

ARNOLD GEULINCX
ETHICS

WITH SAMUEL BECKETT'S NOTES



Translated by

MARTIN WILSON

Edited by

HAN VAN RULER, ANTHONY UHLMANN
& MARTIN WILSON

Subseries Editor: HAN VAN RULER

BRILL

Arnold Geulincx
Ethics

Brill's Studies in Intellectual History

General Editor

A.J. VANDERJAGT, University of Groningen

Editorial Board

C.S. CELENZA, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore

M. COLISH, Oberlin College

J.I. ISRAEL, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

J.D. NORTH, University of Groningen

W. OTTEN, Utrecht University

VOLUME 146

Brill's Texts and Sources in Intellectual History

General Editor

HAN VAN RULER, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Editorial Board

A. FIX, Lafayette College, Easton

J. LAGRÉE, Université de Rennes-1

U. RENZ, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich

A. UHLMANN, University of Western Sydney

VOLUME 1

Arnold Geulincx

Ethics

With Samuel Beckett's Notes

Translated by

Martin Wilson

Edited by

Han van Ruler
Anthony Uhlmann
Martin Wilson



BRILL

LEIDEN · BOSTON
2006

On the cover: 'Interior with a Mother close to a Cradle' by Pieter de Hoogh (1629-after 1683).
Reproduction by courtesy of the Nationalmuseum – The National Museum of Fine Arts,
Stockholm.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Geulincx, Arnold, 1624-1669.

[De virtute et primis eius proprietatibus. English]

Ethics / Arnold Geulincx ; with Samuel Beckett's notes ; translated by Martin
Wilson ; edited by Han van Ruler, Anthony Uhlmann, Martin Wilson.

p. cm. — (Brill's studies in intellectual history, ISSN 0920-8607 ; v. 146)

(Brill's texts and sources in intellectual history ; vol. 1)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN-13: 978-90-04-15467-4

ISBN-10: 90-04-15467-1 (alk. paper)

1. Ethics. 2. Geulincx, Arnold, 1624-1669. De virtute et primis eius
proprietatibus. I. Beckett, Samuel, 1906-1989. II. Wilson, Martin. III. Ruler,
J. A. van. IV. Uhlmann, Anthony. V. Title.

B3918.E5W55 2006

170—dc22

2006048722

ISSN 0920-8607

ISBN-10: 90 04 15467 1

ISBN-13: 978 90 04 15467 4

© Copyright 2006 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands
Koninklijke Brill NV incorporates the imprints Brill,
Hoteli Publishing, IDC Publishers, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers and VSP.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written
permission from the publisher.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal
use is granted by Brill provided that
the appropriate fees are paid directly to The Copyright
Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Suite 910
Danvers, MA 01923, USA.
Fees are subject to change.

PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Abbreviations	ix
Translator's Preface	xi
Introduction	xv
On this Edition	xliii
Annotations and Editors' Notes	xliv
<i>Ethics</i>	
To the Curators of the University of Leiden	3
Gracious Reader	7
Treatise I <i>On Virtue and its Prime Attributes</i>	11
Chapter 1 <i>On Virtue in general</i>	11
Chapter 2 <i>On the Cardinal virtues</i>	19
Section I	19
Section II	29
Treatise II <i>On the Virtues Commonly Called Particular</i>	65
Part I <i>On Particular Virtues in general</i>	67
Part II <i>On Particular Virtues touching upon ourselves</i>	74
Part III <i>On Particular Virtues touching upon God</i>	82
Part IV <i>On Particular Virtues touching upon other men</i>	91
Treatise III <i>On the End and the Good</i>	95
Treatise IV <i>On the Passions</i>	109
Treatise V <i>On the Reward of Virtue</i>	127
Treatise VI <i>On Prudence</i>	151
Annotations to the <i>Ethics</i>	167
Introduction to Beckett's Notes to the <i>Ethics</i>	301
Samuel Beckett's Notes to His Reading of the <i>Ethics</i> by Arnold Geulincx	311
Bibliography	355
Index	361

