



Tercentenary of Spinoza's Birth: Spinoza's Synoptic Vision

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TERCENTENARY OF SPINOZA'S BIRTH: SPINOZA'S SYNOPTIC VISION¹

PROFESSOR A. WOLF

(Followed by Contributions by Professor S. Alexander and Sir Herbert Samuel)

A SYSTEM of philosophy, a comprehensive world-view, is a work of art, although it is also more than that. Already Plato described the philosopher as a poet, and Plato himself was a great poet as well as a great philosopher. In recent years Professor Alexander has explained, on various occasions, that there is artistry involved in all scientific and philosophic thought. They demand creative intellectual construction of a high order. In so far as this is true, as I believe it is, it should be possible, sometimes at least, to contemplate a great system of philosophy as a work of art, to enjoy it in a spirit of detachment, above the noise and the tumult of conflicting personal convictions. It is more or less in this spirit that I propose on this occasion to deal with some of the fundamental ideas of Spinoza. That, I believe, is in accordance with his own wishes. He wanted his works to be published anonymously, so that his philosophy might be considered impersonally, entirely on its own merits. Such a method of treatment may in any case be most suitable on this occasion when, in spite of probably great divergences in our individual views, we have come together to do honour to his memory. This kind of personal tribute may be contrary to his own wishes. But we owe it to ourselves, and to mankind at large, to keep alive the remembrance of one of the greatest masters of the art of high thinking and plain living.

The main task of a philosopher, as a creative artist, is to conceive and to present an harmonious picture of the most significant features of the

¹ Given to the British Institute of Philosophy, November 24, 1932.

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universe. His experience is necessarily as limited as that of other mortals; his data are extremely fragmentary in comparison with the whole world. On the other hand, even ordinary experiences are very varied, very extensive, and very perplexing. The philosopher has therefore a twofold difficulty. On the one hand, there is the difficulty of construing a vast universe on the basis of an infinitesimal sample of experiences. On the other hand, there is the difficulty of fitting the enormous variety of his data into a consistent scheme. Those who give up the attempt as too ambitious cannot be blamed. Those who regard any and every such attempt as at best only moderately probable, and therefore not to be embraced with fanatical zeal, are wise. Yet the attempt is not only legitimate and fascinating, but possibly incumbent on all intelligent people whose energies are not exhausted by their daily work or play, whose interests extend beyond their daily needs, and who have sufficient curiosity to take their bearings in this mysterious universe. And the relative success, or the artistic satisfaction, of any such philosophic construction may be gauged by the measure of systematic integration which it achieves without sacrificing anything that has a *prima facie* claim to be regarded as real. Considered in this way, the philosophy of Spinoza appears to me to be the most satisfactory that has yet been propounded. And I propose to indicate briefly some of its advantages over certain other systems. I do not wish to suggest that it is beyond criticism. But we are here now to praise Caesar, not to bury him.

First, however, I must sketch in barest outline the main metaphysical features of Spinoza's system. According to Spinoza, the whole of reality is an organically interconnected system or cosmos in which nothing happens by chance, but everything takes place in an orderly manner in accordance with invariable laws. This view was arrived at partly in the following way. In order to explain any object or event it is necessary to refer to innumerable others which condition it, and each of these is in turn dependent on innumerable others. Everything seems to be linked up by countless ramifications with ever so many other things and events with which it stands in relations of mutual interdependence. It seems to be a reasonable conclusion that in the last resort all things and events are but parts of one systemic whole. But is it reasonable to suppose that the whole world consists only of such conditional dependent realities? Spinoza, like others, thought that there must be some self-existing, independent, unconditioned or absolute Being as the ultimate ground of all that is conditioned and dependent. So far his views would meet with little opposition. The provoking thought was his conception of the relation of the all-sustaining ground, or absolute Being, to the world of dependent objects and events. According to the conventional answer, in his days and in ours, this absolute Being

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is God, a supernatural Being who has created the world out of nothing, maintains it, and occasionally interferes with its usual mode of operation. But Spinoza conceived of the absolute self-existing Being (or Substance) as immanent in the world, as sustaining it from within, and as giving rise to the endless wealth and variety of natural phenomena, not by acts of external or transeunt creation, but by the immanent expression of its own energies—somewhat after the manner in which a mind forms its thoughts, or the sea forms its waves.

