The title of this paper intentionally echoes that of the famed work of Gregory Vlastos, Cambridge Aristotelian, that attempts to locate, amidst the ironies and the disclaimers, the "real" Socrates of Plato’s writings. Benedict de Spinoza, too, I shall claim is, above all else, an ironist and moral philosopher. In the light of this claim, I shall attempt a re-reading of the *Ethics*, Spinoza’s most famed and most controversial work, that won for him, from critics both contemporary and subsequent, the contradictory characterizations of unconscionable atheist and "God-intoxicated" man. According to my reading of Spinoza, as ironist in the tradition of Socrates, we can no more solve the mystery of Spinoza’s “real” metaphysical views by examining Spinoza’s great metaphysical work, the *Ethics*, than we can know Socrates’ “real” opinions and beliefs by examining his dialogues with interlocutors. As ironists, both thinkers jettison the reader/scholar, in search of such certainties, into a state of abiding *aporia* because of the difficulties of disentangling the truth from the lies that enmesh to define the “ironist.”

The word “irony” itself enacts the problematic of discovering the ironist amidst his irony. The word derives from the ancient Greek *eironeia* (Latinized as

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ironia) from eiron, a dissembler in speech (itself, from eirein, to speak). The word indicates “a method of humorous or sarcastic expression in which the intended meaning of the words used is the direct opposite of their usual sense.”

We might say, then, that the ironist not only swindles his audience, defeating their expectations of the revelation (of the speaker’s opinions, beliefs and intentions) that speaking generally affords to the listener, but he defrauds the very meanings of the words in which he communicates. The very words employed for the purpose of communication betray communication’s aim. They veil, rather than reveal, the identity and intentions of the speaker. The ironist is a liar. A dissembler. A cheater of would-be “knowers.” The ironist robs the audience of the truth of the meanings of his own statements.

One might suppose that discovering the “real” thinker veiled behind the ironies is a simple matter of careful listening. If the ironist were a mere liar, one could simply invert his statements to arrive at an approximation of his truth. However, one can never know who the ironist really is, nor what he really means to communicate through his clever falsehoods, because his lies are so deeply entangled with the truth that the true and the feigned—the black and the white and all the grey areas that lie between the two—cannot be unknotted from each other. This is because the ironist is the one whose lies are also the truth. We can, then, in the final analysis, say nothing more about the speaker than that he is “really” an ironist.

Spinoza’s greatest work, the Ethics, like Spinoza’s life is, at once, simple and profound. With a rigorous mathematical method after the manner of a

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2 Webster’s Dictionary.
Euclid, Spinoza weaves a vision of being that is one of the most single-minded and consistent that has ever been formulated. In contradistinction to Socrates, Spinoza employs no magic spells or incantations, no "swan songs" or elegant myths to charm the soul of the listener. He rarely deploys figures of speech or rhetorical flourishes of any description. Like many philosophers of his era, Spinoza was wedded to the model of mathematics, in geometrical perfection, as the sole paradigm of philosophic-scientific inquiry because of its pure rationality, its certainty and its rigor. This method could be interpreted to reflect the certainties of Spinoza’s vision of Being. Thus the conclusions of his writings could be, and have been, thought to state the metaphysical beliefs held by Spinoza himself. Yet again, his method could simply reflect his concern regarding the suppression of any unpopular views, and their designation as “heretical.” The passionless rigor of mathematical methodology could comprise no less than an impassioned outcry against all religious censorship, all rigid orthodoxy, all persecution of free-thinking people. Some have suggested that the mathematical format may have provided Spinoza with a means of presentation that avoided direct confrontation with the philosophical and ecclesiastical authorities of the day, dodging their dangerous judgmentalisms. If mathematics dictates certain conclusions that are less than popular, the mathematician can hardly be held responsible.

