

# SPINOZA

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AMONG all the philosophers of Greece and Rome whose fame has come down to us, it may be doubted if there is one whose career so closely corresponds to Aristotle's description of the speculative or contemplative life as does that of the grave and solitary Jewish thinker who was born at Amsterdam just three hundred years ago. Alone and unaided, alienated from those of his own race, without the patronage of the great and unconnected with any academic body, this man originated and developed a philosophical system comprising metaphysics, psychology, ethics and political science which in most of its features differed from any that had preceded it, and was destined, after having surmounted obloquy and neglect, to exercise a very wide-spread and enduring influence upon the progress of human thought.

Moreover, the personality of Spinoza stands out with an almost unique distinction for its nobility. To the purity, sweetness, unselfishness and independence of his character all of his biographers bear witness; and even when allowance has been made for the element of myth which is seldom altogether absent from the life-story of a great man, the conviction remains that he was in truth almost as noteworthy for his moral qualities as for his intellectual powers. That, in spite of the prejudice and theological rancour which his writings inevitably encountered, so many of the finest minds of modern times have been attracted to his work, may have been partly due to admiration of his character. For though Spinoza's philosophy as a complete and perfectly co-ordinated system (and as such he seems to have regarded it) may be said never to have established itself, yet the impact of that system upon later thinkers has been exceedingly fruitful. A few instances of this influence may be recalled. Among the first to gain inspiration from him was Lessing; not only is this apparent in his play of *Nathan der Weise*, but his epoch-making essay *The Education of the Human Race* took its main idea from Spinoza's remarkable attempt at biblical criticism in his Theologico-political Tractate. Hegel, not always generous in his estimate of earlier philosophers, frequently assigned a high place to Spinozism in the development of speculative thought, and said that "to be a philosopher one must first be a Spinozist." Jacobi devoured the *Ethica* greedily, though on

religious grounds he rejected its conclusions, admitting however that judged by reason alone those conclusions were irresistible, and that only by falling back upon faith in contradistinction to reason could the orthodox position be maintained. Spinoza's pantheism affected Schelling, and through him influenced Coleridge at one stage of his spiritual career; while Novalis contended that the Jewish philosopher, so far from being an atheist, was rather "a man intoxicated with God;" and Schleiermacher could refer to him as "that holy man who was excommunicated." But of those who came under the sway of Spinozism the greatest was Goethe. Writing of his own youth, he says: "I found in Spinozism a sedative for my passions, and he appeared to me to open up a large and free outlook on the natural and moral world;" how far-reaching and permanent was the impress thus made upon his mind, no student of his poetry can fail to see. Shelley's debt to Spinoza is universally recognized, and it is not difficult to detect his influence upon the New England Transcendentalists—especially in the case of Emerson. Schopenhauer in his metaphysics and Nietzsche in his ethical system both develop ideas that originated with Spinoza.

That the Jews of Amsterdam three centuries ago were no degraded, ignorant or down-trodden community needs for proof only a glance at Rembrandt's numerous portraits of rabbis and Hebrew merchants; dignity, gravity and intelligence are stamped upon their features. Nor is this to be wondered at; for these men were the descendants of Jews of Portugal and Spain who, living for centuries under the comparatively mild sway of the Saracens, had acquired a much higher degree of culture than at that time generally prevailed throughout Europe. Later, when the persecutions of the Inquisition forced on their race the choice between apostasy and martyrdom, many gladly sought the shelter of the Dutch Republic where there was greater tolerance than could be found elsewhere. In Amsterdam they prospered, and seem to have enjoyed the respect of the other citizens, as they were permitted to build two synagogues. As usual with their race while carrying on business with the Gentiles, they retained their own customs and beliefs.

Of Spinoza's parentage and childhood little is known\* except that he was given what for a young Hebrew was a good education.

\*Our chief sources for the life of Spinoza are two biographies, the first written very shortly after the philosopher's death by a man called Lucas who had known him during the later years of his life, and was his admirer and to some extent his disciple. The second was by a Lutheran pastor named Colerus. He had not known Spinoza personally, but coming to The Hague happened to lodge in the house he had occupied, and from the people of the house and others who had been friends of the philosopher he learned many particulars concerning him. Colerus as an orthodox Lutheran naturally looked with abhorrence upon Spinoza's doctrine, but he is fair and even generous in the estimate of his character, and is careful to disprove some scandalous gossip which had been circulated as to the circumstances of his death.

At the age of fifteen he was considered by the rabbis to be an unusually intelligent and promising pupil, having an excellent knowledge of Hebrew and being thoroughly instructed in the Scriptures. But already his active spirit was stretching out toward other and, to the orthodox Jewish mind, less desirable fields of knowledge. From a German instructor he learned the rudiments of Latin, and from him or other teachers he got some familiarity with several modern languages. He also early studied the works of Descartes, then constituting the most influential philosophy in Europe. But it was probably when he became a pupil of a man named Van der Ende, who had a high reputation as a teacher but was suspected of being a free thinker, that his knowledge of Gentile learning became most firmly established. It is likely that through Van der Ende he was led to read the writings of Giordano Bruno which seem to have greatly influenced his own thought.

