

Eternity and Immortality in Spinoza's *Ethics*

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I

Descartes famously prided himself on the felicitous consequences of his philosophy for religion. In particular, he believed that by so separating the mind from the corruptible body, his radical substance dualism offered the best possible defense of and explanation for the immortality of the soul. "Our natural knowledge tells us that the mind is distinct from the body, and that it is a substance . . . And this entitles us to conclude that the mind, insofar as it can be known by natural philosophy, is immortal."¹ Though he cannot with certainty rule out the possibility that God has miraculously endowed the soul with "such a nature that its duration will come to an end simultaneously with the end of the body," nonetheless, because

the soul (unlike the human body, which is merely a collection of material parts) is a substance in its own right, and is not subject to the kind of decomposition to which the body is subject, it is by its nature immortal. When the body dies, the soul—which was only temporarily united with it—is to enjoy a separate existence.

By contrast, Spinoza's views on the immortality of the soul—like his views on many issues—are, at least in the eyes of most readers, notoriously difficult to fathom. One prominent scholar, in what seems to be a cry of frustration after having wrestled with the relevant propositions in Part Five of *Ethics*, claims that this part of the work is an "unmitigated and seemingly unmotivated disaster . . . rubbish that causes others to write rubbish."² Another more equanimous scholar

1. "Second Set of Replies," *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 12 vols., eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1974–83), vol. 7, p. 153.

2. Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), 357. He goes on to say that "I don't think that the final three doctrines [of Part Five] can be rescued. The only attempts at complete salvage that I have encountered have been unintelligible to me and poorly

Nadler has more to say about Bennett's take on Spinoza's *Ethics*, but since this part of Nadler's commentary about source moves further away from the purpose of the article, Nadler relegates this to a footnote.

This second paragraph eases into the literature review by first talking about how two scholars have found the subject matter this article focuses on to be particularly difficult.

confesses that “in spite of many years of study, I still do not feel that I understand this part of *Ethics* at all.” He adds, “I feel the freedom to confess that, of course, because I also believe that no one else understands it adequately either.”³ Because of the complexity and opacity of Spinoza's account of the eternity of the mind, which involves some of the most difficult and puzzling propositions of *Ethics*, there has been, since the posthumous publication of his writings, a great deal of debate over whether he defends or allows for personal immortality or rejects it; even today no consensus has emerged.⁴

A number of scholars have thought that what Spinoza is up to, at least in *Ethics*,⁵ is a denial of personal immortality, although there is very little agreement on just how he accomplishes this. Thus, **Stuart Hampshire** notes that, for Spinoza, while there is an eternal aspect of the mind, what survives the death of a person cannot possess any individuality. “The possible eternity of the human mind cannot . . . be intended to mean that I literally survive, as a distinguishable individual, in so far as I attain genuine knowledge; for in so far as I do attain genuine knowledge, my individuality as a particular thing disappears and my mind becomes so far united with God or Nature conceived under the attribute of thought.”⁶ While he does not necessarily find such an Averroist-type doctrine in *Ethics*, **Curley** agrees with Hampshire's general point. Despite the difficulty he claims to have in understanding Part Five, he says that “Spinoza does not have a doctrine of personal immortality. What ‘remains’ after the destruction of the body is not a person . . . whatever the doctrine of the eternity of the mind does mean, it does not mean that *I* can entertain any hope of immortality.”⁷ **James Morrison**, too, is of this opinion, although he insists that this is not because, as Hampshire claims, the mind is absorbed into the infinite attribute of thought, but because the essential condition of individuation for Spinoza—that is, the existence of the body—no longer obtains.⁸ Although **Yirmiyahu Yovel** sees yet other reasons for denying that

related to what Spinoza actually wrote . . . After three centuries of failure to profit from it, the time has come to admit that this part of *Ethics* has nothing to teach us and is pretty certainly worthless . . . this material is valueless” (372, 374). Either Bennett is intentionally overstating his case, or he fails to understand the import of the entire work.

3. Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 84.

4. The leaders of the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish congregation, on the other hand, had no trouble understanding what Spinoza had to say on this matter. Among the “heresies” for which he is reported to have received his *cherem*, or ban, from the congregation was the denial of the immortality of the soul; see *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 6. I examine the questions surrounding his ban, and especially the importance of the issue of immortality for that community, in *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

5. In this paper, I concentrate only on *Ethics*. The evidence for Spinoza's views on immortality from the earlier, aborted *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being* is more difficult to interpret. The final chapter of the work is entitled “On Immortality,” but the upshot of the brief discussion is not immediately clear; see *Spinoza's Heresy*, chapter 5.

6. Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza* (London: Penguin, 1951), 175.

