise. Spinoza never refers to this period of his life in his extant letters and thus does

not offer his correspondents (or us) any clues as to why he was expelled.¹² All we know for certain is that Spinoza received, from the community's leadership in 1656, a *herem* like no other in the period.

Three relatively reliable sources, however, provide suggestive clues as to the nature of Spinoza's offense. According to the chronology of the events leading up to the *herem* provided by Jean-Maximilien Lucas, Spinoza's earliest biographer and writing just after Spinoza's death, there was much talk in the congregation about his opinions; people, especially the rabbis, were curious about what the young man, known for his intelligence, was thinking. As Lucas tells it, "among those most eager to associate with him there were two young men who, professing to be his most intimate friends, begged him to tell them his real views. They promised him that whatever his opinions were, he had nothing to fear on their part, for their curiosity had no other end than to clear up their own doubts."¹³ They suggested, trying to draw Spinoza out, that if one read Moses and the prophets closely, then one would be led to the conclusion that the soul is not immortal and that God is material. "How does it appear to you?" they asked Spinoza. "Does God have a body? Is the soul immortal?" After some hesitation, Spinoza took the bait.

I confess, said [Spinoza], that since nothing is to be found in the Bible about the nonmaterial or incorporeal, there is nothing objectionable in believing that God is a body. All the more so since, as the Prophet says, God is great, and it is impossible to comprehend greatness without extension and, therefore, without body. As for spirits, it is certain that Scripture does not say that these are real and permanent substances, but mere phantoms, called angels because God makes use of them to declare his will; they are of such kind that the angels and all other kinds of spirits are invisible only because their matter is very fine and diaphanous, so that it can only be seen as one sees phantoms in a mirror, in a dream, or in the night.

As for the human soul, Spinoza reportedly replied that "whenever Scripture speaks of it, the word 'soul' is used simply to express

life, or anything that is living. It would be useless to search for any passage in support of its immortality. As for the contrary view, it may be seen in a hundred places, and nothing is so easy as to prove it.”

Spinoza did not trust the motives behind the curiosity of his “friends”—with good reason—and he broke off the conversation as soon as he had the opportunity. At first his interlocutors thought he was just teasing them or trying merely to shock them by expressing scandalous ideas. But when they saw he was serious, they started talking about Spinoza to others. “They said that the people deceived themselves in believing that this young man might become one of the pillars of the synagogue; that it seemed more likely that he would be its destroyer, as he had nothing but hatred and contempt for the Law of Moses.” Lucas relates that when Spinoza was called before his judges, these same individuals bore witness against him, alleging that he “scoffed at the Jews as ‘superstitious people born and bred in ignorance, who do not know what God is, and who nevertheless have the audacity to speak of themselves as His People, to the disparagement of other nations.’”¹⁴

While some scholars doubt Lucas’s reliability, his report is broadly consistent with an earlier account, given shortly after the *berem* but not discovered in the archives until the mid-1950s. Brother Tomas Solano y Robles was an Augustinian monk who was in Madrid in 1659, just after a voyage that had taken him through Amsterdam in late 1658. The Spanish inquisitors were interested in what was going on among the former New Christians now living in northern Europe, most of whom had once been in its domain and still had *converso* relatives—and business contacts—back in Iberia. They interviewed the friar, as well as another traveler to the Netherlands, Captain Miguel Pérez de Maltranilla, who had stayed in the same house in Amsterdam, and at the same time, as Brother Tomas. Both men claimed that in Amsterdam they had met Spinoza and a man named Juan de Prado, who had been banned by the Jewish community shortly after Spinoza. The two apostates told Brother Tomas that they had been observant of Jewish law but had “changed their mind,”

and that they had been expelled from the synagogue because of their views on God, the soul, and the law. They had, in the eyes of the congregation, “reached the point of atheism.”¹⁵ According to Tomas’s deposition, they were saying that the soul was not immortal, that the law of Moses was “not true,” and that there was no God except in a “philosophical” sense.¹⁶ Maltranilla confirms that, according to Spinoza and Prado, “the law . . . was false.”¹⁷

The Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish community poet-historian David Franco Mendes is the final witness on this matter. Although he was writing many years later than Lucas, his work undoubtedly represents a repository of communal record and memory. He insists, in his brief report on the case, that Spinoza not only violated the Sabbath and the laws governing the festivals but also was filled with “atheistic” ideas, and was punished accordingly.¹⁸

“God exists only philosophically,” “the law is not true,” “the soul is not immortal.” These are rather vague and indeterminate propositions. Ordinarily there is no more telling what is intended by them than what is meant by the notoriously ambiguous charge of “atheism.” But in Spinoza’s case we have some fair basis for knowing what he would have meant, for they are likely just the views that he would at least begin elaborating and arguing for in his written works within five years of the *herem*. To be sure, we cannot be certain that what we find in those writings is exactly what he was saying within the community. But the report by Lucas and the testimony by Brother Tomas indicate that the metaphysical, moral, and religious doctrines that are to be found in his mature philosophical works were already in his mind, and apparently also on his tongue, in the mid-1650s.