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Han van Ruler would like to express his thanks to the Flemish and Dutch Organisations of Scientific Research, the FWO-V (former NFWO) and NWO, whose funding enabled him to study the life and work of Arnold Geulincx first at the Catholic University of Louvain (KU Leuven) and then at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Anthony Uhlmann gratefully acknowledges the support of the Australian Research Council, who funded his involvement in this project, and the College of Arts, School of Humanities and Languages and the Research Office of the University of Western Sydney for their ongoing support.

The editors further wish to acknowledge the executor of Samuel Beckett's estate, Edward Beckett, as well as The Board of Trinity College Dublin, for permission to publish a translation of Beckett's notes to his reading of Geulincx.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AT *Œuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1897–1913/Paris: Vrin, 1964–1971/Paris: Vrin, 1996, followed by volume and page numbers.
- CSM *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch and Anthony Kenny, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1985–1991, followed by volume and page numbers.
- Grynaeus Desiderius Erasmus et al., *Adagia, id est; Proverbiorum, Paroemiarum et Parabolarum omnium (. . .) Collectio*, ed. Johannes Jacobus Grynaeus, Frankfurt: Widow of Johannes Pressius, 1646.
- Opera* Arnold Geulincx, *Opera Philosophica*, ed. J.P.N. Land, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1891–1893/reprinted as Arnold Geulincx, *Sämtliche Schriften in fünf Bänden*, ed. H.J. de Vleeschauwer, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1965–1968, followed by volume and page numbers.
- Metaphysics* Arnold Geulincx, *Metaphysics*, ed. Martin Wilson, Wisbech: Christoffel Press, 1999.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

During the course of this work, I was asked by an enquirer why the *Ethics* of Arnold Geulincx had never been translated into English; and I recall replying, somewhat mischievously, that perhaps all those who had attempted the task had given up in despair—despair, I added, at the obscurity of Geulincx' Latin and his contorted syntax. This explanation seemed at the time enough to satisfy anyone: it certainly satisfied *me*, having at one point become not a little discouraged myself. But now that these obscurities and contortions have all been illuminated and untwisted (and not by my efforts alone, far from it), I have come to see the work in a new light. A brief recollection of how I came to see it in the old light may make my reasons for this revision clearer.

In the Preface to my onetime translation of Geulincx' *Metaphysics*, I had remarked that:

... his [Geulincx'] rhetoric itself is not elegant. His habit of saying everything twice over (sometimes in the same sentence), and of repeating the same train of qualifications every time a certain word or phrase recurs is exasperating. Parts of the present work [*Metaphysics*] read like (what they may well have been) elaborated lecture-notes, producing a disjointed effect similar to Aristotle's work of the same title.

The *Ethics* I conceived of as being very different: a lyrical masterpiece, whose "magnificent Belgo-Latin" Samuel Beckett evidently found as captivating as he found its doctrines liberating—a lyrical masterpiece whose prose-poetry (I vowed) could be best conveyed by allowing my own prose to be infiltrated (however inadequately) by the rhythms and splendours of that era when the English language was at its best; which by no miraculous coincidence was approximately the period of Geulincx' own life. With this forewarning in mind, the reader may then not be as surprised as he might otherwise be to happen upon, when he has barely turned over a page or two, a passage such as this:

At the same time, the pleasure of a mind separated and withdrawing itself from the body (which, as I have said, consists in the bare appropriation of its own actions, inasmuch as they assent to Divine Law)

seems for the most part so meagre, so tenuous and rarefied, that men hardly or not at all consider it to be worthy of the name of Pleasure. And when this spiritual delight is sterile, and does not produce the corporeal and sensible pleasure (passionate Love) which in other cases it usually does produce, they complain that they have to live a life of sorrow and austerity, that they are wasting away, and that for all they obey God and Reason, they are destitute of all reward and consolation.

