

Spinoza as Groundwork for Writing Fiction

By Steven Nadler

The first translator of Spinoza’s *Ethics* was a woman, and not any woman: the great novelist George Eliot who, before taking to writing fiction, had translated Feuerbach, David Strauss—and Spinoza. Her beautiful translation had remained unpublished until now. It has nothing to envy of the ones that followed.

Clare Carlisle (ed.), *Spinoza’s Ethics—Translated by George Eliot*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press

It is hard to think of a philosopher who has had more of an impact in the worlds of art and literature than Spinoza. From his warm reception among the early Romantic poets to his appearance in or influence upon fiction (Isaac Bashevis Singer’s short-story “The Spinoza of Market Street” is only one of many tributes in Jewish literature to the heretic from Amsterdam) to a plethora of novels, poems, plays, even operas, Spinoza’s life and writings have certainly been of great inspiration in both high culture and popular entertainment.

Still, who would have expected the author of *Middlemarch* and *The Mill on the Floss* to have devoted so much effort to translating from Latin to English one of the most notoriously opaque and difficult works in the history of philosophy? We know that the novelist and poet Mary Ann (later, Marian) Evans (a.k.a. George Eliot) had an

interest in the world of Sephardic Jewry; after all, Daniel Deronda, the eponymous hero of her novel, is a British Jew of Spanish ancestry. But it is a far cry from writing a fictional story about a nineteenth-century proto-Zionist Londoner dealing with the drama of his family history to struggling to make the propositions, demonstrations and scholia of the *Ethics* accessible to her contemporary (and later) readers.

Approaching the *Ethics*

George Eliot's translation of the *Ethics*, undertaken almost two-hundred years after the work's initial publication in the Latin *Opera posthuma* and the Dutch *Nagelate Schriften* (both in 1677), was, as far as we know, the very first English version. George Eliot was a devoted admirer of Spinoza, whom she called "a person of great capacity." The appeal that this arch-rationalist critic of both superstition and the organized Abrahamic religions held for her may have had its basis in her own loss (or, as Clare Carlisle puts it in her illuminating introduction to this volume, "loosening") of faith in the 1840s. George Eliot began by trying her hand at a translation of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* around 1843, but abandoned it within six years. She then turned to the study of the *Ethics* in the early 1850s, and started her translation in November 1854. Working from the text of Karl Hermann Bruder's recently published *Benedicti de Spinoza Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia* (3 vols., 1843-46), rather than the *Opera posthuma*, and no doubt encouraged in this project by her friend and lover (and fellow Spinoza aficionado) George Henry Lewes, she completed the translation in 1856, just a year before taking on the pen name 'George Eliot' and turning to the writing of fiction.

George Eliot was an accomplished linguist. She translated works from German (including Ludwig Feuerbach's 1841 treatise *The Essence of Christianity*, in the early 1850s), and could read, in addition to Latin, Greek and French. She was, of course, self-taught in all these languages, since women were still forbidden from attending higher education in England. Spinoza's Latin is not especially difficult, not nearly as florid or stylish as the Latin of Descartes or Leibniz, perhaps because unlike those thinkers who received a classical schooling in the language from a young age, Spinoza took up Latin only in his late teens, after curtailing his Jewish education to enter the family business. Still, even if the Latin of the *Ethics* is relatively straightforward and its sentence structure fairly simple—in part because of the geometric mode of presentation that Spinoza adopted—it is a testament to George Eliot's brilliance that a 35-year old autodidact with no formal philosophical training, and certainly no scholarly

background in Aristotelian or Cartesian or Jewish philosophy, could attack the *Ethics* as skillfully as she did, and do it in two years! You cannot translate Spinoza without engaging deeply with his philosophy: becoming familiar with his very technical vocabulary, following the line of his arguments, and really coming to understand what he is saying. This was no cookbook translation exercise.

The Text

George Eliot's process was first to translate an entire Part of the five-part treatise and review and revise that translation before moving on to the next Part. Then, having completed a full draft of the work, she went back through the whole manuscript and did further revisions. She completed a fully revised draft of Part One ("Of God") within one month, while travelling with Lewes in Germany, but other projects and distractions—including writing articles on Milton, Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Carlyle—slowed her down as she made her way through the rest of the work. In her translation she would occasionally correct obvious errors in Bruder's Latin text; for example, in the second scholium to proposition 33 of Part One, where Bruder has Spinoza referring back to Definition 6, George Eliot changes this to Definition 7, which is obviously the correct citation. She made further editorial and translation decisions on the basis of consulting other texts and translations, including H.E.G. Paulus's *Benedicti de Spinoza Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, published in 1803 and the first complete edition of the philosopher's works (with the exception of the *Korte verhandeling van God, de mensch en deszelvs welstand* [*Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*], which was not discovered until a Dutch version of the Latin original turned up in the mid-nineteenth century); the *Benedicti de Spinoza Opera Philosophica Omnia* published by A.F. Gförer in 1830; an 1841 German translation of Spinoza's works in five volumes by Berthold Auerbach (author of a novel titled *Spinoza: Ein Historischer Roman in Zwei Theilen* [1837]); and a 3-volume French translation, *Oeuvres de Spinoza, traduites en Français pour la Première Fois*, by Emile Saisset 1842. Curiously, George Eliot apparently did not consult the *Opera posthuma*.

