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## BENEDICT SPINOZA

(1632-1677)

BY JOSIAH ROYCE

**I**N A Jewish family of Spanish origin dwelling at Amsterdam, was born in the year 1632, Baruch (in later years known as Benedict) Spinoza. The family were refugees, who had come to Holland directly from Portugal to escape persecution. The Jewish community to which Spinoza's people belonged numbered several hundred,—all wanderers, for similar reasons, from the Spanish peninsula. These people enjoyed a very full liberty as to their own religious and national affairs, and some of them were wealthy. Spinoza's parents however were of moderate means; but the boy received a good training in a Jewish school under the Rabbi Morteira, head of the synagogue. Later he read not only much Talmudic literature, but something of the mediæval Jewish philosophers. He also learned the trade of polishing lenses,—an art by which, after his exile from the Jewish community, he earned his living.

But influences of a very different sort from those of his boyhood were to determine his maturer life. Independent thinking, no doubt, began in his mind even before he had nearly finished his early studies in Jewish literature; but this very trend towards independence soon found expression in an interest in life and thought far removed from those of the orthodox Jewish community. He made a comparatively close friendship with an Anabaptist, Jarigh Jelles; and from this intercourse he acquired both a deep respect for Christianity and a very free interpretation of its spirit. He studied Latin, as well as several modern European languages. In consequence he was soon able to have a wide acquaintance with contemporary thinking. He read a good deal of physical science. As recent scholarship has come to recognize, he also became fairly well versed in the genuine scholastic philosophy, as it was taught in the text-books then most current. And finally, he carefully studied the philosophical system of Descartes, then at the height of its influence. The trains of thought thus determined were from the first various, and not altogether harmonious; and it is doubtful whether Spinoza was ever a disciple either of the system of Descartes, or of any other one doctrine, before he reached his own final views. But at all events Spinoza thus

became, even as a young man, a thinker as resolute as he was calm, and as little disposed to remain in the orthodoxy of his childhood as he was to become an agitator against the faith of others. Although free from hypocrisy, he was never disposed to disturb the little ones; and he was as discreet as he was sincere. Yet fortune forced him to assume ere long, and openly, the heretic's position. Youthful companions, formerly schoolmates of Spinoza, deliberately drew out of him in confidence some of his opinions, denounced him, and thus brought him to trial before the synagogue court. Refusing to recant, he was expelled from the synagogue, under circumstances involving much agitation in the Jewish community; even an attempt was made by an excited Jew upon Spinoza's life.

For Spinoza, excommunication meant a freedom not at all undesirable, and a sort of loneliness in no wise intolerable. Fond as he always remained of the literary and scientific friendship of wiser men, humane and kindly as he throughout appears in all his relations with the common folk, Spinoza was of a profoundly independent disposition. No trace of romance can be found in the authentic records of his career. He called no man master. He willingly accepted favors from no one; and he craved only intellectual sympathy, and that only where he respected, in a thoroughgoing way, the person who was the source of this sympathy. A shrewd critic of human weaknesses, a great foe of illusions, and especially of every form of passionate illusion, Spinoza lived amongst men for the sake of whatever is rational in meaning and universal in character in the world of human intercourse. Exclusive affection, overmastering love, he felt and cultivated only towards God, viewed as he came to view God. Individual men were worthy, in his eyes, only in so far as they lived and taught the life of reason. Social ambitions our philosopher never shared. Worldly success he viewed with a gentle indifference. A somewhat proud nature,—cool, kindly, moderately ascetic, prudent; easily contented as to material goods, patiently strenuous only in the pursuit of the truth; sure of itself, indifferent to the misunderstandings, and even to the hatred, of others; fond of manifold learning, yet very carefully selective of the topics and details that were to be viewed as worth knowing; unaggressive but obstinate, rationalistic but with a strong coloring of mystical love for eternal things,—such is the personality that we find revealed in Spinoza's correspondence as well as in his writings. He was a good citizen, but an unconventional thinker. His comprehension of human nature, while it was far wider, by virtue of his native keenness of insight, than his somewhat narrow experience of life would seem easily to explain, was still limited by reason of his own well-defined and comparatively simple private character. He has no comprehension of the romantic

