

Our Knowledge of Spinoza's Life and Works¹

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1. Studying Spinoza's Life

Why should students of Spinoza's philosophy be interested in the story of his life?

- It is important to understand the times in which he lived and developed into one of the world's greatest thinkers; to map his networks and to describe the political, cultural, religious and social contexts that provided the conditions for his thought to emerge.
- For a proper assessment of his philosophical stature and impact we must chart the canon, genesis, order and reception of his works; this requires solid biographical research.
- More so than with other philosophers (with the possible exception of Socrates), the story of Spinoza's life has always been associated with his moral reputation. From the very beginning his way of living has been considered as the application of his ethics in practice, and by that token as an eminently relevant source for assessing his philosophy. A philosopher who offers precepts for a good life will make his readers wonder about the extent to which he observed these himself. If, moreover, this philosopher is considered an atheist – and Spinoza no doubt was reputed to be one, despite his protests to the contrary – people tend to take the moral character of his own life into account in assessing that reputation.

Large parts of Spinoza's life are virtually undocumented, and many episodes can be reconstructed only with various degrees of probability. There are at least two reasons for this:

¹ This paper was read in Tokyo, Meiji University, on 13 May 2018. It is based on my chapter 'Spinoza's Life', in Don Garrett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, second, revised edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, in preparation).

- Spinoza preferred to live quietly and inconspicuously. He declined the offer of a chair in the university of Heidelberg, and was intent on avoiding quarrels. His signet ring had for its motto *Caute*, ‘cautiously’. According to his friend Jarig Jelles, Spinoza had given the explicit instruction that his name should not appear in full on the title-page of the posthumously published *Ethics*. In spite of all his discreetness, however, Spinoza could not avoid attracting the attention of his contemporaries and whipping up adoration as well as animosity. He had friends, admirers and followers, but they were outnumbered by his enemies: his works stirred up the hatred of the theologians and made him the most notorious thinker of the age. Calling an adversary a Spinozist soon became tantamount to the serious accusation of atheism.
- This is the second reason for the obscurity surrounding much of his life: it was dangerous to be associated with Spinoza. In the letters published in his posthumous works the names of many correspondents were concealed. His books were banned and circulated clandestinely. Although this did not stop people from reading them – quite the contrary – the circumstances were not conducive to the preservation of contentious material.

The notoriety of Spinoza’s thought also gave rise to another problem that hampers the biographer’s task: his life tends to be overshadowed by an abundance of rumours, speculations, legends, myths and popular imagery. These have their origins not only in the defamation of the philosopher in hostile pamphlets, sermons and refutations, but also in the zeal of his defenders. The reception and interpretation of Spinoza’s works has always been, and still is, inextricably linked to an appraisal of his life and reputed character.

2. Sources

What are the sources we can rely on for the study of Spinoza's life? A wealth of precious information is contained in his correspondence. Spinoza's philosophical works do not reveal biographical details, but some can be found in prefaces to his works written by two close friends: Lodewijk Meyer (prologue to the *Principles of Philosophy*, 1663) and Jarig Jelles (preface to the posthumous works, 1677).²

Research in archival records has also revealed many details.³ There are, however, relatively few documents in which Spinoza is mentioned. His course of life was such as to produce few traces: he never held a public office, remained unmarried and did not join any religious denomination after he left the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish community in 1656.

A number of early biographical accounts have come down to us. The most important of these is the life of Spinoza written by Johannes Colerus, pastor of the Lutheran parish in The Hague from 1693 till 1707.⁴ He was in a good position to gather information about Spinoza's life, for he knew a considerable number of people who had been acquainted with the philosopher. His most important witnesses were his parishioners Hendrik van der Spycck and his wife, the couple in whose house on the Paviljoensgracht Spinoza had lodged during the final five years of his life. In spite of his hostility towards Spinoza's views, Colerus was an honest chronicler, who collected and examined all the documentation he could lay hands on. His account is, however, not to be relied on without reservations. He depended heavily on the reports given to him by his informants, some thirty years after the

² Lodewijk Meyer, 'Praefatio', in Spinoza, *Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I et II* (Amsterdam: Rieuwertsz, 1663); Jarig Jelles, 'Voorreden', in Spinoza, *De Nagelate Schriften van B.d.S.* (Amsterdam: Rieuwertsz, 1677).

³ The largest collection is to be found in Manfred Walther and Michael Czelinski (eds), *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinozas*, zweite, stark erweiterte und vollständig neu kommentierte Auflage der Ausgabe van Jakob Freudenthal 1899, vol. I: *Lebensbeschreibungen und Dokumente*, vol. II: *Kommentar* (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: frommann-holzboog, 2006). Facts cited in this paper are mostly taken from this *Lebensgeschichte*. Another important source is the material gathered by Jeroen van de Ven for his exhaustive chronicle of Spinoza's life, now under construction.

⁴ Johannes Colerus, *Korte, dog waaragtige levens-beschrywing van Benedictus de Spinosa, uit autentique stukken en mondeling getuigenis van nog levende personen opgesteld* (Amsterdam: Lindenberg, 1705).

events. Inevitably things had been forgotten or mixed up.

