CHAPTER VI

THE UNITY OF SPINOZA'S THOUGHT

SPINOZA, perhaps more than any other great philosopher, directed all his work to a single unvarying aim. The question of how man shall live to realize his best potentialities is never far from any problem on which he embarks. Politics, theology as it enters in the governance of man and as it affects his freedom, man's beatitude and the correction of his understanding, all these are indicated in the titles of his major works; the book which contains his fullest reflections was called an ethics and his other writings build out only practical ramifications to his central doctrine; problems which he promised to take up in his "philosophy" are treated in the Ethics. In its general outlines the unity of Spinoza's thought is obvious; it is not difficult to state the system of his philosophy within the limits of a thousand words, but when the investigation becomes more precise the single aim is lost among the confusion of the detailed problems through which it threads. It is clear that ethics must be based on metaphysics and physics, but since Spinoza did not trouble to treat metaphysical, mechanical, methodological problems separately, but only as they are the necessary preparation to ethics, the complications which have come out of this introduction to ethics have attracted rather more attention than has the incidental elucidation. Questions of method, science, or ontology seem to have interested Spinoza chiefly as they were relevant to ethics and he treated them only in such detail as that interest warranted; that it warranted considerable detail followed from the nature of the problem which required such sciences as introduction. Nevertheless these preparations do not always seem to have been sufficient to make his view clear, since there has been no paucity of readers who find in them only a misapprehension of the nature of God, or of the exigencies of the mathematical method, or of the efficacy of the laws of nature, the relation of body and mind, the psychology of the passions and of
thinking, or the niceties of any of the dozens of philosophic or technical disciplines in which one reader or another might presume to expertness.

The work of Spinoza, consequently, so far as it needs supplement, calls for the service of disentangling this aim from all the contradictions and confusions in which it has been involved. Even that service involves at first sight a contradiction: that the salient characteristic of a work should be its unity and that the unity of it should have been most frequently overlooked. The contradiction is only in seeming. The unity which is most obvious in Spinoza's work is in the preoccupation which runs through the whole body of his thought. But no great philosophic importance could be attached to a unity of purpose, if the mass of materials and problems through which the investigation proceeded did not form itself in such wise that ethics becomes a selective compendium of all knowledge as it contributes to the knowledge of man. Beside the unity which a single purpose gives the philosophy of Spinoza there is the basis of a logical unity. The system of his philosophy is indicated at every important point, but nowhere in his works is it stated in itself and without the bias of its moral tendencies. What is apparent is a perspicacious philosophic awareness of the diverse layers of implication that can be found in any philosophic problem. But the very acuteness of the perception betrays the exposition, since Spinoza usually sees more than he can induce his reader, even with a scholium and a cross-reference, to see; perhaps if he had finished the physics he had planned, the frequent logical reservations and provisions which he introduced with a *quatenus* in all statements of actual things would be clearer. But they would be clearer only by introducing further aspects of that one distinction between the existence and essence of things, between imagination and knowledge, passion and action, duration and eternity, mode and substance, in a word, between the thing as it exists and changes and the thing as it is and persists in being.

This logical unity, more than the persistent unity of purpose, is of philosophic interest in Spinoza's work. It deserves emphasis because it is a unity evolved rather by philosophic vision than by organization or argument. It is not the unity of an outlined presentation, but rather the peripatetic unity of a conversation which progresses and in which the interlocutor remembers what was last said. The logical unity of this doctrine, therefore, fits nicely to the single purpose; not only is ethics based on physics and metaphysics but that basis is constantly in mind and its principles do not change. Eventually, as the exposition proceeds, that very changelessness becomes so directly relevant to the solution of the problems of ethics that the unity of the doctrine no longer appears as an accidental characteristic; man's best possibility of happiness is in the recognition of essences involved in and implicated in the existence of things.

