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The Way of Necessity

Eighty-One Chapters on God, or Nature

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OPENING SAMPLE

The Way of Necessity

Eighty-One Chapters on God, or Nature

After the manner of the Tao Te Ching. The thought is Spinoza's; the arrangement and the wording are the author's.

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Philosophical inspiration: Baruch Spinoza. Contemporary prose and applications are by the author, not quotations from Spinoza unless expressly identified.

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A Note on the Form

This book has the shape of the Tao Te Ching: eighty-one short chapters, verse rather than argument, counsel delivered as description rather than command. The matter is Spinoza's. The two are joined because they arrive at the same observation from opposite directions. Laozi reports that the way cannot be stated, and that the man who fights the current is worn down by it. Spinoza demonstrates that nothing is contingent, that a man is a mode of one substance, and that freedom is not escape from necessity but understanding of it. What one leaves as a mystery, the other resolves into cause.

That resolution is the argument of this book, which is why each chapter opens on the mystery and closes on the mechanism. The first part establishes the order of things: one substance, nothing contingent, mind and body as one thing seen twice, good and evil made by relation rather than found in nature, and three kinds of knowing that all report the same world. The second part asks how a man who understands that order should live: what virtue is once it stops meaning merit, why the free man hates no one, what not-doing can honestly mean, and how a person stands inside a crowd and a market and a state without being steered by any of them.

Three disagreements between the two were kept rather than smoothed, because in each case the disagreement is the more interesting thing. The Tao treats desire as the root of disorder and looks toward the end of wanting. Spinoza holds desire to be the essence of a man: it cannot be removed, only made active. Chapter 35 states the difference.

The Tao recommends not-doing. Spinoza holds that a man who acts from adequate ideas is more active than other men, not less.

Chapter 50 states what not-doing can honestly mean.

The Tao describes a heaven that levels surplus to fill deficit.

Spinoza's nature has no preferences and owes no debts. Chapter 77 keeps the observation and refuses the compensation.

Where the two agree, they agree because neither will argue with what is. The book has no conclusion to offer beyond that, and its last chapter says so: blessedness is not the reward of virtue, it is virtue itself, and the rest is commentary.



PART I

The Order

I. The Name That Cannot Be Pictured

Whatever can be pictured is a particular thing,
and a particular thing is not the whole.

A horse is not the field.

The field is not the sky.

The sky is a picture too.

The whole is not a larger particular.

It is not the sum of the pictures,
for the sum of pictures is still a picture.

Those who make a picture of the whole
and call it God
have made a man out of the sky
and set him on a throne,
and then they fear him.

The nameless is not a secret to be guarded.
It is what remains when the pictures stop.