Another early account is the anonymous pamphlet *La Vie et l'esprit de Monsieur Benoit de Spinoza*.⁵ This 'Life and Spirit of Mr Benedict de Spinoza' is not a reliable source for biographical information. It is propaganda, designed to demonstrate – by means of fictitious anecdotes – that Spinoza was a secular saint, and that Spinozism is morally superior to superstition. It probably dates from around 1712. If that is correct, the traditional attribution to Jean-Maximilien Lucas, an ardent follower of Spinoza, cannot be upheld, for Lucas died in 1697.

Pierre Bayle wrote about Spinoza and Spinozism in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* of 1697.⁶ His presentation of Spinoza as a virtuous atheist has been very influential, no doubt because it must have appeared a glaring contradiction in terms to his contemporaries: atheists were considered immoral by definition, as they did not believe in an afterlife and thus could not fear God.

In what follows I shall also refer to some other early sources: travel diaries kept by a German scholar, Gottlieb Stolle and a certain Hallmann, who visited the Dutch Republic in 1703–1704; and a brief biography written by Johannes Monnikhoff in the mid eighteenth century.⁷

3. Descent and Family

Spinoza was born in Amsterdam on 24 November 1632 into a Portuguese-Jewish family. His grandparents and father were from Portugal. They had come to

⁵ Anon. (attributed to J.M. Lucas), *La Vie et l'esprit de Mr. Benoit de Spinoza* (The Hague, 1719; also in *Nowelles Litteraires*, Amsterdam 1719).

⁶ See Gianluca Mori, 'Pierre Bayle', in Wiep van Bunge, Henri Krop, Piet Steenbakkens and Jeroen van de Ven (eds), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Spinoza* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 85–106.

⁷ Both sources are included in Walther and Czelinski, *Lebensgeschichte*.

Amsterdam among many other Sephardic Jewish immigrants, who settled there in the early seventeenth century because of the persecution Jews – or those who were suspected of practising Judaism – suffered in Portugal and Spain.

Spinoza's father, Michael de Spinoza, was born in Vidigueira in 1587 or 1588. In the early 1620s, he moved to Amsterdam. He married three times. With his second wife, Hana Deborah Senior, he had five children: Miriam (1629–1651), Isaac (1631–1649), the future philosopher Bento or Baruch, Gabriel (born ca. 1634–38) and Rebecca (died 1695).⁸

Spinoza's first name means 'the blessed one'. It occurs in three forms: Bento (Portuguese), Baruch (Hebrew) and Benedictus (Latin). No documents survive in which Spinoza himself used the Hebrew version of his name 'Baruch'. He signed legal documents as 'Bento', and his letters as 'Benedictus', or just with the initial 'B.'

The family lived on the edge of Vlooienburg, an artificial island created in 1593 in the bed of the river Amstel, as part of the urban expansion of Amsterdam. The house in which Spinoza was born and grew up no longer exists. It stood on what are now the premises of a church ('Mozes en Aäronkerk'), on the north quay of the Houtgracht, a canal that was filled in in 1882 and is now part of the Waterlooplein. To all appearances, Michael de Spinoza and his family lived in the same house for decades, so Bento presumably grew up there. The parental home probably remained his abode up until or even beyond 1656, the year he left the Jewish community.

⁸ Years as given in *Genealogie de Familie Spinoza*, Walther and Czelinski, *Lebensgeschichte*, vol. II (endpaper).

4. Youth, Education, Expulsion

When he was five years old, Spinoza went to the nearby Portuguese-Jewish elementary school ‘Ets Haim’.⁹ There he received a solid Jewish education. Spinoza was never trained to become a rabbi. Instead, he joined his father’s trading firm while still fairly young. Michael de Spinoza was a merchant who imported and exported commodities, mainly comestibles such as raisins, almonds, wine and olive oil. In the period 1651–1653, however, his firm suffered severe losses, forfeiting cargo and vessels owing to piracy and acts of war. In 1652, Michael’s third wife, Spinoza’s stepmother Hester de Spinoza, died. Michael himself died on 28 March 1654. Bento, then 21 years old, and his younger brother Gabriel initially carried on their father’s trading firm together. He remained in business for barely two years. His father had left huge debts, and bankruptcy loomed. Spinoza managed to dodge the blow by a stratagem that was bound to bring him in conflict with the Jewish community. He used an escape route available under Dutch law: being twenty-three years old, he had himself legally declared a minor and placed under tutelage on 16 March 1656. Thus Spinoza was released from the insolvent estate, and that was the end of the philosopher’s mercantile career. Gabriel somehow managed to continue the family firm alone, in spite of the severe financial straits. At the time Bento made his surprising escape from the imperilled family business, only the two brothers were still living together in the parental home. Their sister Rebecca had moved out in 1650, their other brother and sister and their father and stepmother were no longer alive.