George Eliot never published her translation of the *Ethics*. It seemed not to have circulated either, unlike Spinoza's own manuscript of the work, copies of which were read and discussed by his friends in Amsterdam (and one of which, initially in the

hands of Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, recently turned up in the Vatican's archives). Fortunately, George Eliot's manuscript is preserved in Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, which acquired it from Lewes's granddaughter in 1942.

Sympathetic Spirits?

George Eliot's decision to spend so many years translating Spinoza raises quite a few questions. The first question, of course, is "why?" Moreover, fans of George Eliot's novels will want to know how, if at all, Spinoza's philosophy relates to her fiction. Carlisle offers insightful and suggestive speculations on these topics.

On the "why" question, Carlisle shows how Spinoza was "in the air" in England around this time (as it was in Germany), with articles and reviews appearing in several high-profile venues, including Lewes's own 1843 piece "Spinoza's Life and Works." She suggests, moreover, that George Eliot and Spinoza were sympathetic spirits, and that George Eliot's religious views were quite similar to those of the excommunicated Jew.

Marian's implicit rejection of "dogmatic Christianity" in favor of a wider view that accommodated "really spiritual joys and sorrows" and "good works" resulting from "divine love" recalls the distinction between "superstition" and "true religion" drawn by Spinoza in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. And her appeals to "spiritual communion" with God, and to an "experience" of salvation involving "the peace of God", echo the description of human "blessedness" at the end of the *Ethics*. (25)

As for the novels, Carlisle devotes several long sections of her introduction to examining resonances between metaphysical, moral and psychological ideas in Spinoza and themes, plots and characters in George Eliot's fiction. For example, as Carlisle notes, readers have found "a correlation" between the three clergymen in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Amos Barton, Maynard Gilfil and Edgar Tryan) and the three kinds of knowledge (sensation, imagination and opinion; reason; and intuition) in Part Two of the *Ethics*. And the decisions that several characters in *Daniel Deronda* make—Gwendolen Harleth's choice to marry Grandcourt; Daniel's choice of Mirah—seem, for Carlisle, to occur within a Spinozistic determinism. Moreover, she suggests, "George Eliot's description of the effects of social exclusion and isolation in

her 1861 novel *Silas Mariner* demonstrates her Spinozist insistence on the relational nature of human character” (48).

With “Spinozist ideas so deeply inscribed in her thinking, having given intensive and rigorous attention to every proposition in the *Ethics*”, Carlisle writes, “George Eliot had ready to hand a philosophy of encounter and formation that cast light on the embodied relationality of human selves and encouraged her to approach the question of character in the manner of a physical science” (46). While conceding that “it is difficult to conclude that George Eliot was a Spinozist”, Carlisle does claim that “Marian Evans belonged to a generation uniquely receptive to Spinozism” and that “her distinctive religious temperament and remarkable intellectual capacities combined to allow these ideas to take root and grow within her” (55). George Eliot’s fiction, Carlisle suggests, was informed by her “Spinozist insight into the irreducibly interdependent ‘web’ of human life” (53).

The Translation

Now, what about the translation itself? George Eliot was, of course, an extraordinarily gifted writer of English prose, and it shows in her translation of Spinoza. Style does not get in the way of substance here, however, and one is clearly reading Spinoza, not George Eliot. In fact, I would say that her translation of the *Ethics* is just as good and serviceable as that other nineteenth-century translation, the one by R. H. M. Elwes (1887) that served for nearly a hundred years as the standard English text.

Let’s start right at the beginning. Here is Bruder’s text of the definitions of ‘*causa sui*’ and ‘*substantia*’:

I. *Per causam sui intelligo id, cuius essentia involvit existentiam, sive id, cuius natura non potest concipi nisi existens.*

III. *Per substantiam intelligo id quod in se est et per se concipitur; hoc est id, cuius conceptus non indiget conceptu alterius rei, a quo formari debeat.*

George Eliot translates these as follows:

1. By *a thing which is its own cause*, I understand a thing the essence of which involves existence, or the nature of which cannot be conceived except as existing.

3. By *substance* I understand that which exists in itself and is conceived through, or by means of, itself; *i.e.* the conception of which does not require for its formation the conception of anything else.

And here is Elwes's translation of those same definitions:

1. By that which is self-caused, I mean that of which the essence involves existence, or that of which the nature is only conceivable as existent.

3. 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 very much a matter of taste, of course. George Eliot's 'a thing which is its own cause' is less felicitous for *causa sui* than Elwes's simpler 'that which is self-caused' (Edwin Curley, in his 1985 translation, opts for 'cause of itself'); she goes with 'exists in itself' for '*in se est*', rather than the more literal 'is in itself'; and the 'by means of' in the definition of 'substance' is superfluous. On the other hand, I prefer George Eliot's 'cannot be conceived except as' to Elwes's 'is only conceivable as', perhaps for no better reason than it seems closer to the ways in which the "ontological proof" for God's existence is traditionally framed. On the whole, George Eliot's translation of these very simple sentences seems to me just slightly less convoluted than Elwes's.