7. Curley, *Behind the Geometric Method*, 84–6.

8. James Morrison, “Spinoza on the Self, Personal Identity and Immortality,” in Graeme Hunter (ed.), *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 31–47.

Spinoza held a robust doctrine of postmortem survival, he sums up this general line of interpretation nicely: “The transcendent-religious idea of an afterlife, in which our existence will be modified in proportion to what we have done in this life, is foreign to [Spinoza].”⁹ There is, in other words, no personal immortality for Spinoza.

Now this is indeed a very tempting reading of Spinoza. It is, in fact, the one I shall argue for (although I shall offer different, more specific reasons as to why there is and can be no personal immortality in Spinoza’s system). However, the more popular interpretation of Spinoza seems to be that which somehow finds in his philosophy an account of personal immortality, in one or another of that doctrine’s classical senses. Generally speaking, one can hold that the soul is immortal either because as a “substance” (or, so as not to conflict with Spinoza’s own metaphysical terminology, “thing”) in its own right that is ontologically distinct from the mortal body, the entire soul persists after death (the so-called “Platonic” view); or because there is at least a *part* of the soul—which is in fact not a self-subsisting substance but the inseparable “form” of the body, most of which dies with the body—that remains after death (this is the “Aristotelian” view).¹⁰ On either account, there is a spiritual element of the person—either the whole soul itself or some part of it—that persists, disembodied, after that person’s death; an element that is identifiable with that person’s self and that bears some relationship to the life he led. Spinoza is usually alleged to have held some version or another of one of these two positions.

Alan Donagan, for example, in much of his work on Spinoza, has adopted this reading. He insists that Spinoza’s “affirmation of personal immortality” is not irreconcilable with the rest of his system, and that what remains of a person after his death is a particular, individuated, and personal essence—one, moreover, that bears a strong sense of self. Immortality for Spinoza, he claims, is a “personal and individual affair”; what persists postmortem is “a part of the individuating primary constituent of each mind . . . a part that retains its individuality.”¹¹ I shall return to his arguments for this position below. More recently, Tamar Rudavsky has claimed that “Spinoza’s theory of human immortality can in fact be rescued in a way that preserves individuality.” Without saying why his views on the mind need such

9. Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, vol. 1, *The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 170. Yovel, however, goes too far in limiting the eternity of the mind to what can be experienced in this life. See also Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza: L’expérience et l’éternité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994): “Il faut faire violence au texte pour y lire au premier plan une doctrine de l’immortalité de l’âme. Cela n’exclut pas une certaine forme d’immortalité dans le système—celle qui correspondrait à une survie de l’entendement sans imagination; mais elle a une signification limitée et spécifique, et il est impossible qu’elle épuise le sens du mot éternité. En tout cas elle ne concerne pas le totalité de l’âme: elle ne peut donc être assimilée à la conception religieuse traditionnelle” (535).

10. This form of the distinction between two views on the immortality of the soul comes from Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), vol. 2, 289–90.

11. Alan Donagan, “Spinoza’s Proof of Immortality,” in Marjorie Grene (ed.), *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City: Anchor, 1973), 252. See also his *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), chapter 10.

Given the importance of Wolfson's perspective to both the field and Nadler's argument, an entire paragraph is devoted to this scholar.

rescuing,¹² she insists that “what we call immortality of soul, characterized as eternity of mind, for Spinoza must be personal. Within this unity of mind with God/Substance, there is still something of ‘me’ that remains.”¹³

Perhaps the most extreme version of this reading of Spinoza, however, is also the most prominent one. Harry Wolfson, in his magisterial and justly celebrated study of Spinoza's philosophy, sees in *Ethics* as strong a doctrine of personal immortality as one could hope for. In fact, according to Wolfson, Spinoza is “merely reaffirming an old traditional belief,” namely, that “the bliss and happiness of the immortal souls consist in the delight they take in the knowledge of the essence of God.”¹⁴ Immortality for Spinoza is, on his account, entirely personal: “the eternal preservation of something that was peculiar to a particular human being during his lifetime . . . the thought element of the mind that survives death bears the particular characteristics of the individual during his lifetime . . . the immortality of the soul, according to Spinoza, is personal and individual.”¹⁵ Indeed, Wolfson insists, Spinoza's goal is the entirely conservative project of defending the traditional rabbinic view of immortality against its latter-day critics: “[Spinoza's] main object was to affirm the immortality of the soul against those of his own time who denied it.”¹⁶ Spinoza is also concerned to show that there is nothing supernatural about immortality, that it is simply a part of the ordinary course of nature. (In what is the most astounding feature of his interpretation, Wolfson goes so far as to say that Spinoza “retains the traditional vocabulary and speaks of the immortality of the soul.”¹⁷ In fact, nothing could be further from the truth: Spinoza obviously goes to great lengths to avoid the traditional vocabulary. The phrase “immortality of the soul [*immortalitas animae*]” does not once appear in Spinoza's own account in *Ethics*. He consistently—and, I am sure, self-consciously—uses instead the phrase “eternity of the mind [*mentis aeternitas*].”¹⁸ Wolfson's constant use of the words “immortality of the soul” to describe Spinoza's view is thus very puzzling indeed.)¹⁹