Four months later, on 27 July 1656, the board of governors of the synagogue of the Amsterdam Talmud Tora congregation officially expelled its member ‘Baruch espinoza’. The subject himself did not attend the ceremony, although it took place only a few buildings further along the street from where he lived. The written

⁹ Abraham Rosenberg, ‘Op welke school leerde Spinoza?’, in Cis van Heertum (ed.), *Libertas philosophandi: Spinoza als gids voor een vrije wereld* (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2008), pp. 55–67.

record of the *herem* (ban) states that the governors had taken notice of Spinoza's 'evil opinions and activities', and of 'the horrible heresies he practised and taught, and the monstrous acts he committed'. No specification is given of the opinions, heresies or acts that Spinoza was charged with. It is usually taken for granted that he was excommunicated for the philosophical views that were to make him famous and notorious in the decades that followed. The phrase 'horrible heresies he taught' indeed implies that the spreading of heretical ideas was at least part of the accusation. At the moment the *herem* was pronounced, however, Spinoza had not yet (as far as we know) published anything.

Recently, it has been argued by Odette Vlessing that Spinoza's reaction to the financial crisis in 1655 fully accounts for the ban. By having himself placed under tutelage, he had defied the governors' instructions to accept the huge debts he had inherited from his father's firm. That in itself may be considered as a punishable act of disrespect of their authority. Moreover, such behaviour was detrimental to the commercial interests of the Amsterdam Jewish community. Again, we do not know whether this was indeed what was meant by the 'monstrous acts he committed', even if excommunications are known to have been pronounced in similar cases.

We cannot establish to what extent Spinoza had already developed the theories set forth in his mature philosophy. Steven Nadler has plausibly argued that the *herem* should be explained in the context of heated debates in the Amsterdam Jewish community about the immortality of the soul.¹⁰ There are indications that his philosophical views did indeed play a part. The most important of these are testimonies of two travellers who had met Spinoza and another excommunicate, Juan de Prado in Amsterdam in 1658–1659.¹¹ On 8 August 1659, an Augustinian monk by the name of Tomás Solano y Robles told the Spanish Inquisition in Madrid that De Prado and Spinoza were expelled from the synagogue because they

¹⁰ Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹¹ I.S. Révah, *Spinoza et le Dr Juan de Prado* (Paris/The Hague: Mouton, 1959).

had become atheists. They held that the law of Moses is not true, that the soul dies with the body, that God exists only in a philosophical sense, and that they did not need faith. Another witness, Captain Miguel Pérez de Maltranilla, appeared before the Inquisition the next day, 9 August 1659. The Captain had stayed in Amsterdam in 1658–1659, where he had often seen De Prado and Spinoza. He had repeatedly heard that they had renounced Jewish law, as it was no good and false, and that they had been expelled on that account. The two testimonies both mention the rejection of Jewish law as the breaking point. Of course, we do not know how reliable and accurate these witnesses were, but their depositions suggest that Spinoza was indeed expelled for his heretical views.

There is another reason to believe that Spinoza's philosophy was already gestating in the middle of the 1650s, in some form or another. As early as 1661, before having published anything, Spinoza had already acquired a reputation as a redoubtable philosopher. In Amsterdam he gained a group of followers. He obviously flourished in the heterodox circles in which he moved in the latter half of the 1650s.

5. Final years in Amsterdam

As far as Spinoza was concerned the break with Judaism was definitive: for all we know, he accepted the *herem* as an accomplished fact. He certainly never made amends in order to be readmitted to the community. This is not to say that it left him cold. He may have reacted with a written statement, a vindication of his dissent from Judaism, but that did not survive.

The five years after Spinoza's excommunication from the synagogue are shrouded in haze. He had turned his back on the family firm and definitively exited from the

Portuguese-Jewish community. Gabriel, his brother and business partner, and all other members of that community were not permitted to meet him or speak with him. Thus all his contacts with relatives and Jewish acquaintances were abruptly severed. It is therefore unlikely that Spinoza continued living in the parental home on the Houtgracht. Just what he did in Amsterdam after 1656 and where he lived is unknown. He associated with freethinking Christians and apostate Jews.¹² Several of his Christian friends were Mennonite merchants whom he had met when he was still in business: Jarig Jelles, Pieter Balling, Simon Joosten de Vries. He also became acquainted with Jan Rieuwertsz, his future publisher, and the Mennonite circle around him. That included Jan Hendriksz Glazemaker, the professional translator who was to translate most of Spinoza's works. Another important contact was the former Jesuit Franciscus van den Enden, who ran a private Latin school in Amsterdam. Though direct documentary evidence that Spinoza attended this school is lacking, it is virtually certain that he went there to be trained in Latin in 1657–1658. Unfortunately, the administration of Van den Enden's Latin school did not survive. One of the school's assistants is known, though: the schoolmaster's daughter Claria Maria van den Enden, who apparently was a skilled Latinist and singer. According to Colerus, Spinoza had often recounted that he had fancied the girl, because of her wit and learning (and in spite of her physique). Eventually she married another pupil, Dirck Kerckrinck. At the time when Spinoza came to Van den Enden's school, he was twenty-four years old, Clara Maria only fifteen. The story is not confirmed by any other source: it looks like romanticized gossip. Precisely because of its strong romantic appeal, this alleged love story has firmly established itself as one of the most persistent legends about Spinoza.