However, as the work progressed, I came to recognise that there is another essential element present that I had formerly been inclined to dismiss as an obstacle or even as a fault, an element that we can see in operation as early as in the Dedication that Geulincx addressed to the Curators of the University of Leiden. There has, no doubt, been flowerier, more contorted Latin (for instance, try the Dedication to the Grand Duke of Tuscany placed at the head of Galileo's *Starry Messenger*) than Geulincx' here, in that portion of the work in which extravagantly, even ridiculously flowery language was considered at the time to be *de rigueur*; but Geulincx does not disappoint:

For the roof of this temple is Ethics. And what of Politics? It is but an arch in this roof. Those for whom the welfare of a Commonwealth depends on something other than this virtuous firmament (I mean the roof of this temple) are a world away from the truth. He who has suspended the lantern of his counsels from human subtlety often glitters for a little while: the puerile admire him, and toadies flatter; but soon, snuffed out and guttering amidst smoke and stench, he crashes down onto the onlookers, showering them with his innards, and bruising their noddles. Experience, the dominatrix of fools, teaches it all too well with a spiky rod, today as of yore.

Yet even in such a passage, we observe something else going on: the syntax following the movement not of some periodic structure, but of his thought, trying, as it were to catch his thought in motion, as he is borne along by his avidness to explain himself to anyone who is listening, reaching for this, that, or any other metaphor that might elucidate rather than obscure his meaning (whatever his success or lack of it in particular cases), pausing to correct himself, in a word *talking* rather than writing (and I have everywhere punctuated the text accordingly). And this is the scene as I like to imagine it:

Through the high, narrow casements of an upper chamber, watery, autumnal sunlight slants down upon half-a-dozen men of student age, seated on wooden benches. Facing them in a creaking armchair sits an older (though not all that much older) man with a foxy, rubicund Flemish face, wearing a shabby, fur-trimmed gown.

His hand raised before him in a prehensile gesture, he is embarked upon a sentence, delineating the family responsibilities of the Cardinal Virtues. But for all his eagerness, all the twirling of his verbal net, the subject is about to escape from him; he requires a single epithet in order to secure it; he finds the epithet. The silence that ensues on the conclusion of the sentence is at length broken not by a murmur of agreement from the meagre audience but by a shrill little cry coming from downstairs; reminding his hearers that, unlike almost all the eminent philosophers of the age, their teacher is not a childless celibate, but a family man—and reminding us that this chamber is not a hall of the University, but (more likely) the unofficial private academy that so annoyed those same Curators whom he flattered as “most noble and most generous sirs”, and whose merest nod or frown he declared would be enough to cause him willingly to rewrite his entire opus . . .

Or perhaps, likelier still, Geulincx sits alone, celibate for the nonce, in his cramped study, that theatre of the mind, lecturing to imaginary students, reading aloud (in an age that still regarded reading in silence as spooky) his own inchoate thoughts. And the result of this communing is at length something more substantial than a *mot juste*. For Geulincx does not have references, he has *afterthoughts*; he does not write footnotes to the main text in footnote language; he writes *Annotations*. Only at one remove, in a few Annotations, does he descend to footnotes, doubtless alive to the comic effect of annotating Annotations, parodying scholarship. You then, imaginary students, are more privileged than those few real students, and this is not just Geulincx' mind, but your mind, readers.

To convey all the earthy colours, not only of the words but of the world of the *Ethics* in bleached contemporary English would, I concluded, have been impossible. But to convey them in any form whatsoever would have been equally impossible without the unique judgement and expertise of my collaborators, Dr. Han van Ruler and Dr. Anthony Uhlmann. It is to these two guides that I now commend you.