12. As I argue in the final section, the desire to “rescue” a “doctrine of immortality” for Spinoza is misguided and represents a fundamental misunderstanding of Spinoza's major project.

13. Tamar Rudavsky, *Time Matters: Time, Creation and Cosmology in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 181, 186.

14. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. 2, 310–1.

15. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. 2, 295.

16. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. 2, 323. Wolfson has in mind here, in particular, Uriel da Costa. But I believe that it is absolutely clear that Spinoza was, in fact, in agreement with da Costa on the question of immortality.

17. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. 2, 295.

18. As Moreau notes, “Spinoza distingue très rigoureusement ces deux notions”; see *Spinoza: L'expérience et l'éternité*, 534–6.

19. Numerous other authors attribute to Spinoza, as Wolfson does, an account of personal immortality. Some argue that Spinoza just worked hard to accommodate such a doctrine into his own metaphysical schema and language, to give a Spinozistic spin to it. In his book *The God of Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Richard Mason seems to take just this position (chapter 10). So does Seymour Feldman who, in his work on Gersonides, insists that for Spinoza “immortality is individually differentiated” (see the introduction to his translation of *The Wars of the Lord* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1984], vol. 1, p. 76). Other scholars, while noting that Part Five of *Ethics* speaks only of the *eternity* of the mind, insist that far

Despite the vigorous debate around this question, all hands would agree on at least one thing: the question of immortality was of concern to Spinoza from the beginning to the end of his relatively brief philosophical career. It is an issue that is central not only to his metaphysics of the person, but also to his views on religion, morality, and the state. However, it is equally important to see—as a result of both a close reading of his writings and a broader understanding of his philosophy as a whole—that Spinoza *did*, without question, deny the personal immortality of the soul. Given everything he believed about the nature of the soul, and more importantly about true virtue and the happiness of a human being, he *had* to deny that the soul is immortal. And he did so with absolute satisfaction.

II

In *Ethics*, the word *immortality* [*immortalitas*] occurs once and only once. It appears in a context in which Spinoza is describing the foolish beliefs of the multitude, who are often motivated to act virtuously only by their hope for an eternal reward and their fear of an eternal punishment. If they were not convinced that the soul lived on after the body, then morality—difficult as it is—would, in their eyes, not be a burden worth bearing. Such an opinion, he notes,

seems no less absurd to me than if someone, because he does not believe he can nourish his body with good food to eternity, should prefer to fill himself with poisons and other deadly things, or because he sees that the Mind is not eternal, *or* immortal, should prefer to be mindless, and to live without reason. (Vp41s, G II.307/C 615–16)²⁰

The main point of his discussion here is the importance and value of virtue in *this* life; that virtue is, in essence, its own reward. But the passage might also seem important with respect to the question of Spinoza's views on immortality. Spinoza does, as we shall see, argue for the *eternity* of the mind, and this text makes it look as though he is willing to equate the thesis of the eternity of the mind with the

from wishing to deny the personal immortality of the soul, Spinoza just wanted to stress its persistence outside of time rather than its mere everlastingness in time (C. Hardin, "Spinoza on Immortality and Time," in *Spinoza: New Perspectives*, eds. Robert W. Shahan and J. I. Biro [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978], 129–38); while still others, agreeing that for Spinoza there is personal survival after death, argue on the contrary that in fact the eternity of the mind should be understood as a kind of sempiternity (Martha Kneale, "Eternity and Sempiternity," in Grene, *op. cit.*, 227–40; Donagan, "Spinoza's Proof of Immortality"). Finally, there are those who argue that Spinoza did not want to deny the immortality of the personal soul, but only that these immortal souls would be individuated in the same way as they are individuated in this life, that is, by way of their bodies (Erroll Harris, "Spinoza's Theory of Human Immortality," *The Monist* 55 [1971]).

20. All citations of *Ethics* incorporate part number (I–V), proposition (p), definition (d), scholium (s) and corollary (c). References to Spinoza's writings are to *Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, 5 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsverlag, 1972 [vol. 5, 1987]), abbreviated as "G"; and to the translations by Edwin Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), abbreviated as "C."