The picture of Spinoza that emerges between 1656 and 1661 is that he was setting out on a new course. His talents burgeoned. By the time he moved to Rijnsburg,

¹² Frank Mertens, 'Spinoza's Amsterdamse vriendenkring: Studievriendschappen, zakenrelaties en familiebanden', in Cis van Heertum (ed.), *Libertas philosophandi: Spinoza als gids voor een vrije wereld* (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2008), pp. 69–81.

Spinoza had gained renown as a philosopher, he had mastered the art of grinding lenses, and was proficient in Latin, the international language of scholarly and scientific communication. In the remaining years in Amsterdam, Spinoza moved in various circles, with the common denominator that they were heterodox and tolerant. His friends and acquaintances came from a variety of religious backgrounds: Jewish, Roman Catholic, Mennonite, Collegiant, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed. Quite a few of the people he associated with in that period stayed in touch with Spinoza and remained loyal friends.

Spinoza's early education would have given him a solid introduction to the Jewish philosophical tradition, of which many traces can be found in his later works. Being fluent in Portuguese and Spanish, he would also have picked up some Latin. But after 1656 he set out to enlarge his philosophical scope and to master the Latin language sufficiently to be able to write (and converse) in it. When Spinoza started writing the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* cannot be established, but I am inclined to situate that in the final years of the Amsterdam period. It shows that he had already acquired a familiarity with contemporary philosophical issues and with the works of Descartes and Bacon in particular. The Latin style of this early treatise was, according to his friends, still unsophisticated.

Some time before the summer of 1661, Spinoza moved from Amsterdam to the village of Rijnsburg, near Leiden. An obstinate legend, introduced by the anonymous author of *La Vie*, has it that Spinoza was banished from the city of Amsterdam by its magistrates, at the instigation of the spiteful rabbi Saul Levi Morteira. But that could not have taken place without leaving a trace in the archives: banishments were duly recorded. The truth is that Spinoza had nothing to fear from the city magistrates: he left Amsterdam of his own volition, and was able to return there several times afterwards without any trouble.

6. Rijnsburg

The first letter in Spinoza's correspondence as we have it is from Henry Oldenburg. It is dated 26 August 1661. Oldenburg must have visited Spinoza in Rijnsburg before the end of July. This ties in neatly with reports of three academics who visited Rijnsburg in June and September 1661.¹³ According to them, there was an apostate Jew living in the village, named Spinoza, almost an atheist but yet an honest, irreproachable man, an expert in Cartesian philosophy, who made telescopes and microscopes.

The cottage in Rijnsburg where Spinoza rented a room had been built not long before he arrived there. A note in Monnikhoff's biography made it possible to identify the house: it had a plaque in the façade, dated 1660, with the final stanza of a poem by the Remonstrant theologian Dirk Rafaëlsz Camphuysen, 'Mayschen Morgenstond' (A Morning in May).¹⁴ Spinoza's landlord must have been the surgeon who built the cottage between 1656 and 1660, Herman Homan, reportedly a Collegiant. Rijnsburg was at that time the centre of the Collegiant movement, an informal latitudinarian current that attracted Arminians, Mennonites and Socinians. There are no indications that Spinoza himself was actively involved in the meetings ('colleges') that formed the backbone of this religious movement. One reason that Spinoza went to Rijnsburg was its proximity to the university of Leiden. Attempts to find concrete evidence that he attended lectures in Leiden have so far remained fruitless.

Spinoza lived in Rijnsburg for only two years, but it was a very productive period, in which he laid a firm foundation for his own philosophical system. He worked on

¹³ Olaus Borrichius, *Itinerarium 1660–1665*, ed. H. D. Schepelern, 4 vols (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1983); see vol. I, pp. 128 (Höjerus), 214 (Langermann), 228 (Menelaus). Only the two last testimonies appear in Walther and Czelinski, *Lebensgeschichte*, I, p. 276.

¹⁴ Willem Meijer, 'Reinsburch', *Leidsch jaarboekje* 6 (1909), pp. 156–188.

the first systematic exposition of it, the *Short Treatise*, but soon began to rearrange the material for what was to become his masterpiece, the *Ethics*. It was also there that he wrote his geometrical presentation of Descartes's *Principia*.

There are two texts that Spinoza certainly did write before 1662: the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and the *Short Treatise of God, Man and his Well-Being*. He did not finish either of these works. For a long time scholars thought that the *Short Treatise* must have been the earliest of the two, on account of its alleged primitivity and inconsistency. More than a century after its discovery, however, Filippo Mignini argued that Spinoza must have written the *Short Treatise* immediately before embarking on the *Ethics*, a work that was very close to it in scope and content.¹⁵ As appears from his correspondence, he was transcribing and correcting the *Short Treatise* in 1661–1662. At some point between May 1662 and January 1663 Spinoza must have decided to abandon the project altogether, and to devote his attention instead to an entirely new presentation, *ordine geometrico*, of his philosophy – a project that was to occupy him for the next twelve years. According to Mignini, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* predated the *Short Treatise*, and I think he is right.

