

Spinoza's Ethics

Trans. George Eliot. Clare Carlisle (ed.), 2020. Princetown & Woodstock: Princeton University Press.

I have been sitting with this book since Lockdown One, unsure how to proceed and distracted for many months by a house move. But mainly, it was the daunting prospect of reading Spinoza's *Ethics* and, not having read any other translation, I realised I was unable to make a comparison with this one by George Eliot, published to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of her birth. What was I thinking of when I offered to review this book?

I need not have worried, as Clare Carlisle's lengthy introduction and accompanying notes make *Ethics* accessible and the whole book an enjoyable and interesting read. I had to take a few runs at it, but was richly rewarded.

I was already a fan of Eliot's novels and interested to read more of Clare Carlisle's work, having greatly enjoyed reviewing her biography of Kierkegaard (Pringle, 2019), so I looked forward to learning more about Spinoza and how his philosophy found expression in Eliot's novels. Carlisle is not the first to investigate this but she is probably the first to do so from a scholarly philosophical perspective. She explores Eliot's interest in Spinoza (who was not well known in England at the time) and how she came to translate his *Ethics* while including a discussion of her editorial and translation decisions alongside more recent English editions.

Carlisle, a reader in philosophy and theology at Kings College London, says this translation sheds light on an important phase of Eliot's intellectual and philosophical formation in the run up to embarking on her career as a novelist. She illustrates how the meeting of minds which she describes as "a spiritual kinship...a friendship" (56) across two centuries played a part in Eliot writing what is widely acclaimed as one of the greatest novels in English, *Middlemarch*.

Mary Ann Evans became George Eliot in 1859 with the publication pseudonymously of her first novel *Adam Bede*.¹ She completed her *Ethics* translation in 1856 but it was not published until 1980 when a few copies were printed by Salzburg University. In 1856, it would have been the first translation into English and a huge achievement for a lower middle-class country girl, who had left school aged sixteen and self-educated armed with her formidable intelligence and determination. By the time Eliot embarked on *Ethics* she was already established as a translator and reviewer, editing and contributing to a prestigious journal for philosophy and literature, *The Westminster Review*,² and was already widely read in German, French and English philosophy and poetry. Carlisle emphasises that while we can trace some of the influence of Spinoza's thinking had on hers, it was not her only source of inspiration.

Although Eliot's translation was not published in her lifetime, Carlisle's view is that she had already taken what she needed to launch her career in fiction. Carlisle's introduction enabled me to find a way into the rather hard-going formal *Ethics* written in Euclidian style with Axioms, Propositions and so on, but it remains a challenging read. Through her commentary and *Ethics* itself, it becomes clear what an important philosopher Spinoza was, kicking over the traces of medieval thinking and in the vanguard of enlightenment thought.

Born in 1632, Spinoza was raised in Amersdam's Portuguese/Jewish community from which he was expelled when twenty-four years old. Part I of *Ethics* lays out his discussion about what God is. The remaining four parts cover mind, emotion, passions and liberty, and expound his vision of what a human being is, returning at the end to theology. Most of his *Ethics* is concerned with human life – ways of knowing, being and acting. His philosophy is practical and his ideas lead directly to a certain way of life whose goal is happiness and liberation.

Spinoza developed highly controversial ideas on the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible and the nature of the Divine. He argued that "whatever is, is in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God" (84). He defined God as substance, that which exists in itself, and everything else as modes of this substance. So, Carlisle suggests, metaphorically we are as waves to the ocean. Spinoza's God is unknowable, pervades every part of the universe, extends beyond space and time, and is definitely not a personal God. He had no time for idolatry or the unkindness of infantilising religious practice that focused on wrongdoing and punishment. He thought religion should be empowering and joyful.

Eliot was raised in a conservative Anglican tradition which she questioned and left behind, so Spinoza's views on religion may have been an early attraction. Carlisle describes Eliot's eventual position as "spiritually sensitive agnosticism" (24). During his lifetime, Spinoza risked death for his supposed heresy, but by the mid-nineteenth century God, and the human relationship to God, had become an open question, at least among the free-thinking circles in London that Eliot frequented. But it was Spinoza's analysis of human emotions, his insistence on the fundamental connectedness and interdependence of human lives, and his ideas on what we are and how to live, that she absorbed and took into her novels.