Spinoza's metaphysic does indeed go, as all metaphysic must go, beyond the strict bounds of empirical science. But his procedure was strictly scientific in spirit. Physical phenomena, he insisted, need for their explanation other physical phenomena by which they are conditioned, and which alone can account for them; but in the last resort they can only be explained by reference to an infinite (*i.e.* completely exhaustive) physical energy of which they are modes or modifications. In the same way mental experiences must be accounted for by other mental experiences by which they are conditioned, and which alone can explain them; but in the last resort mental events can only be explained adequately by reference to an infinite mind-energy, of which they are modes or modifications. Moreover, there may be an infinite variety of other kinds of realities than the physical or the psychical, with corresponding kinds of infinite energies of which they are severally the modes or modifications.

These ultimate realities or powers he called "attributes," and conceived them as constituting between them the one absolutely infinite Substance, or self-existent Universe, whose immanent activities express themselves in all the endless wealth and variety of its contents. Reality as conceived by Spinoza is essentially dynamic, active. In anticipation of much later tendencies he conceived "Extension" as a kind of space-filling energy, not as something inert. "Thought" likewise he regarded as essentially an activity; ideas, he insisted, are activities, not "dumb pictures on a tablet." And so with the other Attributes. Thus the universe was represented by him, to quote Goethe's paraphrase, as

A limitless ocean,
A constant weaving,
 With change still rife,
A restless heaving,
 A glowing life.

So far I have not said anything about God in the system of Spinoza. I want to reserve this for separate treatment. But I must point out at once that a philosopher who not only admitted the claims to reality of both matter and mind, but, so to say, staked out the

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claims of an infinite variety of realities unknown to man, was not likely to overlook God. Taking very seriously the common conception of God as the self-existent ground of all that is real, Spinoza identified God with "Substance"; and by elevating the conception of Nature so as to make it equivalent to that of the Universe, Spinoza equated the three terms, God, Nature, Substance. I hope to indicate soon something of the religious fervour of Spinoza's pantheism. But for the moment I am mainly concerned with the broad outlines of his ontology, which I propose to compare very briefly with some other philosophies.

First, Spinoza's philosophy does present us with an integration, a wholeness, such as no other system has ever surpassed or even equalled. It embraces in one coherent scheme God as well as Nature. It ignores nothing that has a *prima facie* claim to reality, and leaves ample room for an infinite variety of realities other than those which are accessible to human experience. Contrast with it the many systems of philosophy, ancient, mediaeval and modern, in which there is no real *universe*, no *one* world, but rather two or more separate worlds more or less arbitrarily strung together. Plato, for instance, never really integrated the world of immutable Ideas with the changing world of sensible objects—the world of Being with the world of Becoming. Aristotle likewise never succeeded in unifying the perfectly orderly superlunar world with the imperfect sublunar world of chance. Nor did Descartes succeed in bringing God, bodies, and souls into systematic relationship. Or compare Spinoza's systemic monism with some of the modern monisms in which an impoverished unity is achieved by sacrificing either Mind or Matter, and either representing physical facts as mere appearances to minds, or mental facts as mere by-products of matter. In contrast with these attenuated monisms Spinoza maintains the ultimate reality of both mind and matter; and, realizing the danger of setting up human experience as the measure of all things, he insists on the possible reality of infinite realms beyond our ken. Moreover, the assertion of an infinite variety of reals provides an infinite wealth of objective contents of experience, human and superhuman. Compare with it some of the current monadistic philosophies, according to which individual spirits are the sole realities, and the experience of each monad is but a reflection of the experience of the other monads—a scheme which seems to resemble the economics of a certain legendary island, the inhabitants of which are reported to have all got their living by taking in each other's washing.

Again, the infinitely rich universe as conceived by Spinoza has a thoroughgoing orderliness such as it has in almost no other system of philosophy. In the most influential classical philosophies, as has already been indicated, considerable room was left to mere chance

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and riot in the universe. And in many modern philosophies supernatural incursions are permitted to interfere with the order of Nature. The faith in magic which played such an important rôle in primitive thought dies hard, and in one form or another has survived to the present day. I sometimes wonder how far it unconsciously haunts modern idealism. Do not idealists seem to think of God, or the Absolute, as the Supreme Magician or Illusionist, who gives us the appearance of a material world without the reality? And is there not some faint trace of the same survival of early belief in magic even in the present-day philosophy of emergent evolution? As a bare description of the limited data of our experience, and as a protest against a one-sided materialism, it is no doubt just to indicate the fact that higher or more complex types of things are known to "emerge" somehow from simpler forms. But a philosophy which stops there seems to admit the possibility of something arising miraculously out of nothing, and thereby to acknowledge a kind of magic. The philosophy of Spinoza is more satisfactory in that respect. Nothing is represented as arising out of nothing. The infinite variety of natural phenomena is represented by it as a manifestation of what is already provided for from all eternity, as the expression of infinite powers acting in accordance with eternal laws. I do not suggest that Spinoza ever succeeded in explaining how exactly the infinitely various natural phenomena flow from their ultimate ground in the infinite Attributes of God. On the contrary, he himself has explicitly asserted that he could not do so, and that there is only one Being who has such knowledge, namely God Himself. But Spinoza's philosophy does, I think, contain the general rubrics for progressively more adequate explanations with the growth of knowledge.

