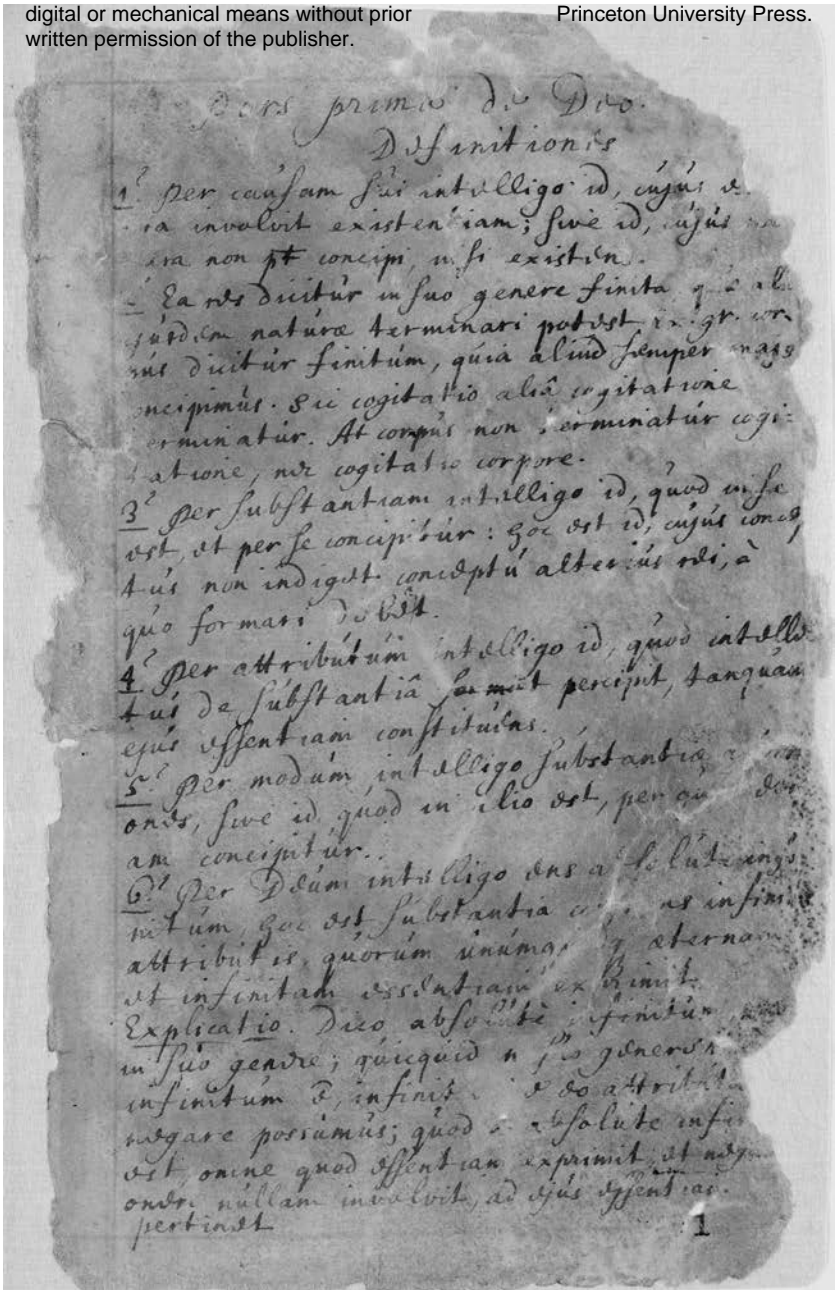


No part of this book may be distributed,
posted, or reproduced in any form by
digital or mechanical means without prior
written permission of the publisher.

© Copyright 2020
Princeton University Press.

THINK LEAST OF DEATH



The first page of Spinoza's *Ethics*, from the only surviving manuscript of the work,
discovered by Leen Spruit in 2010 in the Vatican Library (Vat. Lat. 12838).
Image reproduced by permission of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

No part of this book may be distributed,
posted, or reproduced in any form by
digital or mechanical means without prior
written permission of the publisher.

© Copyright 2020
Princeton University Press.

THINK LEAST OF DEATH



SPINOZA ON
HOW TO LIVE
AND
HOW TO DIE

STEVEN NADLER

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON AND OXFORD

No part of this book may be distributed,
posted, or reproduced in any form by
digital or mechanical means without prior
written permission of the publisher.

© Copyright 2020
Princeton University Press.