Here is another example, the well-known proposition 72 from Part Four about the exceptionless "honesty" of the free person. First, Bruder's Latin text:

Propos. LXXII. *Homo liber nunquam dolo male, sed semper cum fide agit.*

This is a difficult one. How should one translate '*dolo male*' and '*cum fide*'? Curley opts for 'honestly' and 'deceptively', respectively. Elwes translates it as follows:

PROP. LXXII. The free man never acts fraudulently, but always in good faith.

This is pretty good, especially because it seems to capture the motivation of the free person better than 'honestly' and 'deceptively', which might lead to the problematic conclusion noted by scholars that the free person never utters a falsehood. After all, one cannot lie to another person without being deceptive, but one can tell a lie in good faith. Now for George Eliot's translation:

Prop. LXXII. The free man never acts with deceit, but always with fidelity.

I prefer Elwes's 'in good faith' for '*cum fide*.' Moreover, George Eliot's 'never acts with deceit' might seem just as problematic as Curley's 'honestly' and 'deceptively.' The difficulty is that the Latin *dolus malus* (bad deceit, fraud) allows for a contrast with *dolus bonus* (good deceit, or deceit with a good intention), which is hard to capture in a straightforward way in English.

One more example: the brief but all-important proposition 67 of Part Four:

Propos. LXVII. *Homo liber de nulla re minus, quam de morte cogitat, et eius sapientia non mortis, sed vitae meditatio est.*

Curley's translation of the first clause is not great: "A free man thinks of nothing less than of death", which suggests that death is the greatest of all things to think about—just the opposite of what Spinoza has in mind. Elwes translates it as "A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life." GE's version is like Curley's in the first clause, but better than Elwes's in the second clause: "The free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom consists in the contemplation not of death, but of life."

Finally, I would be remiss not to cite GE's translation of the famous final sentence of the *Ethics*: *Sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia, quam rara sunt*. Here Elwes, Curley and George Eliot are all on the same page, with only a trivial difference:

Curley and Elwes: "But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare."

George Eliot: "But everything excellent is as difficult as it is rare."

Carlisle does make some non-trivial editorial interventions in George Eliot's text. For example, in the second scholium to proposition 33 of Part One, regarding the way in which "things have been produced by God", where George Eliot's manuscript reads (with respect to God's freedom): "far different from that which is attributed to God by us", Carlisle modifies this to read: "far different from that which we have attributed to him." This is odd, since Carlisle explicitly says that she is bothered by the gendered language in Spinoza and the way in which this is often reflected in George Eliot's text; but here Carlisle substitutes 'him' for 'God.'

More important, why change George Eliot's text at all (except in cases where there are, as Carlisle notes, "unambiguous textual errors")? Indeed, one thing Carlisle

says she contemplated doing but, in the end, did not do—and wisely so, in my opinion—was play with the gender of Spinoza’s text, especially pronouns, both when they refer to God and when they refer to human beings. Spinoza’s Latin is, of course, highly gendered, and Carlisle considered “introducing a feminine subject into the *Ethics*”—for example, using ‘she’ instead of ‘he.’ While I appreciate Carlisle’s motives—grounded both in historical and biographical considerations and in a matter of principle—I think such a rewriting would have been a big mistake. For then we would have not George Eliot’s translation of the *Ethics* but Clare Carlisle’s adaptation of George Eliot’s translation. But what we want just is George Eliot’s translation, with all the gendered and other choices she made.

This goes to the purpose of publishing George Eliot’s text. Is it simply to make available a new translation of the *Ethics*, one geared to a new generation of readers? There are many excellent English translations of the *Ethics*. Right now, the standard one is Curley’s (also published by Princeton University Press), which, while in need of some revision, is likely to remain *the* English edition (especially for scholars) for quite a long time.

It seems, though, that the value of this book is to make George Eliot’s translation available, really for the first time. A typescript of her *Ethics* was printed in 1981, but it was a very limited edition and is long out of print. This is thus the first true publication of an important text in the history of philosophy *and* the history of English literature.

On the whole, Carlisle has done a beautiful job editing George Eliot’s translation and providing a scholarly apparatus. In addition to her long and illuminating introduction, she has included some photographs of the manuscript; one appendix in the form of an alternative version of the final proposition of the *Ethics*, with feminine pronouns; another appendix with a “Table of Emotions” and their comparative translations by George Eliot, Curley, and Matthew Kisner and Michael Silverthorne (authors of a recent translation); yet another appendix with many of George Eliot’s own revisions to her manuscript; and copious notes, many of which highlight either textual problems with Bruder or differences between George Eliot’s translation and those of Curley and others. In sum, this is the edition that George Eliot’s translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics* has long deserved, and that we have long needed.

Reviewed: Clare Carlisle (ed.), *Spinoza’s Ethics—Translated by George Eliot*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2019, Pp. xii + 369, £41.

Published in *booksandideas.net*, 29 June 2020.