That still does not provide a more accurate dating of the two works. The *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* may have been written when Spinoza was still in Amsterdam, in the period between 1656 and 1661. He may have wanted to finish it one day, but there are no signs that he ever edited or updated the manuscript. In his correspondence it is sometimes referred to as a work in progress. Fokke Akkerman argued that Spinoza's original (and somewhat awkward) Latin had been thoroughly edited by Lodewijk Meyer before the treatise was published in the *Opera posthuma*.¹⁶ This would indicate an early date, well before september 1661 (when he

¹⁵ Filippo Mignini, 'Données et problèmes de la chronologie spinozienne entre 1656 et 1665', *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 71 (1987), pp. 9–21.

¹⁶ Fokke Akkerman, 'La Latinité de Spinoza et l'authenticité du texte du Tractatus de intellectus emendatione', *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 71 (1987), pp. 23–29.

wrote his earliest surviving letter – in perfectly adequate Latin). Mignini suggested that Spinoza may have started writing the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* as early as the end of 1656 or the beginning of 1657. The aim of the work, as set forth in the arresting opening pages, is to find out whether it is possible to attain a true and highest good. It already contains the germs of Spinoza's mature philosophy, but his fundamental claim that all knowledge depends on the true idea of God as the source of all that exists will be elaborated only in the *Ethics*.

The *Short Treatise* has survived only in a contemporary Dutch translation. It is certain that Spinoza wrote it originally in Latin. In its transmitted form, it consists of thirty-six chapters, complemented with two dialogues, two appendices and a large number of extensive explanatory notes. The subsidiary texts must have been part of an initial attempt to revise the work. In the process, however, Spinoza decided to abandon it altogether, and started recasting the material in what was eventually to become the *Ethics*. Thus, the *Short Treatise* can be considered Spinoza's first attempt at a systematic presentation of his philosophy, and the *Ethics* as his definitive version of it. In a letter to a close friend (Letter 28), datable to May or early June 1665, he still calls that work – then well advanced – his *philosophia*. From the correspondence we can infer that Spinoza must have embarked upon the *Ethics* well before January 1663 or even before December 1662.

In spite of all the work Spinoza put into elaborating his own views in Rijnsburg, his first publication was mainly a presentation of the philosophy of René Descartes: *Parts I and II of Descartes's Principles of Philosophy*, with an appendix *Metaphysical Thoughts*. It is the only book he ever published with his full name on the title-page and with a straightforward publisher's imprint. Spinoza must have been studying Descartes's philosophy for a number of years, and this book evinces his mastery of it. He was interested in Cartesian and contemporary scholastic philosophy with an eye to formulating his own ideas. This comes out most clearly in the *Metaphysical*

Thoughts, in which Spinoza offered a discussion of metaphysical issues in a scholastic jargon, applying it to topics that Descartes had not dealt with. He had not envisaged publication of these notes. A student of divinity, Johannes Casarius, who apparently also lived for a while in Homan's house in Rijnsburg, had asked Spinoza for philosophical instruction. Spinoza did not yet want to reveal his own views to Casarius, and gave him an introduction to Descartes instead. This private course must have taken place in the winter of 1662–1663. In April 1663, Spinoza moved to the village of Voorburg, near The Hague. After having transferred his furniture there, Spinoza went to Amsterdam to see his friends. He showed them his lecture notes, and they implored him to expand them. Spinoza obliged, delivering the requested text two weeks later. He then stayed in Amsterdam to oversee the preparations for publication of the work. Lodewijk Meyer edited it, touching up Spinoza's Latin style and supplying a preface in which he made it clear that the book did not present Spinoza's own views.

7. Voorburg

In Voorburg Spinoza rented rooms in the house of the painter Daniel Tydeman in the Kerklaan.¹⁷ In the winter of 1664–1665 he moved temporarily (about three months) to the homestead of Alewijn Gijsen, the brother in law of Simon Joosten de Vries, near Schiedam, presumably to escape from a severe epidemic of the plague.

The six years Spinoza spent in Voorburg were very productive. He continued working on his *Ethics*, but between the summer of 1665 and the end of 1669 he devoted most of his energy to his other masterpiece, the *Theological-Political Treatise*. He was keenly aware that his philosophical enterprise would meet with formidable

¹⁷ Aad van der Tang, 'Spinoza en Schiedam', *Schiedam* 10 (1984), pp. 159–184.

opposition from zealots. The public church was a political factor to reckon with, and its power was supported by what Spinoza saw as an idolatrous interpretation of the Bible. Thus the authority of God's Word was a pivotal political issue. In 1666, a book came out with the provocative programmatic title *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres* (Philosophy the Interpreter of Scripture). Spinoza was rumoured to be its author, but he certainly did not write the book. There is an old tradition that attributes it to Spinoza's friend Lodewijk Meyer; possibly he wrote it together with Johannes Bouwmeester. Though the book has been associated with the Spinoza circle from the very beginning, the view he himself developed on the relationship between reason and Scripture was entirely different.

In 1668 Adriaan Koerbagh was arrested and brought to trial for having attempted to publish a sacrilegious book, *Een licht schijnende in duistere plaatsen* (A Light Shining in Dark Places).¹⁸ When interrogated during the trial, Adriaan admitted under torture that he had visited Spinoza several times, though not spoken to him about his books. He was sentenced to ten years in prison with hard labour. Koerbagh died of exhaustion in October 1669. We do not know how Spinoza took the news. Neither in his works nor in his letters, as far as they are extant, did he ever refer to Koerbagh's fate.