It may seem that Spinoza, with the mathematical rigor that orders his “scandalous” doctrines, is bent upon a deconstruction of all religious “truth” and a discrediting of all religious authority that is so powerfully, coercively present in his
world. However, we can as reasonably argue that Spinoza’s method, in the
*Ethics*, enables the philosopher to sound the depths of *his own* religious heritage
and to question the profundities of *his own* histories. This rigorous method
enables Spinoza, in true Socratic tradition, to examine the roots of *his own*
deepest convictions, confront *his* most personal thoughts and challenge *himself*
upon the very foundations that shaped *his* philosophical orientation. *We might*
claim the *Ethics* is a self-examination that challenges the very beliefs that define
Spinoza himself. *We might* claim this. Yet, all the while, we know that we cannot
at all know what the convictions, thoughts or beliefs of Spinoza truly are. *His*
*Ethics* is nothing but a propose-itional work. *We might* say, its entire format is
syllogistic. It demands that *if* we accept the definition of A (*if A then B*), and *if B*
implies C, *then we* are bound, by our own premises, to the acceptance of C, or
forced to abandon our original definitions. To say *if…then* is not to say anything
about the logician, but it is to say something about his insistence upon the
consistency of truth claims, and about the absurdities of certainties.

In his application of the rigors of logic according to the strictest
mathematical certainties, Spinoza deconstructs the edifice of theological
knowledge that formed the bedrock of his own intellectual being, the very beliefs
that had been the focus of fervent study throughout his youth. But his writings
also deconstruct the belief systems of his fellows, undermine all religious
authority and render suspect all conceptual tradition in the West. Spinoza’s
writings may signal a conviction that one ought rely upon one’s own intellectual
abilities, to reason one’s own way to the truth, guided by the perfect precision of
mathematics. This latter explanation of Spinoza’s method grounds the common
categorization of Spinoza as a “rationalist.”

However, we could just as rigorously argue that the very act of
deconstruction is a counter-movement against the hybris of human reason, a
turning of reason upon itself to remind us that we cannot know what we believe
ourselves to know. In leading us carefully and surely down the path of reason,
from our origin in explicit definitions and simple, self-evident truths, only to force
us to witness the collapse of our very reasons for holding those assumptions,
and to force us to confront the absurdities implied by our own beliefs, Spinoza is
re-enacting the Socratic *elenchus*. He is emptying us of our certainties and our
delusions of the grandeur of human reason. Spinoza is nothing if not a know-
nothing, in the tradition of Socrates. He is an ironist and moral philosopher.
Starkly geometric as Spinoza’s *Ethics* is, its formulations peremptory and
magisterial and its reasoning elegantly simple, its conclusions prove rationally
devastating to humanistic certainties and dogmatic belief systems. This explains
the impassioned contempt and indignation that was heaped upon the
philosopher’s head.

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The *Ethics* opens in the construction of a grand metaphysical vision. This
vision is sketched, with mathematical precision, from a set of preliminary
“definitions” and “axioms.” These opening “self-evident truths” upon which rest
the entire work communicate the general assumptions of the intelligentsia of
Spinoza’s day. With a rigour that echoes the Socratic method, Spinoza unfolds

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the logical implications that follow, with the strictest necessity, from holding those original assumptions. Spinoza is communicating from the outset of the work, in the methodology of “propose-itions” that, if the reader agrees to the founding assumptions, she is bound to the logical conclusions of those assumptions, no matter how uncomfortable they may turn out to be. The only alternative to the acceptance of those logical conclusions lies with a re-confrontation of one’s assumptions, a re-thinking of them as truths.

In Spinoza’s treatment of God in the opening section of the Ethics entitled “Concerning God,” Spinoza posits the most widely accepted definition of God as “a being absolutely infinite—that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality” (E.I.Def.VI.). Since the religious minds of Spinoza’s day, however diversely oriented, can be counted upon to agree with this quasi-universally accepted definition, Spinoza makes it the basis of his metaphysical system. There is nothing in this definition, stated thus that is blatantly antithetical to the beliefs of even the most fanatical religious minds of Spinoza’s time, distasteful neither for Christian nor Jew.

However, if one agrees to this definition of god, one finds oneself bound to much more than the omnipotence and infinity of God. In equating God with substance, one is also bound to define God in consistency with the attributes of substance, expressed at E.I.Def.III: “By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.” It is the implications of this equation that are profoundly scandalous for a traditional understanding of God.
Spinoza expands, in “On the Improvement of the Understanding,” the implications of the equation of the conceptual independence of substance with the infinite power of God. He states:

…the first principle of nature… is in fact a being single and infinite; in other words, it is the sum total of being, beyond which there is no being found.\(^3\)

What this logically requires of the reader, then, is the agreement that, in the very light of his assumption of the greatness and fullness of God, that there can be nothing else but, outside of, or beyond God. To say that God is all-powerful, eternal and infinite is to admit that nothing can exist beyond what God can do or be; nothing can lie outside of God or enjoy separate existence beyond his divine power. If the reader is committed to his original assumptions of the all-powerful nature of God, he is bound to admit, with Spinoza, that all that is is God. But what about all the things that the religious mind would not be willing to see as “godlike?” What of the evil in the world, the atrocities of man, the natural disasters, the heresies and sins committed daily by the unfaithful?