Copyright © 2020 by Princeton University Press

Requests for permission to reproduce material from this work
should be sent to permissions@press.princeton.edu

Published by Princeton University Press
41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540
6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TR

press.princeton.edu

All Rights Reserved

ISBN 9780691183848

ISBN (e-book) 9780691207681

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

Editorial: Rob Tempio and Matt Rohal

Production Editorial: Mark Bellis

Text Design: Leslie Flis

Jacket Design: Karl Spurzem

Production: Erin Suydam

Publicity: Maria Whelan and Amy Stewart

Copyeditor: Cynthia Buck

Jacket art: Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606–1684), *Vase of Flowers*, c. 1660.
Oil on canvas, 69.6 x 56.5 cm. Andrew W. Mellon Fund /
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

This book has been composed in Arno

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

1



“A NEW WAY OF LIFE”

Every day billions of people devote a significant amount of time to worshipping an imaginary being. More precisely, they praise, exalt, and pray to the God of the major Abrahamic religions. They put their hopes in—and they fear—a transcendent, supernatural deity that, they believe, created the world and now exercises providence over it.

In the prophetic writings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, this God appears endowed with familiar psychological and moral characteristics. He—the Abrahamic God is typically conceived as masculine—has knowledge, perception, intention, volition, and desire, and He experiences emotions such as jealousy, disappointment, pleasure, and sadness. God is powerful and free, unconstrained in His omnipotence. He issues commandments that He expects to be fulfilled, and He exercises harsh judgment over those who fail to obey them. God is also good, benevolent, and merciful, and the providential plan conceived and pursued by God is grounded in wisdom and justice.

This all-too-human God does not exist, or so argues the seventeenth-century philosopher Bento de Spinoza.¹ Such a divinity is a superstitious fiction, he claims, grounded in the irrational passions of human beings who daily suffer the vicissitudes of nature. Feeling lost and abandoned in an insecure world that does not cater to their wishes and yet, at the same time, finding in that world an order and convenience that seems more than

accidental, they imagine a governing Spirit that, on the model of human agency, directs all things toward certain ends. Here is how Spinoza describes the common psychological process:

They find—both in themselves and outside themselves— many means that are very helpful in seeking their own advantage, e.g., eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light, the sea for supporting fish. Hence, they consider all natural things as means to their own advantage. And knowing that they had found these means, not provided them for themselves, they had reason to believe that there was someone else who had prepared those means for their use. For after they considered things as means, they could not believe that the things had made themselves; but from the means they were accustomed to prepare for themselves, they had to infer that there was a ruler, or a number of rulers of nature, endowed with human freedom, who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use.²

A comforting thought indeed, but no more true for the consolation it brings. Such people “who feign a God like man . . . wander far from the true knowledge of God.” There is no transcendent deity; there is no supernatural being, no being who is separate or different from or beyond Nature. There was no creation; there will be no final judgment. There is only Nature and what belongs to Nature.

The word ‘God’ is still available, even useful, particularly as it captures certain essential features of Nature that constitute (at least among philosophers in Spinoza’s time) the definition of God: Nature is an eternal, infinite, necessarily existing substance, the most real and self-caused cause of whatever else is real.

(Spinoza defines ‘substance,’ the basic category of his metaphysics, as “what is in itself and conceived through itself,” that is, what has true ontological and epistemological independence.) Thus, God is nothing distinct from Nature itself. God is Nature, and Nature is all there is. This is why Spinoza prefers the phrase *Deus sive Natura* (“God or Nature”).

Early in his philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics*, Spinoza says that “whatever is, is in God,” and “from the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many ways.”³ All things, without exception, are in and a part of Nature; they are governed by the principles of Nature and brought about by other natural causes. Spinoza can be read either as a pantheist—and historically this seems to be far and away the most common interpretation—or as an atheist, as some of his most vehement critics (and fans) have done. Either way, what is non-negotiable is the denial of the personal, anthropomorphic Abrahamic God.⁴

It follows that there is, and can be, no such thing as divine providence, at least as this is typically understood. Every thing that happens in Nature and by Nature’s laws happens with blind, absolute necessity. Every thing and every state of affairs is causally determined to be as it is. Neither Nature itself nor anything in Nature could have been otherwise. As Spinoza puts it, “In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way.”⁵ In Spinoza’s view, this is not the best of all possible worlds; it is not even one among many possible worlds. This is the *only* possible world. “Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced.”⁶