The letters Spinoza wrote when he lived in Voorburg inform us about the progress of his philosophical projects: from a letter to a close friend (Letter 28) we learn that by May 1665 the work on the *Ethics* had advanced to proposition 80 of part 3. In the shape in which it has come down to us, that part has only fifty-nine propositions, so Spinoza must have split it up later. Unfortunately, Spinoza's further correspondence does not allow us to keep track of the progress of the *Ethics*. He will not explicitly refer to it again until 1675, after the manuscript was completed. One does, however, find traces of the content of the *Ethics* in other

¹⁸ Adriaan Koerbagh, *A Light Shining in Dark Places, to Illuminate the Main Questions of Theology and Religion*, ed. and trans. Michiel Wielema, introd. Wiep van Bunge (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011).

letters. Thus his correspondence with Johannes Hudde contains many textual parallels to the arguments Spinoza develops in propositions 8–14 of part 1 of the *Ethics* in order to establish the identity of God and substance. Spinoza discussed philosophical issues with other correspondents, too, but mostly in connection with his book on Descartes's *Principles* and its appendix. Willem van Blijenbergh, a grain broker from Dordrecht, started an exchange with a request for clarification about that publication, but it soon turned into a lengthy discussion about a wide range of philosophical topics: free will, freedom and necessity, determinism, the origin of evil, moral responsibility, the authority of Holy Writ, and reason and revelation. Their points of view remained wide apart, and Spinoza eventually broke off the exchange. Spinoza deals with the issue of a true and infallible method in philosophy in a letter to Bouwmeester, in terms that are reminiscent of the *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect*. In the correspondence of the Voorburg period several other topics are discussed: scientific and alchemic experiments, the calculation of probabilities. A booklet with two Dutch treatises, *Stelkonstige reeckening van den regenboog* (Algebraic Calculation of the Rainbow) and *Reeckening van kanssen* (Calculation of Probabilities), published anonymously in The Hague in 1687, has been attributed to Spinoza, but erroneously so. Though both texts are still to be found in editions and translations of Spinoza's works, it has been established beyond doubt that the author was not Spinoza but a certain Salomon Dierquens.¹⁹ Spinoza's occupation as a lense-grinder for microscopes and telescopes accounts for his interest in dioptrics, as attested in letters to Hudde and to Jelles. In Voorburg, Spinoza also made the acquaintance of Christiaan Huygens and his brother Constantijn.

Spinoza's main project in the Voorburg period was the composition of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, from the summer of 1665 till the end of 1669. It had

¹⁹ J.J.V.M. de Vet, 'Salomon Dierquens, auteur du Stelkonstige reeckening van den regenboog et du Reeckening van kanssen', translated by Ingrid Salien, Joël Ganault and Danielle van Mal-Maeder, in Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkens (eds), *Spinoza to the Letter: Studies in Words, Texts and Books* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 169–188.

become clear to Spinoza that it would be difficult for him to bring out his *Ethics*, and with the new book he envisaged – a plea for the freedom to philosophize – he wanted to intervene in contemporary debates on religion, philosophy and politics. Writing the *Theological-Political Treatise* became a priority, for which he interrupted or at any rate decelerated his work on the *Ethics*. In fact, we know little about what Spinoza did in the years 1667 to 1669: curiously, there is a gap of twenty-nine months in his correspondence between Letters 40 and 41. This may indicate that he was immersed in finishing the book.

8. The Hague, I: Political Upheaval

Around the time that his *Theological-Political Treatise* came out, towards the very end of 1669 or the beginning of 1670, Spinoza moved to The Hague. The exact date cannot be determined. There he initially rented a room in a house on the Veerkade.²⁰ In the early autumn of 1671 Spinoza moved to another and cheaper accommodation, very close by, on the Paviljoensgracht. There, in the house of the painter Hendrik van der Spuyck, he remained until his death in 1677.

As soon as the *Theological-Political Treatise* began to circulate, shocked church councils as well as individual clergymen and academics started campaigning to have it banned. Though it would not be formally prohibited until 1674, there were attempts to have it repressed from the very beginning. Spinoza's treatise created a scandal, but thereby also a demand: it was reprinted five times in the seventeenth century. It had been published anonymously, but the author's identity was soon known and Spinoza made no attempts to disavow the book. He had hoped to find at least a charitable reception among a more philosophically minded audience, but even Cartesians with a reputation for broad-mindedness let him down. Spinoza's

²⁰ Willem Meijer, 'De woning van Despinoza op de Stille Veerkade', *Die Haghe: Bijdragen en Mededeelingen* (1902), pp. 207–217.

response (Letter 43, 17 February 1671) to an attack by Lambertus van Velthuysen (Letter 42, 24 January 1671) betrays his disappointment. Van Velthuysen accused Spinoza of being an atheist, a charge Spinoza indignantly rejected. This did not prevent the two men of becoming acquainted and even, to some extent, friends – though Van Velthuysen later attacked Spinoza's *Ethics* as well.