Yet the logic of the argument is clear. One must either give up one’s idea of evil as a real and palpable substance over against the goodness of God and be prepared to redefine evil things and occurrences as enactments of the goodness of God, or one must give up one’s idea of God as only and always good. If God is to be understood as a good power and not an evil demon, a definition to which the religious thinker would most assuredly be committed, then

one would be required to entirely rethink one’s position on the things, people, events and occurrences that one is wont to call “evils” of the world.

The scholar can easily understand how this puts the religious believer in a most uncomfortable position. It requires, with the certainty and rigour of mathematical truth, that the pious believer in God’s infinite power must either give up his assurance of the uncompromised goodness of God and accept that God might be, as Spinoza states elsewhere, “some arch-deceiver leading us astray,”⁴ or the infallibility of his religious order, the rightness of all its devout and saintly authorities, and the general belief in the dichotomy of goodness and evil that forms the conceptual bedrock of all Western belief systems must be abandoned. If God is all and God is good, then all religious authorities have miscalculated in their judgments of Spinoza and so many others like him when they have called them “evil heretics.” They have been mistaken all along when they have excommunicated and tortured people, burned them at the stake, and condemned them all, as faithless, to eternal damnation. By the same necessities of reason, if heavens and hells exist at all, they can only exist as parts of God, as modes of the eternal substance, as features of God himself.

Spinoza has derived, from the religious thinker’s own assumptions regarding the nature of God, the scandalous doctrine that the world and all its contents are as good as one conceives God to be, since they are, each and every one, parts of the divine substance. If the religious adherent is to stick simultaneously to his belief that God is infinite and to his belief that God is good, then he will need to rethink the entire history of his religious order on earth,
question the authorities of his church on the ugly realities of their words and actions and know them to be mistaken in their dogmatic judgments of others. The implications of these conclusions are even more scandalous than they may at first appear. It is not simply that religious leaders themselves have been doing “evil” all along in castigating, torturing and murdering their fellows. Rather, they have, in fact, been, unknowingly, part of a divine plan of which all “evils” are really “goods” and pleasing to the eye of the god. Echoing the Stoic vision of the cosmos, the truly visionary can see that the god has been at the helm of all actions since the beginning of time, steering the universe in goodly manner.

The believer is forced, under the logic of this system, very near to the abyss of admitting the absurdity of his belief system. If he is faithful to his church, defending the earthly authorities that he understands to represent God and to comprise God’s voice on the planet, he must give up his vision of God as a just and fair administrator of the cosmos, a kindly father figure. In short, the good is good because the gods love it. They do not love it because it is good (by some external measure). God conforms to no absolute standard of goodness or justice or beauty. Rather, God acts upon pure whim, calling good whatever he fancies. Such a God is not so very far from an “arch-deceiver,” a designer of all evil. Such a God would be an abomination. He would be responsible for all suffering and sorrow, producing in himself all the abjection and iniquities of the world, but, because of the vastness of his power, he can name these horrors as “goods.” God loves pain. God loves slavery. God loves witch-burnings. God loves war. Genevieve Lloyd rightly notes the resonance of the resulting

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4 Ibid. 27.
metaphysic with the ancient Stoic worldview when she states: “human atrocities become the self-mutilations of an all-encompassing God.”

If, on the other hand, the believer holds, as Spinoza and we expect, to the certainty that God is good (by some absolute and unchangeable standard), and if he wishes also to redeem his religious order, its entire history in the world and the actions of all of its leaders, then he is forced to alter his definition of “atrocities,” “sufferings” and “sorrows.” In short there can be no evil. Nothing that exists in the universe, now or at any time in the history of the world, can be viewed as bad in itself. It is this logically necessary fact, strictly dictated by the undergirding assumptions guided by the absurdities of alternative possibilities, that leads Spinoza (in the appendix to Book I’s speculations “concerning God”) in a passage that clearly anticipates Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals, to claim that ideas of “good and bad, right and wrong, praise and blame, order and confusion, beauty and ugliness and the like” are simple “prejudices” arising from the misconception that things are separate from God, less good than his perfection, in need of judgment, improvement, salvation, punishment and so on. People are wont to judge the value of things on the basis of their usefulness and their ascetic appeal to human tastes and needs but, given the metaphysical realities implicit in our definitions, these judgments cannot be held true.