MW

INTRODUCTION

If it has been the conviction of many times and places that the need to take action in life should not compel us to fixate on desired effects, Arnold Geulincx' *Ethics* is the seventeenth-century expression of a more universal plea for mental detachment. With its focus on the Will of God rather than fortune, nature or fate, it fitted well with the general spirit of the European Baroque. In the wake of the Reformation, there was a religious trauma to deal with, and calls for a complete dedication to the divine could be heard far beyond Calvinist Leiden and Jansenist Louvain. Yet in its curious combination of ethical, metaphysical and epistemological views, in its particular blend of philosophy, science and religion, Geulincx' *Ethics* is a book that stands all on its own.

Arnold Geulincx (1624–1669) moved from Louvain to Leiden in 1658, the short distance separating Catholic from Protestant lands that had still been united a few generations before. Whether the young and successful philosopher had planned to go north on his own initiative remains unclear. He is said to have made an initial visit to Leiden in 1657, but in January 1658, Geulincx was suddenly dismissed from his Louvain University post. Since the circumstances of his deposition have always been clouded in mystery, what caused the Louvain professors to dismiss their young colleague in such a summary manner has been the subject of wild speculation. Geulincx may have had doctrinal disagreements with them, and an eighteenth-century source, partly based on documents now lost, also mentions financial debts.¹ Yet it is equally possible that Geulincx was being punished for engaging in a sexual relationship with Susanna Strickers, a girl from the countryside who may have been his cousin and was to become his wife.²

¹ Cf. Jean Noël Paquot, *Memoires pour servir a l'histoire litteraire des dix-sept provinces des Pays-Bas, de la principauté de Liege, et de quelque contrées voisines*, vol. 13, Louvain: De l'imprimerie academique, 1768, 69. Details on the life of Arnold Geulincx as well as references to further literature may be found in my article in Wiep van Bunge et al., *The Dictionary of Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Philosophers*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003, vol. 1, 322–331.

² The first to offer the idea that his relationship with Susanna may have been the reason for Geulincx' dismissal was J.P.N. Land, who suggested in 1887 that

Whatever had happened in or around Louvain, a falsified version of Geulincx' motives, given a few months later in Leiden, would prove far more relevant to the history of philosophy. In Holland Geulincx had to start afresh and he managed to receive the support of some influential theologians. No doubt with the best of intentions, these men, Abraham Heidanus (1597–1678), Johannes Coccejus (1603–1669) and Johannes Hoornbeek (1617–1666), portrayed their younger colleague in a letter of recommendation as a brave religious refugee who had given up his former life and all of his possessions for the sake of the Protestant faith.³

Heidanus, the senior theologian of the three, knew well what he was doing. He had bigger plans for this new protégé. A modernist in philosophy and an Augustinian in faith, Arnold Geulincx was the perfect candidate to fulfil a task Heidanus was eager to support: the invention of a Christian philosophy of morals.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE CLASSICS

The idea of a Christian ethics was something of a paradox. By 1669, the year in which Geulincx died with his book left unfinished, strains of classical thought had been seeping into the Christian conception of the blessed life for more than a century and a half. Since the days of Erasmus, a spiritual approach to the Christian faith had gradually drowned the message of otherworldly resurrection. There were mental fruits in this life and pagan motifs to give Christian dogma a more moral and psychological interpretation. Yet rather than being the straightforward outcome of this humanistic approach,

Geulincx had married Susanna against university rules. Cf. J.P.N. Land, 'Arnold Geulincx te Leiden (1658–1669)', in *Verslagen en Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afdeling Letterkunde*, 3rd series, vol. 3 (1887), 277–327. Note that when Geulincx' predecessor William Philippi (1600–1665) had been allowed to marry, it was expressly stated that he would be the last Louvain academic to be granted such a privilege. Cf. Paquot, *Memoires*, vol. 7, 212—a source suggested to Land by Victor Vander Haeghen: 'La faculté obtint cependant que les professeurs (de philosophie) qui se marieroient à l'avenir seroient privés de leur chaire; ce qui a toujours été observé depuis.' On Philippi, see also Georges Monchamp, *Histoire du cartésianisme en Belgique*, Brussels: Hayez, 1886, 317 ff.