Meanwhile, what degree of storm and stress had been agitating the young man's soul we cannot say. Unflinching though Spinoza ever was in the pursuit of truth, he was by nature reserved and self-contained. But the internal revolution was at last complete. He was no longer a Jew in religion, and his whole spiritual outlook was totally different from that of the men of his own race. To them the severance must early have been apparent. It was, however, only when he had reached the age of twenty-four, and when two false friends of his had reported to the rabbis the enormity of his opinions, that action was taken in regard to him. At first bribery was tried, and he was offered a thousand florins a year if he would conform to Jewish ceremonies and doctrines. This being refused, he was subjected at first to a temporary and later to the permanent excommunication which cut him off from all connection with his own people. In judging of this we must remember that no degree of toleration towards what was regarded as atheism was recognized as legitimate by Jew, Catholic or Protestant at that period, and the Hebrew community could hardly have acted otherwise than as they did. Spinoza himself seems to have realized the inevitableness of his sentence. He said that it compelled him to nothing that he had not already determined to do. Changing his name of Baruch to its Latin equivalent Benedict, he accordingly left Amsterdam, and after living quietly in several small towns, where he consorted chiefly with members of the Mennonite sect, he took up his residence at The Hague where the rest of his life was spent.

On the whole that life, short though it was and marked by plain living as well as high thinking, was not an unhappy one. We may dismiss as unfounded the story told by Colerus that while

studying with Van der Ende he fell in love with his daughter and she jilted him for a wealthier suitor who gave her a pearl necklace. It is known now that this girl was but eleven years old when Spinoza was her father's pupil, and her marriage to his supposed rival did not take place till sixteen years later. There is no evidence that Spinoza ever came under feminine influence of any kind. Before he left Amsterdam he was attacked by a half-crazy Jew who inflicted a slight wound with a dagger. In later years he was threatened by a mob at The Hague whose anger he had incurred by a visit he had paid to the French camp. The master of the house in which he lived feared an attack on it, but Spinoza promised that if such were made he would go out and surrender to them, so that no one should be endangered on his account. When the mob learned, however, that the supposed traitor was only a philosopher, they decided that he was harmless and desisted from their purpose. Of serious personal persecution there was nothing, though his books were proscribed, and this immunity is remarkable when we recollect that a century earlier Servetus had been burned alive for his pantheism by the Geneva Calvinists, that Bruno had met the same fate on a similar charge in 1600 at Rome, and that neither Catholics nor Protestants had since modified their opinions as to the heinousness of such doctrine. His own prudence and the respect in which his character was held may have had some share in his freedom from molestation.

Nor was the philosopher wholly friendless. From his own family, indeed, his excommunication seems to have made a complete barrier. His sister after his father's death endeavoured to deprive him of his share of the inheritance, a claim which Spinoza resisted; but when his rights had been secured, he at once made over the whole property to her. He had, however, friendly correspondents in several cities to whom he confided much of the system which he later developed into his great work, the *Ethica*, which was published only after his death. One of these friends was a well-to-do young student of medicine named De Vries, who with other young men held meetings to study Spinoza's system—the philosopher writing to them from time to time to explain their difficulties. De Vries, knowing how small were Spinoza's means, offered him a considerable sum of money; this being refused, he wished to make him his heir, and when this too was declined De Vries, who was then in very bad health, willed his fortune to his own brother, but made the proviso that his beloved teacher should enjoy an annuity of five hundred florins. After De Vries died, this was offered, but Spinoza consented to take only three hundred florins as being amply sufficient for his needs.

The master was almost as short-lived as the pupil. Spinoza was always delicate; his tendency to tuberculosis was probably increased by his very sedentary life, and his trade in grinding optical glasses, by which for some time he gained his living, may also have been unfavourable to his health. The people with whom he resided were attached to him, but could do nothing to stay the progress of the disease. His end came suddenly; he had felt unwell, and sent for a friend who was also a physician, named Dr. Meyer. The next day he felt better, and it being Sunday his landlord and his wife went to church as usual, but they found on their return that Spinoza was dead, Dr. Meyer alone being with him at his death. This was on February 21st, 1677. He was in his forty-fifth year.

The philosophy of Spinoza is so far-reaching in its scope and so intricate in its details that it is not possible to give even a summary of it within the limits of this essay; and only a sketch of what may be regarded as the most essential and characteristic features of his thought as presented in his greatest work, the *Ethica*, will be attempted here. Two main difficulties confront the student who would pluck out the heart of Spinoza's mystery. The first is the inadequacy of the philosophical vocabulary of the time. Writing in Latin, he was limited to the phraseology of the mediaeval Scholastics, and to adapt this to ideas so novel as his was not always possible:—in fact the new wine often burst the old bottles. But the hardest obstacle to overcome is the inelastic and repellent form in which the thought is embodied. Descartes had stated that it would be possible to present all philosophical truth by strictly mathematical methods; and Spinoza, an enthusiast for mathematics, undertook to put Descartes's suggestion into practice. Hence upon opening the *Ethics* we find ourselves confronted with the complete furniture of Euclidean geometry,—definitions, axioms, postulates, propositions, corollaries, and all the rest. The claim of the author is that each succeeding proposition, depending upon what has already been proved, must be indisputably true; but the mathematician is likely to regard his own method when applied to metaphysical subjects as misplaced, while the non-mathematical student finds it only increases the difficulties of a necessarily difficult study. This rough and stony surface once penetrated, there is rich ore to be found in the mine.