Spinoza's theory of knowledge is in fact intimately bound up with his ontology. He distinguishes three ascending grades of knowledge—perception, reason, intuition, or a pre-scientific stage, a scientific stage, and an ultra-scientific stage of knowledge. At the pre-scientific level, things and events are apprehended more or less in isolation, and as matters of arbitrary caprice or chance. At the scientific level reason discovers the interconnections between things, and also their laws of operation. At the ultra-scientific level, the many interconnections, or "world-lines," discovered by reason are integrated into a cosmic intuition—the synoptic view which philosophy aims at. But for Spinoza this intuition, although it is intellectual and presupposes an antecedent scientific discipline, is not intellectual *only*. It is also emotional—it is "thoughtfulness matured to inspiration." In fact it is no exaggeration to maintain that in Spinoza's "intuition" the synoptic view of the rational philosopher blends with the beatific vision of the religious mystic.

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This brings me to the most fascinating aspect of Spinoza's world-view—his pantheism, or the theory that God is All, and All is God, or that God is in *all* things, and *all* things are in God.

Pantheism is, of course, much older than Spinoza. It is to be met with throughout the ages, in the East and in the West. Spinoza was fond of citing the verse from *The First Epistle of John*: "Hereby know we that we abide in him and he in us, because he hath given us of his spirit." This verse was actually used by Spinoza as the motto of his *Theological and Political Treatise*. The earlier forms of pantheism are sometimes described as the expression of *emotional moods* rather than of philosophical theory. Certainly it was Spinoza who has furnished pantheism with its most philosophical exposition. But even in Spinoza's pantheism there is much more than purely rational theory. His pantheism has been described as "mathematical" pantheism. But this is a misleading description; it only tends to make people overlook the religious sentiment which inspired it. I have explained in another place that religion is one of the three roots, the three "R's," of Spinoza's philosophy, the other two being realism and rationalism. It was probably the oldest and the most potent of them. Even the stiff geometrical method of the *Ethics* has failed to obscure it. It shines through, and helps to give to the book that elevating atmosphere which inspires its readers with reverence.

I have already indicated some of the *logic* of Spinoza's pantheistic world-view. Let me add something about its *emotional* side. Pantheistic or cosmic emotion is, I suggest, intimately connected with what is commonly called a feeling for Nature. This seems fairly obvious in the case of the great nature poets, such as Wordsworth and Goethe. Something similar applies to the case of Spinoza, I believe. His pantheism is, on the one hand, the result of the converging demands of both science and religion for an unconditioned, self-existent Being, embracing and sustaining all. Hence Spinoza's identification of God and Nature. On the other hand, his pantheism is an emotional attitude, in which the religious sentiment is blended with the feeling for Nature. It is noteworthy that many of the great religious teachers sought quiet communion with Nature at critical stages in their career—staying on the mountains, meditating in the wilderness, or at least lifting their eyes unto the hills. Spinoza, too, spent many years in the countryside.

Spinoza is so eminent as a rationalist, indeed as the prince of rationalists, that the emotional side of his character is apt to be overlooked. The attribution to him of a feeling for Nature, and the association of it with his "mathematical" pantheism, may appear to be far-fetched. But there is sufficient evidence for my contention. It is known that he spent many years in rural haunts like Ouderkerk, Rhynsburg and Voorburg; and we have the assurance

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of his oldest biographer that Spinoza always showed a preference for the countryside. Moreover, poets like Goethe and Schiller, Coleridge and Wordsworth easily sensed the emotional current which flows through the seemingly cold lines of his arguments; and they drew some of their inspiration from him. This is particularly true of Goethe, who may be described as the classic poet of pantheism, just as Spinoza is its classic philosopher. Even those who are mainly interested in its philosophical side will do well to try and sense something of its inward emotional side with the help of the great poets. Let me quote at least one passage in which Goethe gave expression to his pantheistic emotion. The passage occurs in the *Faust*. This is the context. Margaret asks Faust whether he believes in God. Faust, realizing the vast difference between his own conception of God-Nature and her simple everyday theology, feels that a mere yea or nay would be a misleading reply. So he attempts, in language that baffles adequate translation, to conjure up for her benefit the vision of a God whose presence is, and is to be felt, in all things and in all experiences, and especially in great things and in deep experiences. Here are the lines:

The All-embracing,
The All-sustaining,
Holds and sustains He not
Thee, me, Himself?
Is not the vault of Heaven above?
Lies not the Earth so firm beneath?
And in the heavens, gleaming friendly,
Rise there not the eternal stars?
Do not mine eyes gaze into thine?
Do not all things just throng
Into thy head and heart,
And weave in endless mystery
The invisible and visible near thee?
Fill thy heart therewith, great as it is,
And if thou feelest perfect bliss,
Then call it what thou wilt.
Call it Bliss, Heart, Love, God.
I have no name for it.
Feeling is all in all.
Names are but sound and smoke
That dim the heavenly glow.

Such a feeling for Nature, or the cosmic emotion, may not be universal among mankind, nor particularly strong or constant among those who do feel it. But it is probably more common than is supposed. Certainly a great many people when they are alone face to face with Nature under conditions of serene beauty, or of unusual grandeur, are overcome by a feeling of being absorbed in their vision, or of expanding into it, by a momentary oblivion of their individual

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limitations. But we do not speak of these things. It needs the gift of great poetry to articulate these rare experiences in a manner that shall not provoke the derision of the irreverent. And great poets are few. Spinoza was primarily a philosopher, not a poet. As a philosopher his main business was to give a reasoned justification of the pantheistic theory—to argue its plausibility, not to sing its praises. But this should not blind anyone to the emotional side of his pantheistic attitude, or make them forget that his philosophic intuition was not without its beatific vision.

Spinoza's moral philosophy is as intimately and harmoniously connected with his theory of knowledge as his theory of knowledge is with his ontology. Spinoza associates the main stages of man's moral progress with the several stages of his intellectual progress. At the lowest, the merely perceptual stage of knowledge, man is dominated by the influence of things outside himself, and is consequently in a state of bondage to them. At the next higher stage, the rational or scientific stage, human intelligence asserts itself, and helps to emancipate him from bondage to merely external objects and their coercive influence. The insight gained into things generally, and into human nature more particularly, helps man to acquire some measure of independence of mere externals. A fuller understanding of his own place in the cosmic system, and of the place therein of all the ordinary objects of his likes and dislikes, and especially his increasing grasp of the necessity which is inherent in the very nature of things, tend to cure him of his disappointments, his resentments, and his vain regrets. He gradually grows reconciled to things, and thereby obtains peace of mind. He learns acquiescence in the cosmic order, and gradually rises superior to the turmoil of inner and outer conflicts. At the highest stage of all, that of "intuition," the mind apprehends and feels all things as expressions of the eternal cosmos. It sees all things in God, and God in all things. It feels itself as an integral part of the eternal order, and man identifies his own interests with cosmic interests, contented that "Thy will, not mine, be done." Thereby the human mind becomes eternal as one of the eternal ideas of God's Thought, and attains to that blessedness which "is not the reward of virtue, but is virtue itself." Spinoza fully realized that this was no easy or common achievement. "But," he added, "everything excellent is as difficult as it is rare."

I began my address with a reference to the very unusual degree of integration achieved by the philosophy of Spinoza. Let me conclude my remarks by referring to the profound sense of cosmic unity which Spinoza obviously felt. With this feeling of cosmic unity went his fervent gospel of human co-operation, of the discarding of individual aggressiveness, of the need of seeing things

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whole, and of pursuing the highest interests of all as a whole. This was the secret of Spinoza's unselfishness in his life and in his thought. Goethe was profoundly impressed by what he has described as the supreme expression of unselfishness in the literature of the world, namely Spinoza's utterance that "he who truly loves God, does not ask that God should love him in return."

How very different human affairs would now be, if mankind shared more fully Spinoza's unselfishness and his sense of cosmic unity!