According to Lucas, Spinoza took his expulsion in good stride. “All the better,” he quotes Spinoza as saying, “they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own accord if I did not dread scandal. . . . I gladly enter on the path that is opened to me.”¹⁹ By this point, he was certainly not very religiously observant, and must have had grave doubts about both the particular tenets of Judaism and, more generally, the value of sectarian religions. Besides the opportunity it afforded him to

maintain the family business and earn a living, membership in good standing in the Portuguese community seems to have mattered little to him.

Within a couple of years, Spinoza had left Amsterdam. By 1661 he was living in Rijnsburg, a small village just outside Leiden, grinding lenses for a living and working on various elements of what he was then calling “my Philosophy.” These included, in good Cartesian tradition, a treatise on philosophical method, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in which Spinoza addresses some basic problems concerning the nature and varieties of human knowledge and the proper means to achieving true understanding, all in the context of a broad conception of what constitutes “the good” for a human being. He also composed around this time his *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*,²⁰ which contains in embryonic form many themes and ideas that will reappear in more mature versions and in a more orderly and perspicuous format in his philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics*. Spinoza did not finish these early works, and neither of them would be published in his lifetime. The *Short Treatise*, however, represents Spinoza’s first serious attempt to lay out what he takes to be the metaphysics of God and nature, the proper conception of the human soul, the nature of knowledge and freedom, the status of good and evil, and the human being’s relationship to nature and the means to true happiness.

Over the years, Spinoza kept up with his circle of friends in Amsterdam, who were soon asking him for an accessible general introduction to the philosophy of Descartes, on which they considered him an expert. Thus, in 1663, shortly after moving from Rijnsburg to Voorburg, a small village not far from The Hague, he composed for their benefit the only work he published in his lifetime under his own name, *Parts One and Two of the Principles of Philosophy of René Descartes Demonstrated According to the Geometric Method*. This was based on some tutorials on Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy* that Spinoza had been giving to a young man who was living with him for a time in Rijnsburg. In the written version, Spinoza re-presents the metaphysics, epistemology, and basic physics of Descartes’s “textbook” of philosophy into a geometric

method involving axioms, definitions, and demonstrated propositions. (By this point he had decided that the Euclidean format was the best way to present these parts of philosophy.) The *Principles* brought Spinoza fame as an expositor of Cartesian philosophy, and (quite misleadingly) even earned him a reputation as a leading Cartesian; this would later, as Spinoza's infamy grew, cause a good deal of trouble for Descartes's true followers.

The exposition of Descartes, however, was primarily a distraction for Spinoza from what, in the early to mid-1660s, was his main preoccupation, a rigorous presentation of his own highly original philosophical thoughts. Having aborted the *Short Treatise*, which clearly did not satisfy him, Spinoza took up his pen to begin what would be his philosophical masterpiece and one of the greatest works in the history of philosophy, the *Ethics*.

Still, in essence, a treatise on God, man, and his well-being, the *Ethics* was an attempt to provide a fuller, clearer, and more systematic layout in "the geometric style" for his grand metaphysical and moral project. When finished, many years later, Spinoza's five-part magnum opus would offer a rigorous demonstration of the way to human happiness in a world governed by strict causal determinism and filled with obstacles to our well-being, obstacles to which we are naturally prone to react in not entirely beneficial ways.

Spinoza begins the *Ethics* by arguing that at the most basic ontological level, the universe is a single, unique, infinite, eternal, necessarily existing substance. This is what is most real, and he calls it "God or Nature" (*Deus sive Natura*). Spinoza's God is not some transcendent, supernatural being. He—or, rather, It—is not endowed with the psychological or moral characteristics traditionally attributed to God by many Western religions. Spinoza's God does not command, judge, or make covenants. Understanding, will, goodness, wisdom, and justice form no part of God's essence. In Spinoza's philosophy, in other words, God is not the providential, awe-inspiring deity of Abraham. Rather, God just is the fundamental, eternal, infinite substance of reality and the first cause of all things. Everything else that is belongs to (or is a "mode" of) Nature.²¹

All things within Nature—that is, everything—are invariably and necessarily determined by Nature. There is nothing that escapes Nature’s laws; there are no exceptions to its ways. Whatever is, follows with an absolute necessity from Nature’s necessary universal principles (God’s attributes). There are thus no purposes for Nature or within Nature. Nothing happens for any ultimate reason or to serve any goal or overarching plan. Whatever takes place does so only because it is brought about by the ordinary causal order of Nature. And because God is identical with the universal, active causal principles of Nature—the substance of it all—it follows that the anthropomorphic conception of God that, as Spinoza sees it, characterizes sectarian religions, and all the claims about divine reward and punishment that it implies, are nothing but superstitious fictions.