The heart and core of Spinoza's philosophy is his conviction of the essential oneness of the universe. To this he gives the name of "Substance," for which we might substitute "ultimate reality." This all-embracing unity is infinite and eternal, and by the latter

term he means not an unending extension of time, but absolute timelessness;—to see things “under the form of eternity” is to see them free from all temporal limitations whatever. Synonymous with Substance are the two words “God” and “Nature,” but the former must be conceived as wholly free from anthropomorphic associations, and the latter must be understood as inclusive of the mental as well as of the material world. This Substance, God, or Nature, being infinite has an infinite number of aspects, or in Spinoza’s language “attributes”, of which, however, but two are observable by us; these he calls “thought” and “extension”,—in more modern phraseology, the conscious and the material. It is through these two attributes that we perceive finite things, which are “modes,” and constitute the expression in time and space of the already mentioned infinite unity or God. Every such thing or “mode,” thus related to the totality of existence, is at once physical and psychical according to the “attribute” under which it is viewed. Or we might say that every material unit has some degree of consciousness, and each psychical fact its physical correlate. Nor is the conception of God or Nature merely a static one; Substance is not merely infinite being, it is infinite activity as well; and in this activity all its finite “modes” or manifestations participate. It has sometimes been asserted that Spinozism was not indeed an “atheism”, but that it was an “acosmism,” since it denied reality to the world as we know it. This, however, is a complete misunderstanding of Spinoza’s meaning. All phenomena as they appear in time and space are in truth “modes,” but they are *necessary* modes, which in their causal sequence are manifestations of God. Spinoza would have heartily accepted Jacob Boehme’s statement, “God has as much need of me as I have of Him.” The world we know is not a veil of illusion concealing the truth, but rather the finite perceived as the inevitable expression and realization of the infinite.

It is upon this pantheistic foundation that Spinoza built his psychology, his ethics and his philosophy of religion. His psychology will still repay study, and is often in close accord with theories of modern writers; his analysis of the relation between desires and emotions is singularly acute. His ethical system is based upon the principle that men, as well as all other beings in their several degrees, strive for self-perpetuation and increase of activity. Morality therefore is bound up with a rational self-love, though as mankind benefits by co-operation, Spinoza finds ample room for altruistic conduct. While his ethical system is virile and in many respects inspiring, it is certainly one-sided,—what we may call the essentially Christian virtues, humility, self-sacrifice, repentance are foreign to it. But his ethics leads up to a conception of religion that is



noble and fine. The highest activity of which the human mind is capable is found in what he terms "the intellectual love of God," by which he understands the consciousness of God as the ultimate and infinite Reality, and the joyful acceptance of all that comes as being a part of the divine order. Such love must be absolutely disinterested,—not only does it ask for no reward, but no answering love is expected from God, since His nature transcends personality and excludes emotions. Yet this knowledge of, and supreme devotion to, the truth is its own reward; for as the highest and purest activity of thought, it is perfect happiness or blessedness. In somewhat vague and abstruse fashion Spinoza even hints at personal immortality as its outcome, though such immortality can be of the intellect only, not of the senses or memory. But this part of his doctrine is extremely obscure, and has been interpreted in several different ways. Indeed in the latter part of the *Ethics*, where it is treated of, we are conscious of a strain of mysticism not wholly in accord with the scientific and rationalistic spirit which dominated his original outlook. Was he beginning to see with his great French contemporary, Blaise Pascal, that "The Heart has its reasons which Reason does not know"?

But there was never any hesitation in his belief that in the effort after an adequate knowledge of reality is to be found the most perfect activity of the human soul, and that the reaching out to that knowledge constitutes happiness, which "is not the reward of virtue, but is virtue itself." And in this intellectualism we may perceive wherein Spinoza's philosophy of life is defective. The world of men is not composed wholly of philosophers, and for those who by nature or circumstance are shut out from the pursuit of knowledge Spinozism seems to offer but little.

Yet even if inadequate to satisfy all human needs, this system of thought merits consideration and inspires respect. To man is given the privilege and responsibility of conceiving an Ideal which, never wholly comprehended or made real by him in his struggle for a more worthy existence, is yet that which gives it worth and forms the standard by which he judges himself. But inasmuch as—

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,

this Ideal shows itself but partially to each soul, and differs with the recipient. To some it appears as Righteousness, to others as Love; to Benedict de Spinoza it was revealed as Truth,—perhaps an incomplete, but certainly not an unworthy, presentation of the Beatific Vision.