SPINOZA: MAN OF SCIENCE AND MYSTIC

PROFESSOR S. ALEXANDER, who was in the chair, said that Spinoza was not only one of the great philosophers, but one of the major philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, and perhaps Kant, who represented certain fundamental ways of thought and had accordingly a message for every time as well as for their own. The proper method of treating a great philosopher was no doubt to consider him in his historical setting, so as to bring out exactly what he said in its true meaning. The speaker had no pretensions to do that, which required scholarship beyond his ability. He preferred to take the other and easier line of indicating what Spinoza might mean for us at the present time. From this point of view, what seemed the most striking feature in Spinoza was the fusion in him of man of science and mystic. The speaker had been asked whether there was any distinctive Jewish approach to philosophy, and he had answered (in *The Jewish Review*, No. 2) that he did not know, because in the philosophy of any people the types of thought most prominent in the philosophy of other peoples were to be found. But it was remarkable that the combination of man of science with mystic occurred in two eminent Jewish philosophers, Spinoza and, in our own day, M. Bergson, though the fusion of the two elements in the second philosopher was much less complete than in Spinoza. At any rate, within the scheme of his philosophy, Spinoza, pursuing the method of science, whether in physical matters or in relation to human nature, completed the scheme with the mystical "intellectual love of God," which, though it did not fall under Spinoza's own description of religion in the ordinary sense of that word, was in fact a form of religion. In other words, his final religion was the outcome of the method of science itself, and contrasted therefore both with the excuses found for religion in the nineteenth century and with the tendency notable in our own day to regard religion as supplying the gaps left by science. Follow science to the end, Spinoza seemed to say, and you arrive at the religion of the mystical vision. The lesson

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which the speaker drew was that religion, to be of value, is not only compatible with science, but its outcome.¹

SPINOZA: THE CHAMPION OF TRUTH

SIR HERBERT SAMUEL said that it was a relief to turn from the turmoil of politics to the calmer atmosphere of philosophy.

The British Institute of Philosophy would be falling short of the duties for which it was established if it did not commemorate this tercentenary of the birth of Spinoza. The man who was condemned as an atheist, anathematized by the Synagogue in which he was trained, ostracized by the community in which he lived, whose works for one hundred years no one dared to quote in public discussions, is being honoured this day in all lands as one of the greatest of thinkers, one of the greatest servants of mankind. Almost all our present-day philosophers derive in some degree their root ideas from his teachings. Whether we are immortal in ourselves is a matter of controversy, but it is certain that we may attain immortality by what we do. Spinoza is still alive to-day in modern thought.

A thinker in earlier centuries had this advantage over thinkers of the twentieth century—he had fewer philosophers to learn about. Kant had this advantage over his successors, that he did not have to spend months and years in studying Kant. Montaigne tells us that his father used to say to him that the reason for the superiority which the Greeks and Romans were considered to have over later times in greatness of soul and in knowledge was due to the fact that they did not have to spend so much of their youth in learning Greek and Latin. But in any case, Spinoza did not make the mistake of thinking that the study of philosophy was nothing more than the study of philosophers. Well acquainted as he was with the teaching of the men who had gone before, he drew his inspiration from the given facts of the physical universe, of life, of thought, and of human conduct. “The mind understands itself better,” he said, “the more things it understands in nature.” As Dr. Wolf has said, Spinoza’s philosophy is based on Reason, Reality, and Religion. Spinoza saw that the supposed distinction between the natural and the supernatural, the separation between the world and God, was a dichotomy that corresponded to no reality in the universe.

There is, indeed, a distinction between the things that we human beings think we understand and the things we know we do not understand; we may call the first natural and the others supernatural; but in fact everything in the universe is in a sense equally

¹ For a fuller statement of this position, see an address on Spinoza which is about to be published by the University Press of Manchester.

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natural and everything is equally supernatural. The boundary is between our own knowledge and ignorance, not between the universe and the Deity. Because Spinoza saw this and said it, he was condemned as an atheist. Because he would not discard Reason or reject Reality, he was held to be an enemy of Religion. There runs through his work, in fact, what Dr. Pringle-Pattison has called "an undertone of mystical exaltation," and he was, indeed, in a phrase often quoted, "a God-intoxicated man."

It was thought three centuries ago that religion consisted mainly in historical dogma and ritual, and men tortured and killed each other for the sake of those things. Now we realize that religion is something far wider and deeper and more lasting than these, and so we have established toleration, liberty of thought—the greatest achievement of the modern world, for it opens the door to all else.

Professor Sorley has said: "In Spinoza two great qualities were combined: the logical power which has command of abstract reasoning and can weld arguments into system, and, along with this, the vision of a seer." Further, he was animated by a restless and unconquerable striving towards an understanding of the nature of things. That was a combination of qualities which reappears again and again, century after century, millennium after millennium, among individuals of the Jewish race, and has been able to render great service to mankind.

Victor Hugo has said in a vivid phrase: "Genius is a promontory into the future." The mind of Spinoza juts out from the seventeenth century into the twentieth and on, we may believe, into the unknown centuries to come. He was an unflinching servant of truth as he saw it, and that must have been his strength and his solace.

Surrounded always by animosities, sometimes by dangers, living always in poverty and for years affected by a fatal disease, he was sustained by the faith that through it all he was still the champion of truth. Often in the darkest days he must have thought—

It fortifies my soul to know
That, though I perish, Truth is so.

We are right to honour his memory.