

# Spinoza's *Ethics* as Kabbalistic Transposition

## The Geometric Method as Communicative Code

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### Abstract

This article argues that Spinoza's *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (1677) is not primarily a work of rationalist system-building in the tradition of Descartes or Euclid, but a systematic transposition of Lurianic Kabbalistic metaphysics into the formal language most legible to Spinoza's scientific contemporaries — notably Leibniz, Huygens, and the broader Republic of Letters. The argument proceeds in four stages. First, the historical record of Spinoza's documented exposure to Kabbalistic sources in Amsterdam is reviewed. Second, the structural isomorphism between the *Ethics* and the Lurianic Sefirot system is demonstrated through parallel analysis of key conceptual architectures. Third, the rhetorical function of the *ordo geometrica* is assessed against the intellectual conventions of seventeenth-century natural philosophy, establishing that geometrical demonstration served Spinoza as a legitimating code rather than as the genuine foundation of his system. Fourth, the underlying triadic structure common to the Kabbalah, the *Ethics*, and multiple independent wisdom traditions is identified as evidence of a universal formal pattern — one that modern algebraic topology and category theory are capable of representing with precision. The conclusion is that reading the *Ethics* through its Kabbalistic substructure resolves longstanding interpretive difficulties and reveals the work's internal coherence in a way that purely rationalist readings cannot achieve.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, Kabbalah, Lurianic mysticism, Abraham Cohen de Herrera, *ordo geometrica*, emanation, sefirot, algebraic topology, triadic structure, history of philosophy

## 1. Introduction

Spinoza's *Ethics* has consistently presented its interpreters with a paradox. Its form is maximally rigorous — definitions, axioms, propositions, proofs, corollaries and scholia arranged in strict deductive sequence — yet its conclusions are among the most heterodox in the history of Western philosophy: the identity of God and Nature, the eternity of the intellect, the intellectual love of God as the highest human good. These conclusions do not feel like the outputs of Euclidean geometry. They feel, to anyone with prior exposure, like the conclusions of a mature mystical tradition.

This discrepancy has been noted before, but it has rarely been stated with the directness the evidence warrants. The present article states it directly: the *Ethics* is a Kabbalistic work in geometric dress. Its architectonic derives from the Lurianic Kabbalah as mediated through the Sephardic-Neoplatonist synthesis of Abraham Cohen de Herrera. Its geometric method is a communicative strategy, calibrated to the epistemic conventions of seventeenth-century natural philosophy, that gave the work legitimacy in the eyes of readers — Leibniz, Huygens, Tschirnhaus, Oldenburg — who would have dismissed an explicitly mystical treatise.

This thesis is not new in its components. What is new here is its systematic integration: the historical evidence, the structural analysis, the rhetorical argument, and the identification of the

universal pattern that underlies both Kabbalistic and Spinozist ontology, and that formal mathematics is now equipped to describe.

## 2. Historical Evidence: Spinoza's Kabbalistic Formation

### 2.1 The Amsterdam Milieu

Spinoza's formation took place within a community deeply saturated with Kabbalistic learning. The Portuguese-Jewish community (*Nação*) of Amsterdam in the seventeenth century was not simply a congregation of merchants and refugees; it was one of the most intellectually active centres of Jewish philosophical and mystical thought in Europe. The *Talmud Torah* school that Spinoza attended from approximately 1639 to 1656 operated under the direct influence of rabbis for whom Kabbalah was a living intellectual practice, not a marginal curiosity.<sup>1</sup>

The specific circle documented by scholars includes Menasseh ben Israel, a polymath rabbi with extensive Kabbalistic learning; Saul Levi Morteira, Spinoza's primary teacher; and — most crucially — the influence of Abraham Cohen de Herrera, whose Kabbalistic synthesis was available in Amsterdam in the abridged Hebrew version prepared by Isaac Aboab da Fonseca and published in 1655, the year before Spinoza's excommunication.<sup>2</sup> As Aanen has demonstrated through careful archival reconstruction, Spinoza's exposure to this literature was not incidental but constitutive of his early intellectual formation.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.2 Abraham Cohen de Herrera: The Critical Intermediary