In 1670 Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt was still in power, but tensions came to a head when the De Witt party failed to protect the Dutch Republic against the combined aggression of the French King Louis XIV, the English and two German bishoprics. Together they invaded the country in 1672 – known in Dutch history as the Year of Disaster – in the south, the east and on the western seaboard. The French gained several military successes and occupied part of the Republic, including the city of Utrecht. The Dutch could only just prevent the foreign armies from taking Amsterdam and The Hague, by inundating parts of the provinces of Utrecht and Holland. Incited by Orangist leaders (including the young Prince William, whose role in the events was, however, carefully obfuscated), a violent mob brutally lynched Johan de Witt and his brother Cornelis on 20 August 1672 in The Hague. We know how Spinoza reacted, for he told Leibniz about it four years later. In the night after the murder of the De Witt brothers, Spinoza wanted to go to the site of the crime (where the naked and mutilated corpses of the victims were still on display) with a placard that said 'Utter barbarians', but his landlord, Hendrik van der Spyck, blocked the door, for fear his lodger would get slaughtered, too. During the Year of Disaster, The Hague, officially not a town and hence devoid of ramparts, only narrowly escaped being attacked and captured.

The French occupation lasted until the end of 1673. In the meantime, the Prince of Orange had become stadholder of the Dutch Republic and inaugurated a period of virtually absolute rule, zealously supported by the ministers of the Dutch Reformed church. Though never a partisan of De Witt, Spinoza had enjoyed relative freedom

as long as the latter was in power. After 1672, he thought it wiser not to publish anymore unless conditions would improve. At the same time, both his fame as an original thinker and his notoriety as an arch-atheist spread. In February 1673, Spinoza received a letter with an invitation to occupy a chair in the university of Heidelberg. Spinoza declined politely.

One of the most puzzling events in Spinoza's life is a visit he made to the occupied town of Utrecht in July and August 1673.²¹ Spinoza never was much of a traveller: up to that point he had never been outside the province of Holland. Though Utrecht was not far from The Hague, it was at that moment a precarious destination, where no-one would go without a very good reason. It required one to enter occupied territory that could be reached only by crossing the inundated area of the 'water line'. Albert Gootjes recently found unknown letters from Spinoza's intimate friend Johannes Bouwmeester to the Utrecht professor Johann Georg Graevius.²² They prove that Spinoza left The Hague on Wednesday 26 July 1673, travelled to Gouda and crossed the water line there in order to go to Utrecht. By 14 August he still was in Utrecht, but he must have returned home before 23 August. The Prince of Condé, the French military commander, had signed a safe conduct that allowed Spinoza to cross the French lines, but it is unlikely that Condé himself was otherwise actively involved in the invitation. It is absolutely certain that the two men did not meet, in spite of several contemporary accounts that assert the contrary. Condé had left Utrecht on 25 July to join the army camps in Grave and did not return until much later. Spinoza's motives for accepting the invitation remain obscure. Broadly, there are two options: Spinoza may have gone to Utrecht in order to be of service to friends or acquaintances (in the circle of Cartesians, or perhaps also among French officers), or for political reasons, such as negotiating

²¹ Jeroen van de Ven, "'Crastinâ die loquar cum Celsissimo principe de Spinoza': New Perspectives on Spinoza's Trip to the French Army Headquarters in Utrecht in Late July 1673", *Intellectual History Review* 25 (2015), pp. 147–165; Albert Gootjes, 'Spinoza between French Libertines and Dutch Cartesians: The 1673 Utrecht Visit', *Modern Intellectual History* (accepted for publication).

²² Albert Gootjes, 'Sources inédites sur Spinoza: La correspondance de Johannes Bouwmeester et Johannes Georgius Graevius', *Bulletin de Bibliographie Spinoziste* 38, *Archives de Philosophie* 79:4 (2016), pp. 817–819.

with the French. The French officers and Utrecht Cartesians who were involved were impressed by the profundity of Spinoza's thought, but they were neither close friends nor followers. Yet there is, so far, not a scrap of evidence to substantiate the second option, a political mission. It seems that Spinoza's contemporaries did suspect a political motive: they thought that Spinoza was a spy who had dealings with the enemy.

9. The Hague, II: Spinoza's Last Years

Late in 1674 or early in 1675 Spinoza completed his *Ethics*. From his correspondence with Oldenburg, we know that he went to Amsterdam to have the work printed in the summer of 1675, but then decided to put the manuscript away. The recent discovery by Leen Spruit of a handwritten copy in the Vatican library now enables us to date the completion of the text more precisely.²³ The copy was made by Pieter van Gent at the request of Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, who took it with him on his Grand Tour through Europe. Tschirnhaus stayed in the Netherlands from the end of 1674 until May 1675, and that is apparently when he obtained Spinoza's permission to have Van Gent, a mutual acquaintance, copy the completed *Ethics*. So Spinoza had finished the text towards the end of 1674 or in the first months of 1675. He then seems to have turned his attention mainly or exclusively to a treatise on politics that was to remain unfinished: the *Political Treatise*, a systematic exposition of his political thought, on the foundation provided by the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Spinoza's death prevented him from completing the work. It breaks off just after the beginning of chapter 11, on democracy.