It is easy to see, in the light of the necessities of this system, why many despised and condemned Spinoza’s “scandalous claims,” no doubt feeling cheated by the perfections of a mathematics that required them either to accept

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6 Ethics. I. Appendix.
the repugnant implications of their own “truths,” or to admit themselves and their systems to be illogical. Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), in his famed *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, refers to Spinozan doctrine as surpassing “the fantastic ravings of the maddest heads that were ever locked up.”  

David Hume refers to “all those sentiments for which Spinoza is so universally infamous” as Spinoza’s “hideous hypothesis.” Yet to others less bound to religious dogma, Spinoza was acknowledged, as he was by his friends, a most kindly and thoughtful man. At the dedication of the statue of Spinoza at the Hague in 1882, Joseph Ernest Renan delivered him the following, most Spinozan and Socratic eulogy:

> Woe to him who in passing should hurl an insult at this gentle and pensive head! He would be punished, as all vulgar souls are punished, by his very vulgarity and by his incapacity to conceive what is divine.”

Spinoza has oft been criticized for asserting, by the very title of this work, that the *Ethics* is a work of ethical nature, logically necessitating the pursuit of a certain ideal of conduct in the world. It seems as though my reading of Spinoza’s project would lend credence to this criticism. That is, we may call Spinoza an ironist, but, if we do, can we still call him a moralist? If there is no real Spinozan metaphysical “doctrine,” then how can we trace a real moral doctrine without the latter to ground it? Jonathan Bennett has gone further and castigated Spinoza for maintaining an ethical doctrine that is, in his opinion, worse than no doctrine.

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8 *A Treatise on Human Nature.* IV.5.
9 Renan (1823-1892) was a French historian and critic. He studied for the priesthood but lost his faith and thereafter devoted himself to the study of the history of languages and religions and to the sciences. He greatly influenced students and young writers of the 1880’s.
at all. He argues that Spinoza is peddling a sheer egoism that he (Spinoza) hopes to successfully transform to an ethical altruism. However, insists Bennett, Spinoza is altogether unsuccessful at pulling off the ethical turn in this work. Bennett insists that, given the rigorous ethical egoism that guides the early books, the sleight of hand whereby Spinoza hopes to resolve egoistic beings into reasonable, altruistic fellows is neither successfully, nor coherently, accomplished. Spinoza does not, claims Bennett, make a convincing transition from the self-seeking self-promotion of the one to the other-promoting altruism of the many pursuing their interests in beneficent “like communities.”

Bennett’s charge is unwarranted, as Genevieve Lloyd has convincingly argued. Contrary to Bennett’s assumption, Spinoza undermines, from the beginning, the dichotomy between self-seeking and altruism upon which Bennett’s criticisms rest. Self-seeking does not transform into altruism, but rather, being understood by Spinoza as the rational virtue par excellence, egoism forms the very reasonable foundation upon which altruism, as the most rational of relations between reasonable beings, is to be both argued and ontically accomplished. Spinoza, the great deconstructionist, constructs a foundation for ethics in the very same movement as he collapses the very basis upon which the distinction between egoism and altruism are thought.

To address the question of whether Spinoza can be said to be promoting an ethic, if we are to accept that he is not at all promoting a metaphysic upon which that ethic may rest, we confront a much greater problematic, one that has

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12 Spinoza and the Ethics. 74-75.
been argued lately in the language of phenomenology. Hans Jonas, a German Jew, student of Heidegger and Bultmann and lifelong friend of Hannah Arendt at the New School for Social Research, has contended, throughout his writings, that an ethic requires a metaphysic to ontologically ground its claims. Jonas proposes, in the light of the waning of the credibility of religious systems and the waxing secularization of the world, that we look to the natural good embedded in the force of life itself to discover, in Nature, that ontological foundation that he deems so necessary to the grounding of an ethic. On the other hand, Emmanuel Levinas, Lithuanian Jew and student of Husserl and Heidegger, has crafted an account of human being-in-the-world that makes secondary and subordinate, ontologically, the ontological constructions of the conscious mind, and redresses ethics as a “rupture” in Being that can only be accomplished in the collapse of ontological projects. In Levinas’ insistence that ethics is “first philosophy,” Levinas is breaking with a philosophical tradition intact since Aristotle, that names metaphysics, the study of “first causes,” as “first philosophy.”