Spinoza then turns to the nature of the human being and its place in Nature. Nature, as infinite substance, has infinite attributes or essences, each constituting a kind of universal nature of things. We know of only two of these attributes: Thought (or thinking essence, the stuff of minds) and Extension (material essence, the stuff of bodies). The course of Nature is one, since Nature is one substance, a unity. But for just this reason it proceeds under each attribute in parallel coordination with its unfolding in every other attribute. Any individual thing or event is only a “mode” of Nature appearing under the different attributes. One and the same thing or event, then, manifests itself in Thought (as a mental or thinking thing or event), in Extension (as a material or bodily thing or event), and so on through the other attributes. Thus, the human mind and the human body are one and the same thing in Nature, manifesting itself under Thought and Extension, respectively. Their unity in a human being and the correlation of their respective states is a function of their ultimate metaphysical identity in Nature. The upshot is that human beings are as much a part of Nature as any other thing and do not inhabit some separate “dominion” in which they are exempt from its laws. Every individual, human or otherwise, is subject to the same causal determinism that governs all of Nature’s events. This explains how Spinoza can

propose to treat human thoughts, emotions, desires, and volitions “just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies.”²²

Spinoza’s account of human nature is accompanied by a psychology that reflects the various ways in which human beings are affected by the world around them and that investigates the striving to persevere in existence in the face of these external forces that characterizes human beings’ (and any being’s) essence. Human mental life is made up of various passions and actions. The former are our affective responses to the ways in which external objects causally impinge on us; the latter derive from our own inner resources. Both represent ways in which our powers are increased or decreased by the causal nexuses within which we exist. The picture of human life that emerges from Spinoza’s catalogue of the passions is a tormented one in which a person is emotionally tossed about and at the mercy of things and forces beyond his or her control.

The remedy for such a life mired in the passions lies in virtue, that is, in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. No human being can ever be entirely free from the passions, since all beings are necessarily a part of Nature and always subject to external influences. Human beings can, however, achieve some degree of autonomy and freedom from their turmoil to the extent that they are active and guided by reason and thereby acquire an understanding of the way in which everything in Nature must happen as it does, including acts of human volition. In this way, the power of the passive affects is at least diminished.

Human power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes. So we do not have an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use. Nevertheless, we shall bear calmly those things which happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage demands, if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could have avoided those things, and that we are a part of the whole of nature, whose order we follow. If we understand this clearly and distinctly, that part of us which is defined by understanding, i.e. the

better part of us, will be entirely satisfied with this, and will strive to persevere in that satisfaction.²³

The ideal of the free, rational individual presented in the *Ethics* provides a model for a virtuous human life liberated from various illusions and seeking what is truly in its best interest (as opposed to those things that merely cause transitory pleasure).

The highest form of knowledge, “as difficult as it is rare,” is a thorough understanding of Nature and its ways. This includes an intellectual intuition of how the essence of anything (especially of oneself and all of one’s mental and bodily states) follows from Nature’s most universal elements—or, since God and Nature are one and the same, how the essence of anything relates to God. Spinoza concludes the *Ethics* with an examination of the ultimate benefits of such deep insight. The true rewards of virtue, he insists, lie not in some otherworldly recompense for an immortal soul. There is no such thing as personal immortality; it is a fiction used by manipulative ecclesiastics to keep us in a perpetual condition of hope and fear and thus control us. Rather, “blessedness” and “salvation” consist in the well-being and peace of mind that understanding brings us in this life. The virtuous person sees the necessity of all things, and is therefore less troubled by what may or may not come his way. He regards the vicissitudes of fortune with equanimity, and his happiness is not subject to circumstances beyond his control.

Spinoza worked on the *Ethics*—or, as he called it at this point, *Philosophia*—steadily for a number of years, through his move to Voorburg in 1663 and on into the summer of 1665. He appears to have had a fairly substantial draft in hand by June 1665. Indeed, he felt confident enough of what he had written so far to allow a select few to read it, and there were Latin and Dutch copies of parts of the manuscript circulating among his Amsterdam friends. He may even have contemplated publishing it in the near future.

By late 1665, however, in what seems an abrupt change of project, Spinoza put the *Ethics* aside to concentrate on more pressing matters, matters that required something more than metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological inquiry.