In November 1676 Spinoza was visited by Leibniz, who spent about three weeks in

²³ Leen Spruit and Pina Totaro (eds), *The Vatican Manuscript of Spinoza's Ethica* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

Holland. According to Leibniz himself he had several long meetings with Spinoza, during which they discussed Descartes's laws of motion and Spinoza's finalized but as yet unpublished *Ethics*. Leibniz came from London, where he had seen Henry Oldenburg and copied three recent letters (73, 75 and 78) from Spinoza to Oldenburg.

Towards the end of 1676, Spinoza's health began to deteriorate. Although it has commonly been assumed that his health had always been frail and that he suffered from (hereditary) phthisis, a fresh examination of the available evidence by Nanne Bloksma shows that in fact his physical condition must have been quite good – good enough to have an adequate resistance against many infectious diseases.²⁴ 'Phthisis' is now commonly used to designate pulmonary tuberculosis, but in Spinoza's time it was a catch-all term that covered a variety of lung diseases that involved coughing and respiratory problems. When, therefore, his early biographers speak of phthisis or consumption as the cause of Spinoza's death, that still does not get us very far. What did Spinoza die of? The most detailed report of his death is that by Colerus, based on the information he had obtained from the couple in whose house Spinoza breathed his last. Piecing all the evidence together, we know that Spinoza died in the presence of a medical doctor, that this was most likely either Lodewijk Meyer or Georg Hermann Schuller, and that the historical details were soon overrun by rumours. In a letter to Leibniz from 26 February 1677 Schuller wrote: 'the excellent and acute Mr Spinoza passed away on 21 February, after having suffered from extreme atrophy.' If that is indeed a reliable and accurate description of the cause of Spinoza's death, he may have died of what is now designated as a cachexia: a wasting of the body due to severe chronic illness.

Van der Spyck sent for a public notary, Willem van de Hove, who came the same day to draw up a first, unspecified inventory of the goods Spinoza had left, after

²⁴ Nanne Bloksma, *Spinoza: A Miraculously Healthy Philosopher* (Rijnsburg: Spinozahuis, 2018; Mededelingen vanwege Het Spinozahuis, vol. 113)

which he sealed the deceased tenant's rooms. Spinoza was buried on Thursday, 25 February, in a rented grave inside the Nieuwe Kerk, a nearby Reformed Church in The Hague. Graves were rented for a certain number of years, after which the relatives (or acquaintances) of the deceased had to renew the lease. If they did not do so, the grave was emptied. That happened to Spinoza's grave sometime in the eighteenth century; his remains (together with those of other bodies) were then dispersed over the surface of the churchyard of the Nieuwe Kerk and dug in. Although he is still buried on the site, there is no locatable plot that can be said to contain Spinoza's body. A monument just outside the Nieuwe Kerk commemorates the philosopher.

When Spinoza's relatives – his sister Rebecca and her stepson (who was also her and Spinoza's nephew) Daniel de Casseres – heard about his demise, they came to The Hague to claim the inheritance, if there was any. They asked for a complete inventory, which was made by the same notary public Van den Hove on 2 March. When they found there were still debts to be settled, Rebecca and Daniel waived all their rights to an inheritance.

Before he died, Spinoza had made arrangements with his landlord, his publisher and his friends in Amsterdam that they would see to the publication of his *Ethics*.²⁵ A writing box that contained manuscripts and letters was sent to Rieuwertsz by Van der Spyck very soon after Spinoza died. A number of people were involved in preparing Spinoza's posthumous works for publication: Bouwmeester, Meyer, Jelles, Glazemaker, Rieuwertsz, Schuller and Van Gent. In about nine months, they managed to bring out simultaneously the *Opera posthuma* and *De nagelate schriften*. Around 1680, Rieuwertsz ordered an engraved portrait from an unknown artist. It was printed on a loose sheet, and could be bought by customers to have it bound in with their copy of the posthumous works. Though made after Spinoza's death, it

²⁵ Piet Steenbakkers. 'The Textual History of Spinoza's Ethics', in Olli Koistinen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 26–41.

is assumed to present a fair likeness of Spinoza – one would not expect Rieuwertsz to sell it as a portrait if the resemblance had been poor. Another early portrait is the oil painting in the collection of the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel. The two portraits closely resemble each other.

On 4 November 1677, Spinoza's possessions were auctioned. For our knowledge of Spinoza's development the most relevant element of the auction was his library. The second notarial inventory of 2 March 1677 contains a list of the books Spinoza owned when he died. It was probably compiled by Jan Rieuwertsz, who was present as a witness when the inventory was made. The list is most likely incomplete, but it still is an extraordinary document, avidly studied by Spinoza scholars. An almost complete reconstruction of the library as described in the inventory is now kept in the Spinozahuis in Rijnsburg.

The posthumous works were printed in December 1677 and distributed as from January 1678. Within a matter of weeks, the machinery to ban the books was set in motion: from 4 February onwards church councils and synods expressed their disapproval. The books were formally proscribed by the States of Holland and West-Frisia on 25 June 1678, and more bans were to follow soon. That, however, is the beginning of another story. The tale of Benedict de Spinoza's life ends here.