However one argues the ordering of philosophical domains, there still remains good reason to consider Spinoza’s work deeply ethical, not only on the basis of Book III, Proposition 18 where Spinoza argues (quite successfully, I believe) the collapse of the egoism-altruism distinction, but from beginning to end of the Ethics, not to mention, in differing formats, in the political and theological

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works. The very act of proposing a metaphysic that must abide rigorously by the implications of its own assumptions is an ethical undertaking that has profound ethical implications. To insist that each of us face the consequences of our own beliefs and live, in our daily actions with others, by the ethical ramifications of our assertions (or be prepared to abandon those assertions as truth-claims) is to promote a rigorous ethic after the tradition of Socrates. The deconstructed, deflated interlocutor, is already a humbled thinker, a less dangerous fellow in the world.

By his deconstructions of religious thought, Spinoza is not insisting that all believers give up their beliefs. But he is attempting to empty the dogmatist of his arrogant certainties and to promote the toleration of differing views and alternative belief systems. If the reader is to abide by her definition of God as all-powerful, and, simultaneously maintain God’s eternal and uncompromised goodness, she is obliged to admit that bad and ugly, blameworthy and degraded, are all in the eye of the human beholder and do not at all comprise the truths about things in themselves. This doctrine, if “doctrine” it can rightly be called, is nothing if not profoundly ethical, inducing, in the interlocutor, a thoroughgoing altruism. It becomes a corollary to one’s understanding of goodness that

\[\text{[t]he perfection of things is to be reckoned only from their own nature and power; things are not more or less perfect, according as they delight or offend human senses, or according as they are serviceable or repugnant to mankind.}\]

This means that things of the world, and indeed other human beings, are to be rightly measured only in respect of their own greatest possibilities, and not in
respect of their appeal upon human sensibilities or their usefulness to human agents. That is to say, the rabbit is a good rabbit in respect of its rabbit-ness, and not in respect of its tastiness in my stew or its aesthetic appeal upon my senses. It is precisely because God is entirely all-powerful, reasons Spinoza (in E.I.P.XVI and again in I.Appendix), that nothing was lacking to stand in the way of God’s creating every possible degree of perfection from highest to lowest possibility. “Because the laws of his nature are so vast, as to suffice for the production of everything conceivable by an infinite intelligence…”

Abstract notions about good and bad, blameworthy and praiseworthy, are “nothing but modes of imagining.”

What does it mean then to live according to the ethical implications of a view of God and his creation as proposed in the *Ethics*? It means that one cannot justly be judgmental of any other being. All things are always already as perfect as they can be, reaching ever out into their greater perfection by the very power of the god within. Humans must mirror a different god than the harsh and condemnatory god of the tradition. God does not rant and rave. He does not judge and punish and condemn. He smiles, but not “down” upon things. He smiles from within them. He is their being. He gives them the power to pursue their greatest possibilities and he orders the universe so perfectly that peaceful, benevolent communities are as natural as falling rain.

If, furthermore, as is implicit in Spinoza’s notion of *conatus*, a thing’s endeavour to persist in being comprises its “essence,” then we can say that each

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15 Ethics. I. Appendix.
16 Ibid.
and every being has the fullest right to extend itself in every respect toward the fulfillment of its own greatest possibilities, inscribed into its essence by the power of God. This definition of essence as conatus incorporates into the concept of egoistic perseverance an ethical connotation that makes egoistic striving the foundation for ethical action and the very goal of virtue. Since God is not an arch-deceiver, and since God sees fit to produce as many things as match the conceivable possibilities of things that might be, infinite wisdom and infinite potency make for a creation of the most diverse and rich array, thus demonstrating that Being itself is good, and that beings are fulfillments, not of degrees of imperfection, so much as of possibilities for perfection. What we seek in seeking perseverance is the extension of the possibilities of God himself, and thus the fulfillment of the possibilities of goodness in the cosmos. Conatus turns out, according to the logic of this system, to be the very being of things, and, in each thing realizing itself to its fullest possibilities, the goodness of God is also realized.