³ A. Eekhof, 'De wijgeer Arnoldus Geulincx te Leuven en te Leiden', *Nederlandsch Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, new series, nr 15 (1919), 1–24. The Latin text of the letter is reproduced on pp. 18–20.

Geulincx' *Ethics* is an extraordinary attempt to reinvest the ancient approach to ethics with an input of a genuinely Christian flavour.

On the outside—and true to the ideas of his Leiden patron Heidanus—Geulincx opposed pagan ways of moral thinking. Repeated criticisms of Aristotle and Seneca illustrate his aim and aspiration to offer an alternative to the schools and systems of antiquity. At the same time, if his Christian alternative was to be a purely philosophical one, argued from the viewpoint of reason without referring to either theological dogma or Scripture, it could hardly escape borrowing crucial elements from the philosophical tradition. Details of Aristotelian thought accordingly survive, such as the concept of finding the right mean in between virtue's excesses and defects. Still, in Aristotle's case Geulincx was able at least to keep a clear distance from the notion that ethics was essentially an effort at excellence and virtue a question of habit. Such views were relatively easy targets for the Christian critic. An early modern moralist encountered much more difficulty in keeping a pious distance from Stoic views. Two main points of opposition to Stoicism seem to have surfaced in seventeenth-century thought, both clearly evident in Geulincx: (1) pessimism with regard to the possibility of mastering fate and acquiring a lasting tranquillity and (2) a rejection of suicide.⁴ Yet Stoic analyses were too close to early modern Christian conceptions of the good life to be entirely ignored. Embracing the idea that human happiness could not be based on primary experience, but had to be found through a process of rational reflection that might deliver the soul from the automatism of its subjective illusions, Geulincx was never far away from what might seem to an outsider a genuinely Stoic point of view.

Irony would accordingly have it that the first complete edition of Geulincx' *Ethics* carried as its motto the opening lines of Seneca's *De vita beata*:

To live happily [...] is the desire of all men, but their minds are blinded to a clear vision of what makes life happy.⁵

⁴ Cf. my forthcoming article 'L'amour de Dieu pour le sage. Notions philosophiques de la béatitude d'Érasme à Spinoza'.

⁵ Seneca, *De vita beata ad Gallionem* I, 1. Translation from John W. Basore's edition: Seneca, *Moral Essays*, volume 2, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1932, 99. Cf. Arnold Geulincx, *Gnothi Seauton, Sive (...) Ethica*, Leiden: A. Severini, 1675/Amsterdam: Jansenio-Waesbergii, 1691, A4/Revised edition

Even in a motto like this, however, the editor, too, chose to distance himself from the ancients. Where Seneca had said that taking the wrong road might lead one away in the opposite direction, a curious line was added, explaining that this was what ‘usually happens today and previously happened in all the schools of the Pagans.’ Seneca had presumably fallen into the trap he himself had warned against. What was needed to avoid it, according to Geulincx, was to work on one’s motivation. He agreed with some of the ancients that the road to wisdom could not be based on habitual and instinctive drives, but had to be found through a cultivated concern for one’s own conduct and a concentrated compliance with the law of Reason. What he rejected in their systems was their inability to see that such compliance could not be based on selfish motivations.

Laws, according to Geulincx, never correspond to obvious forms of self-interest, or they would not be laws. In an annotation to the Preface of the *Ethics*, Geulincx refers to the marginal notes of his own Dutch edition (1667) of Treatise I, where he had stated and restated this crucial point.⁶ A law, ‘inasmuch as it is a law,’ does not aim at the advantage of those who are held to observe it; it is by definition a ‘burden’ that has to be ‘enforced’.⁷ Accusing all ancient philosophers of being preoccupied with self-interest, Geulincx showed himself to be well aware of the element of *souci de soi*, or ‘care of the self’, that Michel Foucault has famously presented as an essential aspect of all moral systems of antiquity.⁸ Contrary to

by Johannes Flenderus and Abraham Hazeu, Amsterdam, Janssonio-Waesbergii, 1696, A4.