side of life, and sees in human passions only the expression of confused and inadequate ideas as to what each individual imagines to be advantageous or disadvantageous to the welfare of his own organism. On the other hand, whenever Spinoza speaks of the world of absolute truth, he reveals a genuine warmth of religious experience, which, as already indicated, often allies him to the mystics. In brief, he is in spirit a Stoic, tinged with something of the ardor of the mediæval saint, but also tempered by the cautious reasonableness of a learned and free-thinking Jew. In consequence of these various motives that determine his thought, it is easy at times to view him as a somewhat cynical critic of life; and even as if he were one who prudently veiled an extremely radical, almost materialistic doctrine, under formulas whose traditional terms, such as God, Mind, Eternity, and the like, only hinted, through symbols, their meaning. Yet such a view is not only one-sided, but false. Equally easy, and less mistaken, it is to view Spinoza, on the basis of other parts of his work, as the "God-intoxicated" man whom a well-known tradition of the German Romantic school declared him to be. Yet this too is a one-sided view. Spinoza's doctrine, so far as it expresses his own temperament, is a product of three factors: (1) His idea of God, whose historical origin lies in the tradition common to all mysticism; (2) his ingenious interpretation of certain empirical facts about the relation of body and mind,—an interpretation which modified the former views of the Occasionalists; and (3) his shrewd Jewish common-sense, in terms of which, although again not without much use of the work of his predecessors, he estimated the strength and the weakness, the passions and the powers, of our common human nature.

Enough has been already said to indicate that Spinoza's fundamental personal interest in philosophy lay rather more in its bearing upon life than in its value as a pure theory. Yet Spinoza, for good reasons, is best known by his metaphysical theories; and has influenced subsequent thinking rather by his doctrine regarding Reality than by his advice as to the conduct of life. The reason for this fact is easy to grasp. Stoics and mystics all advise some more or less ascetic form of retirement from the world. The advice is often inspiring, but the deepest problem of life for mankind at large is how to live *in* the world. Moreover, the Stoics and the mystics have all alike certain beautiful but somewhat colorless and unvarying tales to tell—tales either of resignation, or of passionless insight, or of rapt devotion. Hence originality is possible in these types of doctrine only as regards the form, the illustration, or the persuasiveness of exposition, of a teaching that in substance is as old as the Hindoo Upanishads. In so far as Spinoza belongs to this very general and ancient genus of thinkers, he deeply moves his special disciples; but has less

distinctive meaning for the world, since many others would so far do as well to represent the gospel of the peace that passeth understanding. On the other hand, what is historically distinctive about Spinoza as a thinker is not the prime motive which inspired him,—namely a determination to be at peace with life,—but the theoretical conception of the universe in terms of which he justified his teaching. Hence while Spinoza the man, the practical philosopher, the mystic, profoundly attracts, it is Spinoza the thinker whose theories have been of most importance for later literature. As for that central interest in the conduct of life, its importance for Spinoza appears in the titles of several of his books. He wrote an unfinished essay 'On the Improvement of the Intellect'; a 'Theologico-Political Tractate' (the only confessedly original and independent philosophical treatise that he published during his life,—a book inspired by a distinctly practical and social aim); an essay 'De Monarchia'; a little work long lost, and only recently known through a Dutch translation,—on 'God, Man, and Man's Happiness'; and in addition to these he wrote his great systematic philosophical exposition, his principal production, under the title 'Ethics.' These titles suggest a writer whose main purposes are purely practical. Yet the contents of all these books involve elaborately wrought theories. This gospel of Stoic or of mystic type must receive a demonstrative defense. The defense involves, however, both fundamental and supplementary theories regarding God, Matter, Mind, and Knowledge. It is to these theories that Spinoza's influence upon the history of thought is due; and this influence extends to men and to doctrines very remote from Spinoza's own ethical and religious interests. During his life he also published an exposition of the Cartesian philosophy, and this book is indeed a confessed contribution to theoretical thought.

To return for a moment from the man's character and influence to the story of his life,—there is indeed here little more to tell. Spinoza removed from Amsterdam to escape persecution; lived first in the country near by, then near Leyden, and later (1663) passed to the vicinity of The Hague. In 1670 he again moved into The Hague itself, and remained there until his death. In 1673 he received a call from the Elector Palatine to a professorship of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg, with a guarantee, very liberal in view of that age, as to his freedom of teaching. Spinoza carefully considered this flattering proposal; and then, with characteristic prudence and unworldliness, declined it. Meanwhile he had become a man of prominence. He corresponded with numerous friends, some of them persons of great note. His published 'Principles of Cartesian Philosophy' were in many hands; his 'Theologico-Political Tractate,' which appeared in 1670, aroused a storm of opposition, by reason of

its rationalistic criticism of Scripture, and because of its admirable defense of the freedom of thought and of speech; and his posthumously published 'Ethics' had already become known in manuscript to his more confidential friends, either as a whole or in part. In one or two instances only is Spinoza known to have shown an interest in the political events of that decidedly eventful time. In the slander and personal abuse to which malevolent critics often exposed his name he showed almost as little concern.