This means that beings must look kindly upon their fellows, as all are equally valuable entities, parts of the great body/mind of God. This metaphysic, scandalous as it might to many appear, gives the greatest ontological weight to each and every being, even as it simultaneously humbles the natural hybris of the human being. It reminds people that, though we like to imagine that everything has been created for the sake of ourselves, no such thing is the case. Each thing, however lowly, is created for the sake of itself, and for the sake of fulfilling, in every way conceivable, the infinite possibilities of God.

17 Ibid.
With all this insistence upon the power and the goodness of God that characterizes the Spinozan metaphysic, to what logical implications am I bound in my reading of the Ethics? Am I bound to see, in Spinoza’s tolerance and beneficence, the vision of a man “God-intoxicated” who wants the freedom of all beings only for the greater glory and power of his god? Or, must I admit, in the end, that Spinoza is the symbol of loathsome atheism and an arid rationalist? He does, after all, explicitly disclose, in A Political Treatise, his misgivings about the power of religious doctrine to shape ethical action in the world. He states:

…although all are persuaded that religion… teaches every man to love his neighbour as himself, that is to defend another’s right just as much as his own, yet we showed that this persuasion has too little power over the passions… We showed as well that reason can, indeed, do much to restrain and moderate the passions but we saw at the same time that the road, which reason herself points out, is very steep.\(^{18}\)

In the end, I cannot make either claim, since Spinoza, like the old philosopher Socrates, has told me nothing. He has only drawn forth the implications of the definitions that were accepted at the outset. But the definitions that belong to whom? To me? To his contemporaries? To religious folk of all times and persuasions? To Spinoza himself? Spinoza has told me nothing of what he “really” believes. He has only insisted that he who accepts the premises of the argument accept the outcomes of that argument, or abandon the premises. We do not know Spinoza, after all his ethical writings, except to say that he is a man who urges ethical transformations in his religiously-oriented fellows, and all other dogmatic people. Since few religious believers will be willing to abandon their

\(^{18}\) Chapter I. Section 4. (R.H.M.Elwes, tr.)
premises, that God is all-powerful, that God is infinite, that God is unqualifiedly good, they are bound to an ethic that seeks altruistic connections between fellows, and an attitude of valuation and affirmation of all other beings.

I might say, therefore, that, in his relentless refusal to divulge his own beliefs, Spinoza is voicing an equally relentless insistence that everyone live ethically the implications of one’s beliefs. We can also say that Spinoza, in his relentless refusal to divulge the “real” Spinoza, is demonstrating that, like his philosophizing predecessor Socrates, he is nothing if not an ironist and a moral philosopher. I think I may safely characterize Spinoza as a man who trusts that the world would be a better place if I were less judgmental of others, more tolerant of perceived gradations in Being, more celebratory of differences, more prone to see the perfections in my fellows and in other beings, rather than to see them in measurement of their faults and their failings. This leads me to claim Spinoza as a man of great kindness and compassion, a teacher whose tools are affirmation and authentification, a logician whose logic is always subordinated to the ethical task. I think I might also characterize Spinoza’s perception of the task of philosophy as equivalent to that of the old Socrates. I believe that he is, in his inquiries, always concerned, before all else, with helping us to think the ethical implications of our actions and our opinions. And I trust that, on the question of the most crucial object of philosophy, Spinoza would say, with Socrates,

This is no small matter that we are discussing, but the right conduct of life.¹⁹

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Does Spinoza mean what he says in the *Ethics*? Does he really conceive of Being as One? Of God as the sum of Nature? Of body as mind understood otherwise? What is the truth-- Spinoza’s truth-- entangled in the lies of the ironist? No student of this ambiguous thinker will ever know for certain. But I believe that I cannot be far off the track when I claim that Spinoza would have been willing to endorse any vision of reality that would challenge humankind to a rigorous self-examination, to a reassessment of their ways of understanding power, and to a reconsideration of the modes of conduct that shape their coming together to make a peaceful world. Spinoza admits the sheer ideality of his reasonable constructions in the *Ethics* when, in *A Political Treatise*, in speaking of the former work, he suggests that only the wildest utopianism could imagine humankind following the most reasonable course and living together in peace. He states:

…such that persuade themselves that the multitude of men distracted by politics can ever be induced to live according to the bare dictate of reason, must be dreaming of the poetic golden age, or of a stage-play.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{19}\) Republic 352d.

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