The figure of Abraham Cohen de Herrera (c. 1570 – c. 1635) is central to any account of the Kabbalah-Spinoza connection, and has been established as such by the most rigorous scholarship currently available. Herrera was a Sephardic philosopher trained in Neoplatonism who translated Lurianic Kabbalistic doctrine — the system of Isaac Luria (1534–1572) — into the philosophical vocabulary of Plotinus, Proclus, Leone Ebreo, and Marsilio Ficino.<sup>4</sup> His major work, *Puerta del Cielo* (*Gate of Heaven*), accomplished exactly the synthesis that Spinoza would later replicate: it rendered an emanationist mystical cosmology in the formal language expected by a philosophically literate audience.

Beltrán's monumental study (Brill, 2016) provides the most comprehensive demonstration of Herrera's direct influence on Spinoza's metaphysics.<sup>5</sup> The correspondences are not superficial. As Beltrán documents, the concept of the first cause as unique substance, the procession of infinite modes from that substance, the subjective or metaphorical status of the divine attributes, and the panentheistic identification of God with the totality of being — all of these are present in Herrera's *Puerta del Cielo* and all reappear, in transformed philosophical register, in Spinoza's *Ethics*. Beltrán's conclusion is unambiguous: Herrera's work anticipated Spinoza's central metaphysical commitments and provided the template from which Spinoza worked.

Zovko's analysis adds the further dimension of the *ordo geometrica* itself.<sup>6</sup> Herrera chose a dialectical expository style — drawn from Proclus's Neoplatonic method — that was, in his own time, associated with rigorous philosophical argumentation. Spinoza's choice of geometric method stands in direct continuity with this tradition: both authors faced the same problem of communicating esoteric content in a form that would command intellectual respect from non-initiated audiences, and both resolved it by adopting the most prestigious formal style available to them.

## 2.3 Spinoza's Own Testimony

Spinoza's relationship to the Kabbalah as reflected in his own writings is strategically ambiguous — which is itself significant. In the *Theological-Political Treatise* he writes dismissively of "Kabbalistic triflers," expressing amazement at "their madness."<sup>7</sup> This dismissal has been read as evidence of Spinoza's distance from the tradition. Melamed correctly notes, however, that this reading is superficial.<sup>8</sup> The passage occurs in a work designed to argue for the separation of philosophy from theology, directed at an audience of Christian intellectuals. Public dismissal of the Kabbalah in that context is exactly what a philosopher committed to the project of the *Ethics* would need to perform.

More revealing are the structural commitments of the *Ethics* itself — commitments that, as the following section demonstrates, are inexplicable without reference to the Kabbalistic framework that generated them.

## 3. Structural Analysis: The Ethics as Sefirot System

### 3.1 The Macro-Architecture

The five-part structure of the *Ethics* follows a pattern of emanation and return that is the defining schema of Lurianic cosmology. Part I (*De Deo*) addresses the infinite, self-causing source of all being. Parts II through IV trace the genesis of finite mind, its entanglement with affects and inadequate ideas, and the path of partial liberation through rational understanding. Part V describes the culminating return — the intellectual love of God, *amor intellectualis Dei* — which is the reintegration of finite intellect with its infinite ground.

This is not coincidentally similar to the Lurianic schema of *tzimtzum* (contraction), *shevirat ha-kelim* (shattering of the vessels), and *tikkun* (repair/restoration). It is the same movement: infinite source, descent into finitude and fragmentation, ascent through understanding toward reintegration. As Zovko documents, this structure corresponds directly to Herrera's division of *Gate of Heaven*: transcendent cause and source of being (Ain Sof); procession (*hitpaštut*); and reversion (*histaqlut*).<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2 The Conceptual Mapping

The correspondence extends to the level of individual conceptual architecture:

Lurianic Kabbalah	Spinoza's <i>Ethics</i>
Ain Sof (the Infinite, beyond all)	Substance ( <i>Substantia</i> ), absolutely infinite, self-caused
Sefirot (ten divine emanations/attributes)	Attributes ( <i>Attributa</i> ), infinite in number, each expressing the whole of substance
Partzufim (configurational faces of the)	Infinite modes ( <i>Modi infiniti</i> ), immediate and mediate
Finite worlds (Olamot: Atzilut, Beriah,	Finite modes ( <i>Modi finiti</i> ), the totality of existing things
Devekut (adhesion/union with God as	Amor intellectualis Dei, intellectual love of God ( <i>Ethics</i>
Three trans-Keter levels: Ain → Ain Sof	Three levels of the cognitive ascent: imaginatio → ratio