His health was throughout these years never very bad; but also, apparently, never robust. Without any previous warning by illness, so far as known to the family in whose house he lived, he died quite suddenly, February 21st, 1677. His 'Ethics' first received publication in his 'Posthumous Works' in the same year.

The philosophical doctrine of Spinoza belongs to the general class of what are called monistic theories of the universe. It is more or less dimly known to common-sense that the universe in which we live has some sort of deep unity about it. Everything is related, in some fashion or other, to everything else. For, not to begin with any closer ties, all material objects appear as in one space; all events take place in one time; and then if we look closer, we find far-reaching laws of nature, which, in surprising ways, bring to our knowledge how both things and events may be dependent in numerous ways upon facts that, as at first viewed, seem indefinitely remote from them. It is this apparent unity of natural things, obscurely recognized even in many superstitions of savage tribes, which, as it becomes more clearly evident, gives rise to the belief that one God created the world, and now rules all that is therein. But to refer every fact in the world to the will of the one Creator still leaves unexplained the precise relation of this God to his world. If he is one and the world is another, there remains a certain puzzling duality about one's view of things,—a duality that in the history of thought has repeatedly given place, in certain minds, to a doctrine that all reality is one, and that all diversity—or that in particular the duality of God and the world—is something either secondary, or subordinate, or unreal. The resulting monism has numerous forms. Sometimes it has appeared as a pure materialism, which knows no reality except that of the physical world, and which then reduces all this reality to some single type. In forms that are historically more potent, monism has appeared when it has undertaken to be what is called pantheistic. In this case monism regards the one Reality, not as the barely apparent physical world of visible or tangible matter, but as some deeper power, principle, substance, or mind, which in such doctrines is viewed as impersonal, and usually as unconscious, although its dignity or its spirituality is supposed to

be such that one can call it Divine. One then views God and the world as forming together, or as lapsing into, the one ultimate Being. Of this Being one calls the physical universe a "show," or a "manifestation," or a more or less "illusory" hint, or perhaps an "emanation." Of such pantheistic doctrines the Vedānta philosophy of the Hindoos is the classic representative; and very possibly, in large part, the ultimate historical source. In Greek philosophy the Eleatic school, and later the Stoics, and in one sense the Neo-Platonic doctrines, were representatives of pantheism. In unorthodox mediæval philosophy pantheism is well represented. It was not without its marked and important influence upon the formulation of even the orthodox scholastic philosophy. And as was remarked above, Spinoza drew some of the weapons which he wielded from the armory of orthodox scholasticism itself.

Spinoza's doctrine is the classical representative of pure pantheism in modern philosophy. God and the world are, for Spinoza, absolutely one. There is in reality nothing but God,—the Substance, the Unity with an infinity of attributes, the source whence all springs; but also the home wherein all things dwell, the "productive" or "generating" Nature, in whose bosom all the produced or generated nature that we know or that can exist, lives and moves and has its being. For all that is produced, or that appears, is only the expression, the incorporation, the manifestation, of the one Substance; and has no separate being apart from this Substance itself. Moreover, all that is produced *necessarily* results from the nature of the one Substance. There is no contingency or free-will in the world.

So far Spinoza's doctrine, as thus stated, occupies on the whole the ground common to all pantheism. The special interest of this doctrine lies however in three features: first, in Spinoza's method of giving a proof for his doctrine; secondly, in his devices for explaining the seeming varieties that appear in our known world; and thirdly, in the application and use that he makes of his theory when once it has been expounded. The first of these topics concerns the student of philosophy rather than any one else, and must here be left out of account. Suffice it to say only that Spinoza, in his 'Ethics,' imitates the traditional form of Euclid's geometrical treatise,—starts with definitions, axioms, and the like, and proposes to give a rigid demonstration of every step of his argument; while as a fact, what he accomplishes is a very brilliant and skillful analysis, one-sided but instructive, of certain traditional (and largely scholastic) ideas about the ultimate nature of real Being. He naturally convinces no one who does not start with just his chosen group of traditional notions, emphasized in precisely his own fashion,—which differed, we need hardly say, from the old scholastic fashion. Yet his study

is profoundly instructive; and is lighted up by numerous passing remarks, comments, and criticisms, of no small interest.

