

## Philosophy in Review



# Henry E. Allison, "An Introduction to the Philosophy of Spinoza"

Nathaniel Goldberg

Volume 42, numéro 3, août 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092039ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092039ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Goldberg, N. (2022). Compte rendu de [Henry E. Allison, "An Introduction to the Philosophy of Spinoza"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 42(3), 1-3.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1092039ar>

Copyright © Nathaniel Goldberg, 2022



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

**Henry E. Allison.** *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Spinoza*. Cambridge University Press 2022. 280 pp. \$71.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781009098199); \$24.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781009096867).

Scandalous in his day and long after—for much subsequent history of philosophy ‘Spinozist’ was a term of abuse—Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) has for decades received increased academic attention. That attention shows no signs of letting up. Scholars of early-modern European philosophy, including (among others) Edwin Curley, Daniel Garber, Don Garrett, and Michael Della Rocca, have published important work. Steven Nadler alone has published five books.

To this, Henry Allison’s *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Spinoza* (which, Allison explains, is his third such work) is most welcome—not because these others’ are deficient, but because Allison’s is simply that good. Allison employs his characteristic care and erudition, long honed on Kant scholarship. While the straightforwardly historical chapters are encyclopedic, the exegetical chapters weave Spinoza’s compressed views into comprehensible narratives, and where Allison’s interpretations are controversial he defends them. That seems exactly the right approach.

The book has nine chapters. The first two are historical. Chapter 1, ‘The Life of Spinoza,’ tells the tale of Baruch de Spinoza, son of Portuguese Jewish immigrants to the Netherlands, descended from Jews escaping the Spanish Inquisition. Baruch—who went by ‘Bento’ in Portuguese—dropped the ‘de’ and changed his first name from Hebrew for blessed to ‘Benedictus,’ Latin for the same. Allison relates Spinoza’s early Jewish education, initial exposure to secular subjects, and then immersion into Latin, science, and Cartesian philosophy, after which Spinoza lost his religious faith. Sharing his heretical views, he was famously excommunicated by the Amsterdam Jewish community at 23 years of age. The chapter details Spinoza’s moves around the Netherlands and connection with John De Witt, leader of the Dutch republicans, de facto ruler of the country, and Spinoza’s advocate. After De Witt’s 1672 murder, Spinoza decided not to publish any more work during his lifetime. The chapter closes with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, fourteen years his junior, visiting Spinoza at the end of his life, which, Allison rightly remarks, ‘must be ranked as one of the major intellectual events of the seventeenth century’ (20).

Chapter 2, ‘Spinoza’s Philosophy in Its Historical Context,’ mentions the influence on Spinoza of medieval Jewish philosophy (especially Maimonides’ and Gersonides’) and dwells on that of Descartes’ philosophy and Galileo’s science—the latter two motivating Spinoza to reject Aristotelian notions of final causes. It then summarizes Spinoza’s philosophical orientation: in epistemology, rationalism more thoroughgoing than Descartes’; in metaphysics, substance monism; and in ethics and political philosophy, naturalistic egoism similar to Hobbes’.

The next five chapters focus on one part each of Spinoza’s *Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*, his *magnum opus*, published posthumously in 1677, and on which Spinoza worked for decades. In Chapter 3, ‘God,’ Allison explains how Spinoza argues that God is identical with nature, or the entirety of existence by leaning on the Cartesian notion of substance, and performing a ‘demotion’ (46) of created substances (i.e., bodies) to attributes, and of Aristotelian prime substances (e.g., species) to modes. In addition to being identical with nature, God is free, but only in the sense



of being self-determined, and, since God is Nature, Nature has self-determined, and therefore necessary, laws. Allison remarks, ‘within the arcane metaphysical framework in which Spinoza presents his doctrine of divine causality, there is at least the outline of a thoroughly modern conception of nature and of scientific explanation’ (74). The chapter closes by exploring how alien a conception of God this is, noting that, for Spinoza, while such a God ‘is not *intelligent*,’ because it is not a mind, but instead the totality of cognitions coextensive with the totality of physical facts, ‘it is *intelligible*, which the God of the theologians is not’ (82).

Chapter 4, ‘The Human Mind,’ examines the second part of the *Ethics*, according to which the human mind, a mode of God, is identical with the human body, a mode of Nature. Eschewing both Cartesian ontological dualism and Hobbesian reductive material monism, Spinoza claims that there is one substance and set of modes describable separately via the distinct attributes of thought and extension. Allison wrestles with explaining not only how ideas can have extensional counterparts, but also the converse, since that seems to commit Spinoza to panpsychism. He then discusses how, for Spinoza, human cognition is capable of understanding God, and whether Spinoza has a correspondence theory of truth. Error gets explained as not adequately conceiving ideas, all of which are innate. The chapter closes with how Spinoza’s analysis of divine will applies to humans: free only in the sense of being self-determined.