The parallel between the three Kabbalistic registers preceding Keter and Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge is particularly striking and has received insufficient attention in the literature. In both

systems, the highest mode of knowing is not discursive or inferential but a form of direct, unmediated apprehension of the whole — what Spinoza calls *scientia intuitiva* and what Kabbalah terms *da'at* in its supernal form.

### 3.3 The Attribute Problem Resolved

One of the most contested interpretive problems in Spinoza scholarship concerns the ontological status of the divine attributes. Spinoza states that God has infinitely many attributes, yet human beings can know only two: thought (*cogitatio*) and extension (*extensio*). The logical and metaphysical status of the unknown attributes has generated several centuries of scholarly controversy.<sup>10</sup>

This problem dissolves when the Kabbalistic substrate is made explicit. In the Lurianic system, the ten Sefirot are understood as the knowable faces of Ein Sof — not as partitions of the divine being, but as the modes through which the infinite makes itself accessible to finite cognition. The ten Sefirot do not exhaust the divine; they are the channels of communication between infinite being and finite knowing. Spinoza's two known attributes are precisely the two channels through which embodied human cognition can access the infinite substance: the world as extended matter, and the world as thinking mind. The claim that substance has infinitely many attributes is not a logical proposition requiring derivation; it is the Kabbalistic affirmation that Ein Sof exceeds any finite characterization, translated into the formal language of substance metaphysics.

## 4. The Geometric Method as Communicative Code

### 4.1 The Epistemic Culture of the Seventeenth Century

To understand why Spinoza chose the *ordo geometrica*, it is necessary to understand the epistemic prestige of geometrical demonstration in the seventeenth century. The mathematization of natural philosophy — accelerated by Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, and Huygens — had established geometric proof as the gold standard of intellectual legitimacy.<sup>11</sup> Leibniz and Huygens, who were among the most sophisticated thinkers in Spinoza's network, operated within a framework in which certainty was geometrically grounded. A work presented in any other form would have been evaluated against a lower standard of rigor.

Leibniz's view is representative: he praised Euclid precisely for demonstrating what appeared self-evident, because demonstration was the means of achieving not merely knowledge, but knowledge with *certainty* (*scire cum certitudine*).<sup>12</sup> The geometrical method was, in this context, not merely a stylistic convention but a claim about the epistemic status of one's conclusions.

### 4.2 Double Function: Systematic and Rhetorical

Gatens has analyzed what she calls Spinoza's "double strategy" in the *Ethics*: the geometric mode of presentation simultaneously functions as a systematic grounding and as a rhetorical instrument.<sup>13</sup> The systematic function is genuine — the deductive structure does track real entailments within Spinoza's metaphysical system. But the rhetorical function is equally real and has been insufficiently emphasized: the geometric form lends an "aura of necessity" to conclusions that, in their actual content, far exceed what geometrical demonstration can establish.

The conclusions of Part V of the *Ethics* — the eternity of the mind, the intellectual love of God, *beatitudo* as the highest good — are not demonstrated from axioms and definitions in any sense that

would satisfy a modern proof theorist. They are the culminating statements of a metaphysical and soteriological vision whose real foundations lie in the emanationist cosmology that Spinoza inherited from Herrera and, through Herrera, from the Lurianic tradition.

### 4.3 The Audience

Spinoza's correspondence with Leibniz, Huygens, Oldenburg, and Tschirnhaus confirms that he was acutely aware of the intellectual expectations of his contemporaries.<sup>14</sup> The geometric method was the communicative contract that made the *Ethics* legible as serious philosophy rather than mystical speculation. It was Spinoza's solution to a problem that Herrera had also faced: how to transmit an esoteric ontology to an audience that lacked — or had been trained to distrust — the vocabulary in which that ontology was natively expressed.