It is no contradiction that this man in whom the unity and system of thought is so striking, should never have completed a single work. Of the two books he published in his lifetime, one, the *Principles of Descartes's Philosophy*, contains a fragmentary Third Part which is frankly uncompleted because the Second Part does not include the necessary proposition on fluidity; the other, the *Theologic-Political Treatise*, though it is a finished work, is poorly planned if it was to be (as its subtitle, introduction and concluding chapters seem to indicate) a work on the relation of reason and faith with particular practical application to religion and state, and not primarily a work on biblical criticism. The *Short Treatise*, at least at it comes to us, is a fragment; the *Political Treatise* and the *Correction of the Understanding* are incomplete. Moreover the latter ends abruptly in what seems a colossal logical derangement: beginning with a beautiful statement of its problem, it proceeds, with the interposition from time to time of statements of what has been done up to that point, of what does not fall in the province of this treatment and what remains to do, to so indiscriminate an interest in the bypaths that open along the road to the correction of the understanding that one could enumerate, at the point where it does stop, a dozen subjects which might conceivably have followed the last one. And with the spectacle of the dilemmas of all these works, one may be emboldened to the suggestion that even the *Ethics*, though Spinoza was ready to publish it and though by its scope and its method it is the most sys-
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systematic and elaborately organized of his writings, is an incomplete work; certainly Books IV and V are open to criticism from the point of view of both organization and comprehensiveness. Spinoza's seems to have been a mind of remarkable logical sagacity, not for the architectonic presentation of ideas, but for profound and detailed analysis. The unity of his thought is properly in the principles to which he appealed unceasingly and in the systematic background of his thoughts.

In the moral application which interested Spinoza so persistently, this systematic unity appeared in the reiteration of his insistence that the life of man proceeds simultaneously along two ethical planes. Good action and intelligent action are impossible without enough understanding of God and of bodies and of the mind to make clear what is implicated in the existence of anything and in the continuance of anything, idea or essence, through change. Here are the distinct ways of knowledge, the classification of the emotions, and the relation of passion and intellect on the background of an intelligible universe in which every occurrence results from necessary causes operating according to unchanging principles. The most important philosophic convictions of Spinoza are these, and even in the Short Treatise, where the doctrine of the attributes is a little uncertain still, and the distinction of body and mind and their identity is not quite decisive, where the psychology of the passions is detailed shortly in a mere cartesian enumeration, and where the intuitive culmination to the rational ethics is not developed, there is a statement of this relation of God to the universe which is an explicit and as definite a statement as any statement of it in the later works. God is ubiquitous in the writings of Spinoza because the world is intelligible, and that he should be necessary to the understanding of any part of it follows from any explanation of his nature.

Place man in the universe of contrasted things that depend on and illustrate the rationality of God, and there is the inevitable sequence of passions. The ethical problems follow as a consequence involved in them. Seen in this light the problems are clearer: the real evils of the world are not poverty, neglect, pain or any of the unavoidable accidents of life, but the perturbations of the mind. These are so set by the nature of man and of things that the whole philosophic background must be reviewed to know how they may be removed: in no way other than by understanding the nature of things could one know that the endeavor by which the mind asserts the continued existence of the body, its endeavor to understand, and its endeavor to know God are not only precisely the same, but further, are the mind's one virtue and its one effort toward perfection. Man's perfection, his freedom, and his salvation are one; all three include only the precept to act as reason dictates, and reason's dictates are according to the rational principles on which the universe is set; no one of the three could be contrary to any other. It would be a little sardonic nevertheless if that were all, if this organizing of all the sciences that they may lead to one single end found no more illuminating theoretic pronouncements than that only the good is good, not pleasure, riches, or fame, that the beginning of virtue is self-interest, that our end in action should be to act that our actions depend as largely as possible on ourselves alone, and that our only secure happiness is one which has its formal cause in our own mind. But there is more; not in the plan of social reform nor in the catalogue of the passions to which it is joined, but precisely in the depth of philosophic implication on which they are founded; virtue significantly is most complete when such things as these are understood best and most completely. Since there is this system which must lie behind Spinoza's conclusions to his moral problems, on even ethical grounds the fundamental unity of it deserves to have been restated and reexamined, for this is the very knowledge of the union the mind has with all nature and therefore it not only contains the possibility and safeguard of that which is supremely good, but is itself the supreme good.