Spinoza believed that our lives are shaped by our relationships with others and that realising this is vitally important and can be therapeutic and empowering. His is a philosophy of encounter and transformation, where character is a process and an unfolding. It rules out free will and is deterministic,³ although he says some freedom can be gained through understanding the influences that have shaped us and by making changes. This idea found expression in Eliot's novels where some characters gain

greater understanding of themselves and their relationships while others fail to do so. *Middlemarch* ends with “there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it” (51).

Spinoza’s insight that we exist in an irreducibly interdependent web is illustrated most clearly in *Middlemarch*, where Eliot employs a narrator to make visible this interconnectedness, which cannot be fully grasped from within and to show the “elusive meeting point of determinism and responsibility” (39) in moments of decision that may lead to change and character development. She was committed to the idea of moral responsibility and, like Spinoza, believed virtue is its own rewards and vice its own punishment – as she went on to illustrate in her characters’ lives.

Carlisle suggests the strongest affinity with Spinoza lies in Eliot’s belief that human excellence lies in enlargement of soul. In Part IV of *Ethics*, he argued that harmonious friendships (including marriages) can be one of the most empowering conditions of human life. Eliot shows this both in well-matched marriages and others which are oppressive when partners are ill-matched, famously in *Middlemarch* where the wide-souled Dorothea marries the narrow-souled Casaubon. There are examples of the idea of enlargement leading to a fuller life, or not, throughout her fiction.

The effects of social isolation and the importance of community and engagement in the web of human life are explored in Silas Marner, whose whole being shrinks to a narrow focus on his weaving and his stash of money after he is expelled from his Christian community. He is brought back into social life through his chance meeting and adoption of an infant orphan girl.

Spinoza’s closing words to Part V are on salvation:

I have completed what I wished to show concerning the power of the mind over the emotions, and concerning the liberty of the mind...if salvation were close at hand and could be obtained without great labour, how were it possible that it should be neglected by almost all? But everything excellent is as difficult as it is rare.

(316)

If we translate salvation to wisdom, we see how Eliot took this notion and wove it into her characters’ stories. And so we have the product of this unlikely encounter across two centuries between “a contemplative, celibate Jewish man [and] a passionate, not quite married English woman” (56).

I enjoyed becoming better acquainted with Spinoza’s ideas, brought to life in Eliot’s novels and made accessible in her translation which, according to Carlisle, compares well with modern translations: “In the 19th century

translation was more of an art than a science [and in Eliot's hands] has a nice literary quality about it" (Flood & Irvine, 2019).

The Spinoza I have discovered here comes across as touchingly earnest, deeply thoughtful and kind. I was reminded recently that Bertrand Russell described Spinoza as "the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers" (Bartley, 2017). Anthony Gottlieb, who relates this, says he too fell under Spinoza's spell. It seems Eliot did too, and Carlisle, and now me.

Readers who do not already know Spinoza's work will find a fresh source of ideas compatible with existential thinking and relevant to therapy, and maybe even fresh inspiration on how to live and be happy.

Diana Pringle

Endnotes

1. Mary Ann Evans was a well-published and highly respected scholar by 1859. She may have chosen a male name for her novels partly to ensure her work was taken seriously as a woman in the world of fiction but also to disguise her irregular social position; at the same time she had begun living openly as an unmarried woman with a married man. *Adam Bede* was a great success and eventually she admitted to being George Eliot.
2. Carlisle traces Eliot's remarkable ascent into the London world of letters and notes that she was self taught in Latin, the language of *Ethics*. This is partly the reason for a number of revisions listed at the end of the book, while she got to grips with both the language and the philosophy.
3. Only God as the substance is free, "determined to action by itself alone... [whereas a mode] is determined by another to exist and act according to a certain and definite law" (74).

References

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