This does not make the *Ethics* dishonest or merely rhetorical. Spinoza believed that his Kabbalistic inheritance expressed genuine truths about the structure of reality. The geometric method was his means of demonstrating those truths in a language his contemporaries could recognize as valid. The code was appropriate to the message.

## 5. The Universal Triadic Structure

### 5.1 The Triad as Fundamental Pattern

Both the Kabbalistic system and Spinoza's metaphysics instantiate a triadic structural pattern that recurs across independent wisdom traditions and that modern mathematics is equipped to formalize. The pattern is:

**Source** (undifferentiated infinite) → **Differentiation** (attributes/aspects/emanations) → **Manifestation** (finite modes/worlds/things)

In the Kabbalah this appears as: Ain Sof → Sefirot → finite worlds (Olamot). In Spinoza: Substance → Attributes → Modes. In the Tao Te Ching: Tao → One → Two → Three → ten thousand things. In Neoplatonism (Plotinus): The One → Intellect (*Nous*) → Soul → Matter. In the Vedantic tradition: Brahman → Maya → phenomenal world.

The independence of these instantiations — developed across cultures with minimal historical contact — is evidence that the pattern tracks something real about the structure of being and knowing. It is not a cultural artifact but a fundamental formal structure.

### 5.2 Formal Representation

The triadic emanative structure corresponds precisely to the categorical structure of dependent type hierarchies. In the language of category theory and algebraic topology, the relation between Source, Differentiation, and Manifestation can be represented as a system of pullbacks (aggregation toward unity) and pushouts (distribution toward multiplicity), organized as a simplicial complex.<sup>15</sup>

This formal representation is not an imposition of modern mathematics onto ancient systems. It is the recognition that the ancient systems were already tracking the same structural relationships that modern mathematics has learned to describe with precision. The Sefirot-fractal — a self-similar

network of triadic nodes in which each Sefirot reproduces the overall structure at a smaller scale — is formally identical to the recursive type hierarchies of dependent type theory.

The dependent type structure of Spinoza's *Ethics* can be expressed as follows:

- *Substantia* forms a contractible type — there is exactly one substance, and every apparent multiplicity of substances is identical to it
- *Attributum(s : Substantia)* — attributes are dependent types, defined relative to the unique substance
- *Modus(a : Attributum)* — modes are dependent on attributes
- *Affectus(m : Modus)* — affects are dependent on modes

This hierarchy is not merely analogous to the Sefirot system; it is structurally homologous with it. The paths of emanation in the Kabbalistic system — the directed relations between Sefirot that constitute the Tree of Life — correspond to the morphisms and paths in the type-theoretic representation.

## 6. Interpretive Consequences

### 6.1 Dissolving the "Rationalist" Reading

The dominant historiographical tradition, from Wolfson through Bennett, has read Spinoza primarily as a rationalist — a philosopher engaged in the project of Cartesian-inflected substance metaphysics, using geometrical method because he believed philosophical truth could be derived from first principles in the way geometrical theorems are derived from axioms.<sup>16</sup> This reading has generated the interpretive puzzles it has been unable to solve: the status of the attributes, the nature of infinite modes, the meaning of *sub specie aeternitatis*, the relation between conatus and beatitudo.

When the Kabbalistic substrate is restored to visibility, these puzzles are not solved by new arguments but dissolved by better description. The attributes are the knowable faces of the unknowable Ein Sof, limited to two for finite human cognition. The infinite modes are the first emanations from substance — the Kabbalistic equivalents of the immediate modes of Keter, Chokhmah, and Binah. *Sub specie aeternitatis* is the intellectual equivalent of the Kabbalistic ascent to the level of Atzilut, where time and finitude fall away. Conatus is the finite thing's participation in the infinite self-maintaining power of Ein Sof. Beatitudo is devekut — adhesion to the divine ground.

### 6.2 The Ethics as Accessible

A further consequence of the Kabbalistic reading is that the *Ethics* becomes, paradoxically, more accessible. The geometric form has repelled generations of readers who encountered a succession of apparently arbitrary definitions and axioms followed by proofs whose validity they could not assess. When the Kabbalistic architecture is made visible, the movement of the text becomes transparent: it traces the path from infinite source through finite existence to the highest form of knowing and being — the path that every major wisdom tradition has traced in its own vocabulary. The reader who understands the Sefirot system, the Neoplatonic emanation scheme, or the Taoist cosmological sequence finds the *Ethics* immediately legible.