Grant however for the moment the central thesis of Spinoza's pantheism: suppose him to have proved that one Substance, called God, not only produces, but *is* all things: and then comes the question, always critical for any monistic view of the world, How can we apply this ultimate conception to explain the diversities of things as we see them? Above all, how reconcile with the mysterious unity of the Divine Substance the largest and most important diversity of the world as known to us men,—namely, the contrast between matter and mind? How can matter and mind be, and be so diverse as they seem, and yet manifest equally the nature of the one Real Being, God? and what are the true relations of matter and mind?

Spinoza's answer to this question has been of great historical importance. It has influenced much of the most recent speculation, and has played a part in the most modern discussions of psychology, of evolution, and in some cases of general physical science. Spinoza here asserted that the one Substance, being essentially and in all respects infinite, has to reveal the wealth of its nature in infinitely numerous attributes, or fundamental fashions of showing what it is and what it can express. Each of these attributes embodies, in its own independent way, and "after its own kind," the true nature of the Substance, and the whole true nature thereof, precisely in so far as the nature of each attribute permits. Of these infinitely numerous attributes, two are known to man. They are extension, or the attribute expressed in the whole world of material facts, and thought, or the attribute expressed in the whole world of mental facts. Each of these attributes of the Substance reveals in its own way, or after its own kind, and quite independently of the other attribute, the whole nature of the Substance. Each is infinite after its own kind, just as the Substance, which possesses the entire Reality and expresses itself in the attributes, is absolutely infinite. In other words, to adopt Taine's famous comparison, matter and mind are like two expressions, in two precisely parallel texts, of the same ultimate meaning; or together they form, as it were, a bilingual book, with text and interlinear translation. They are precisely parallel; but as to the succession of the single words in each, they are mutually independent. Each in its own way tells the whole truth as to what the Substance is, in so far as the Substance can be viewed now under this and now under that aspect,—*i. e.*, now as Substance extended, and now as Substance thinking. Each attribute is text, each translation, yet neither interferes with the other. Accordingly, wherever there is matter there is mind, and *vice versa*. That this last fact escapes us ordinarily is due to the limitation of our natures. Our minds



are part of the Divine Thought, just as our bodies are part of the Divine Extension. But we know directly only so much of mind as corresponds to our own bodily processes, viewed in their linkage and in their unity. Hence other bodies seem to us inanimate. As a fact, matter and mind are parallel and coextensive throughout the universe. On the other hand, although perfectly correspondent, inseparable, and parallel (for each is in its own way an expression of precisely the same Divine truth which the other expresses), matter and mind, close companions as they are, never causally affect each other; but each is determined solely by its own inner laws. Ideas cause ideas; bodies move bodies: but bodies never produce mental states, nor do thoughts issue in physical movements, even in case of our own bodies and minds. The appearance which makes this seem true, when our mind and bodies appear to interact, is due to the principle that "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things," owing precisely to the parallelism of the attributes. Hence just when a given physical state takes place in our bodies, the parallel idea, by virtue of the laws of mind, is sure to arise in our consciousness.

This theory of the independence and parallelism of mind and body has played, as we have said, a great part in more recent discussion; and survives, as the doctrine of the "psycho-physical parallelism," in modern scientific discussions which are far removed in many respects from Spinoza's metaphysics.

The practical consequences of the system of Spinoza are worked out by the author in the later divisions of his 'Ethics,' in a manner which has become classic; although, as pointed out above, Spinoza's distinctive historical influence is due rather to his general theories. But as one way of telling the ancient tale of the wise man's life in God, the practical interpretation which Spinoza gives to monism may well stand beside the other classics of Stoical and of mystical lore. Since there is naught but God, and since in God there is fulfilled, in an impersonal but none the less perfect way, all that our thought aims to know, and all that even our blind passions mistakenly strive to attain, the wise man, according to Spinoza, enjoys an absolute "acquiescence" in whatever the infinite wisdom produces. God is absolute, and can lack nothing; hence apparent evil is a merely negative "deprivation" of good, a deprivation itself due only to our inadequate view,—*i. e.*, only to error. Evil is, then, nothing positive. And the wise man, seeing all things in God, loves God with a love that is identical with God's love of his own perfection. For God, if not conscious in our fleeting way, has still the fulfillment of all that consciousness means, in the very perfection of his thinking attribute; so that our thoughts are God's very thoughts precisely in so far as

our thoughts are rational, complete, adequate, true. In other words, in so far as we are wise, we directly enter into the perfection of God himself.

Since thoughts of a very similar type have received a frequent expression in writings reputed orthodox, it is not surprising that many who easily fear the name pantheism have still been ready to reverence, in Spinoza, the spirit, profound if inadequate, which in such fashion embodies, in our philosopher's work, one of the most universal motives of piety.

*Josiah Royce.*