⁶ See Annotation 2 to Treatise I, Preface, below, 167–168. The same point is made in Annotation 13 to Treatise I, Chapter II, Section II, § 5, 252–253, below.

⁷ Arnout Geulincx, *Van de Hooft-deuchden: De eerste Tucht-verhandeling*, Leiden: Philips de Croy, 1667/*Van de Hooft-deuchden: De Eerste Tucht-verhandeling*, ed. J.P.N. Land, Antwerpen – Gent – ’s Gravenhage: Buschmann – Hoste – Nyhoff, 1895, 76 and 78–79: ‘Let noch eens (daer is aen gelegen) op het voorighe, daer wy seggen, *Wet, voor so veel wet is, en siet op geen voordeel van den verplichten*: Wet, voor soo veel sy wet is, is last: en die een wet krygt, dien wordt yet belast, yet op geleyt: hy is aen de wet verbonden, hy isser aen gehouden: en wanneer hy de wet volbrengt, so doet hy synen last: Dit is een manier van spreken, en gemeynen tael van alle Natien.’ Cf. Arnout Geulincx, *Van de hoofddeugden: De eerste tuchtverhandeling*, ed. Cornelis Verhoeven, *Geschiedenis van de wijsbegeerte in Nederland* 10, Baarn: Ambo, 1986, 141–142, notes to p. 88.

⁸ Though Foucault applied the notion of ‘the care of the self’ to late antiquity in particular, he made it clear that the theme was classical in origin. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 3, ‘Le souci de soi’, Paris: Gallimard, 1984: 60–63/Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, ‘The Care of the Self’, New York: Vintage Books, 1988, 43–45.

Foucault, however, Geulincx tried to distance himself from this idea as far as possible. The two-faced egotism of the pagans had perversely misrepresented selflessness as a crafty—and therefore ultimately ineffective—form of self-care. Humility was to be its Christian antidote.

Yet how to seek blessedness if not on the basis of self-interest? The appropriation of classical literature by humanist Christian authors had opened up the possibility of an intermediate position between what Foucault saw as the self-care of the ancients on the one hand and the Christian focus on conscience and confession on the other. But what if the Christian rules of purity and virginity were themselves interpreted as forms of psychological self-management? There is no question but that humanist authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries appropriated classical ideas of ‘virtuous’ and ‘masculine’ reserve such as they were presented by Cicero, Epictetus and Seneca as valid forms of psychological empowerment within their own, Christian, tradition. Geulincx, however, now tried again to dissociate the two and the solution he came up with was as simple as it was hazardous in its psychological effect: find happiness by not seeking it! As he explains in an annotation of his own to the start of the chapter on humility, all depends on one’s capability to make the right distinction between one’s intentions and their results:

The virtuous man, so far as his intention is concerned, in no way cares for himself, and does not work in his own interest; but so far as the result is concerned, cares for himself best of all, and labours hard for his own interest.⁹

Selflessness alone would have the right result, whereas all the efforts of the vulgar and of the philosophers of antiquity deliberately to seek happiness for themselves were bound to end in ruin and disappointment.

With no revealed laws of morality, but only philosophical reason as one’s guide, this strategy was full of paradox from the start. Geulincx himself discusses an apparent inconsistency where he explains his ‘sixth obligation’, i.e. the rule that one should relax and be merry from time to time, and revert to ‘dining, drinking, dancing’.¹⁰ If this is to be a moral rule, then how could one distinguish those who led

⁹ See below, 218, Annotation 3.

¹⁰ See below, 50ff.