In Chapter 5, ‘The Human Emotions,’ examining the third part of the *Ethics*, Allison stresses Spinoza’s ‘thoroughgoing naturalism’ (120), differing from Hobbes’s in distinguishing active from passive emotions based on the adequacy or inadequacy, respectively, of their corresponding ideas. Only adequate ideas lead to active emotions, and only they are rational. Allison offers as example the active emotion to desire a particular food because it is nutritious (126). Presumably to desire it because it tastes good would be a passive emotion, or passion, since (on Spinoza’s view) anticipating taste involves imagination rather than only cognition. Allison then explicates Spinoza’s ‘Conatus’ Principle, that all living things strive to continue living, by comparing it with a similar notion in Hobbes. The principle is famously obscure, which Allison may not sufficiently indicate, but his explication is easily grasped.

Chapter 6, ‘Spinoza’s Virtue Ethic,’ examines the fourth part of the *Ethics*, a virtue ethic grounded on egoism. The virtuous person, by having adequate ideas, has only active emotions, so is not bound by their passions. That provides egoistic reasons for community. Allison considers Spinoza’s evaluation of various passions and, in comparison with Kant, analogizes Spinoza’s argumentative form with the categorical imperative’s formula of humanity. The chapter closes by considering what it means for a person to be free in this ethical sense, which, by analogizing Spinoza’s argument now with the categorical imperative’s formula of universal law, Allison shows requires never acting deceitfully.

Chapter 7, ‘Freedom and Blessedness,’ examines the final part of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza argues that humans are free insofar as they have adequate ideas allowing their active emotions to control their passions, and how having such ideas leads to human blessedness in his sense of clarity of thought and contemplative peace. Responding to Spinoza’s seemingly contradictory claim that blessedness involves ‘the Mind’s duration without relation to the body’ (188, quoting Spinoza),

Allison offers an ‘epistemic reading’ (196) uncommitted to ontological dualism. Left unnoted, this is similar in method to the epistemic reading that Allison offers of Kant’s transcendental idealism to avoid its commitment to ontological dualism.

Chapter 8, ‘The Individual and the State,’ considers Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, published anonymously in 1670, and *Political Treatise*, published posthumously in 1677. On Allison’s telling, Spinoza and Hobbes are both social contract theorists acknowledging supreme state authority. Spinoza, however, is more naturalist, since Hobbes ascribes natural rights normativity. Spinoza is also more optimistic, thinking that benefits of community are more than merely security but also material and intellectual comfort. The chapter closes by arguing that the absolute authority that Spinoza assigns the sovereign—best embodied, in his view, in democratically elected government—should motivate the sovereign to permit free thought.

Chapter 9, ‘The Theology of the *Theological-Political Treatise*,’ considers theological themes in the titular work. According to Allison, Spinoza’s ‘radical innovation’ was to apply the Cartesian method to Biblical exegesis: ‘nothing may be claimed to be in the text that is not clearly and distinctly perceived to be contained in it’ (236). Allison explains Spinoza’s arguments against miracles and consideration of Jews as God’s chosen people, contending concerning the latter that Jews have retained their identity as a people (Allison and Spinoza disregard the changing nature of that identity and composition of that people) because of sociological conditions. Allison next explains the sense in which Spinoza was not an atheist, including his view that the Bible teaches morality, which Spinoza encapsulates into articles of faith ‘very close’ (253) to those of liberal Christians of Spinoza’s day. The chapter and book conclude: ‘Thus, paradoxical as it may seem, Spinoza, an apostate Jew living in a Christian country, advocates an official state religion, characterized in essentially Christian terms, as the best protection of the freedom of philosophy’ (255).

Throughout, Allison accomplishes the arduous task of making opaque passages clear. His overall method is to defend Spinoza, not necessarily because he is right but instead because that is the best way to articulate the view. I highly recommend *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Spinoza* to professional philosophers and graduate students with interest in, but little knowledge of, Spinoza. That is precisely what one should expect given the book’s title and general feel. Though his book is not easy—owing in no small part to its subject matter—undergraduates might also find it a useful resource.

**Nathaniel Goldberg**, Washington and Lee University