Spinoza's geometric method was a necessary code for his historical moment. It is no longer necessary. The task of interpretation is now to read the code correctly — to restore to visibility the

esoteric content that the geometric form was designed to communicate to those capable of receiving it.

## 7. Conclusion

Spinoza's *Ethics* is a work of Kabbalistic transposition. Its ontological architecture derives from the Lurianic Kabbalistic tradition as transmitted through Abraham Cohen de Herrera's Neoplatonic synthesis. Its geometric method is a communicative strategy calibrated to the epistemic conventions of seventeenth-century natural philosophy — the shared formal language of Leibniz, Huygens, and the scientific community within which Spinoza sought intellectual recognition.

The historical evidence for Spinoza's Kabbalistic formation is well-established in the scholarly literature. The structural isomorphism between the *Ethics* and the Sefirot system has been demonstrated at every level of the analysis. The rhetorical function of the geometric method has been confirmed by analysis of both the intellectual culture of the seventeenth century and the specific features of Spinoza's argumentative strategy. The universal triadic pattern that underlies both systems has been identified and shown to be formally representable in the language of modern algebraic topology and category theory.

What emerges from this analysis is not a diminished Spinoza — a mystic who disguised his sources — but an enhanced one: a thinker who recognized that the deepest truths of the Kabbalistic tradition could be reconstructed in the most rigorous formal language available to his time, and who executed that reconstruction with precision and philosophical originality. The geometric method was not the foundation of the *Ethics*. It was its translation. The source text was the living tradition of Jewish mystical thought in which Spinoza was formed, and which he spent his life — in exile from the community that had transmitted it to him — attempting to communicate to the world.

## Notes

1. For the intellectual character of the Amsterdam *Nação*, see Kaplan (1989) and Nadler (1999).
2. On Aboab da Fonseca's abridgement and its circulation, see Zovko (2017), p. 398–399; Popkin (1992), p. 391.
3. Aanen, Johan. "The Kabbalistic Sources of Spinoza." *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2016): 279–299.
4. On Herrera's Neoplatonic synthesis, see Beltrán (2016), Chapter 1; Zovko (2017), pp. 391–414.
5. Beltrán, Miquel. *The Influence of Abraham Cohen de Herrera's Kabbalah on Spinoza's Metaphysics*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.
6. Zovko, Marie-Élise. "Understanding the Geometric Method: Prolegomena to a Study of Procline Influences in Spinoza as Mediated through Abraham Cohen Herrera." In *Proclus and his Legacy*, edited by Danielle Layne and David D. Butorac. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 391–414.
7. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chapter 9; Gebhardt III/136/1–2.
8. Melamed, Yitzhak Y. "Spinoza and the Kabbalah: From the Gate of Heaven to the 'Field of Holy Apples'." In Cristina Cisiu (ed.), *Early Modern Philosophy and the Kabbalah* (forthcoming).
9. Zovko (2017), p. 405.

10. For the major positions on the attribute controversy, see Wolfson (1934), Curley (1969), Della Rocca (1996), and Melamed (2013).
11. On the mathematization of seventeenth-century natural philosophy and its epistemic implications, see the relevant chapters in Garber and Ayers (eds.), *Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (1998).
12. Leibniz, cited in Goldenbaum (2008); see also *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Geometrical Method."
13. Gatens, Moira. "The Rhetoric of the Geometrical Method: Spinoza's Double Strategy." *Project MUSE / Journal of the History of Philosophy* (2001).
14. Spinoza's correspondence is collected in Gebhardt (1925); for the network of correspondents, see Nadler (1999), Chapter 11.
15. For the category-theoretic representation of triadic emanative structures, see the formal analysis in Konstapel (2025a, 2025b).
16. The "rationalist" reading is exemplified by Wolfson (1934) and Bennett (1984); for critique, see Curley (1988).

## Annotated Bibliography

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