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Introduction

Spinoza's *Ethics* is without doubt one of the most exciting and contested works in philosophy. The primary goal of this work written in the austere geometrical fashion is, as it was of the Ancients, to teach how we should live, and it ends with an ethics in which the only thing good in itself is understanding; only that which hinders us from understanding is bad; and beings endowed with a human mind should devote themselves, as much as they can, to a contemplative life. The purpose of the present volume is to provide a detailed and accessible step-by-step exposition of the *Ethics*; in this Introduction, we want to present the outlines of the reasoning behind Spinoza's rather uncompromising ethical intellectualism and briefly designate the particular topics discussed in the ensuing chapters.

It seems that any theory of good life inevitably makes some fundamental assumptions concerning what human beings are, and it can be seen as an important virtue of Spinoza's approach that these basic questions are tackled in a thorough and explicit manner. For Spinoza, to know what we are depends on knowing what the universe or God is, because Spinoza sees us as limitations in God or the universe. Our bodies have spatial limits and our understanding has limits in thought. In seriously thinking about our bodies, we have to conceive them as being embedded in a larger spatial whole, and in thinking about our minds, we clearly see that our intellects are limited, even defective. Thus, in thinking about our intellect, we by necessity form an idea of a more perfect intellect. However, that we are limited – both mentally and physically – by something larger suggests that in a sense we constitute this larger being and, thus, knowledge of this larger being gives knowledge of ourselves. Spinoza, then, adopts what is called a top-down strategy, which is explicated in the following passage:

> And so they believe either that the nature of God pertains to the essence of created things, or that created things can be or be conceived without God – or what is more certain, they are not sufficiently consistent.

The cause of this, I believe, was that they did not observe the [proper] order of Philosophizing. For they believed that the divine nature, which they should have contemplated before all else (because it is prior both in knowledge and in nature) is last in the order of knowledge, and that the things that are called objects of the senses are prior to all. That is why, when they contemplated natural things, they thought of nothing less than they did of the divine nature; and when afterwards they directed their minds to contemplating the divine nature, they could think of nothing less than of their first fictions, on which they had built the knowledge of natural things, because these could not assist knowledge of the divine nature. So it is no wonder that they have generally contradicted themselves. (2p10s)

For Spinoza, knowledge of the infinite is, then, prior to knowledge of the finite; finite being is negation in the infinite. This kind of top-down strategy can be contrasted with Descartes's first-person point of view and his methodological scepticism, but, in fact, at least at one point in the *Meditations* Descartes holds a very similar view:

I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired – that is, lacked something – and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison? (CSM II, 31; AT VII, 46)

In the first two chapters of this book, entitled 'The Textual History of Spinoza's *Ethics*' and 'The Geometrical Order in the *Ethics*', Piet Steenbakkers scrutinizes the textual history of Spinoza's masterpiece, which reflects its contested and revered status, and its geometrical method, which is to a considerable extent responsible for that status. Devoting a section to each of its five parts, we now turn to explaining the main ideas of the *Ethics*.

ETHICS, PART I

Part 1 of the *Ethics*, 'On God', is written very abstractly. One could see it as a tractate in cosmology investigating the nature of the world. The most important theses in the *Ethics*, Part 1, are the following three: (i) God necessarily exists; (ii) God is the only possible substance; (iii) everything follows from God by geometrical necessity. All these theses follow rather straightforwardly from Spinoza's ontology, which further develops Descartes's conception of the nature of reality. Thus, before these theses are investigated, a short exposition of Spinoza's ontology is required.

It is natural to think that the world consists of different individual things that are in mutual interaction. For example, the state and the

form of a tree depend on various external factors. However, it also is natural to think that these ordinary things, trees and rocks, are themselves compositional objects, in the sense that they consist of smaller individual things, which in turn consist of smaller things, and so on. The existence of ordinary things is dependent on their parts. However, it is not implausible to claim that this kind of dependency on parts has to stop somewhere, that is, that there have to be simple things out of which all compositional things are ultimately composed. These simple things, it can be argued, have to be completely independent of all other things. Not only is their existence independent of any parts, but, moreover, they cannot have external causes for their existence, because it is natural to hold that when a thing comes to existence through external causes, these causes just arrange preexisting things so that they together compose a new thing. Moreover, it seems that simple things cannot be destroyed through external factors, because destruction through external causes can happen only if an external cause breaks the inner constitution of a thing. Finally, it seems that external causes cannot affect these simple things at all, because a thing can be affected only if it has an inner constitution that can be changed. This kind of independent things that lie at the basis of reality are traditionally called substances. In a certain sense, the existence of all other things is reducible to the ways or modes in which these simple substances exist. The independence of substances characterized above could be labeled *ontological independence*, and from this ontological independence it is a small step to what could be called *conceptual independence*. If a thing is completely independent of everything else and is able to exist alone, its nature, or what it is, cannot be dependent on anything else. Thus, all there is to know about an ontologically independent thing has to be in the thing itself, which means that the thing is conceptually independent.

In 1d3, Spinoza defines substance in terms of ontological and conceptual independence. Something is a substance just in case it *is in itself* and is *conceived through itself*, Spinoza says. Here the in-itself condition signifies ontological independence and the conceived-through-itself condition conceptual independence. Moreover, all other things are nothing but ways or modes of substances. Thus, Spinoza's conception of substance seems to differ in no way from the traditional conception; what makes his metaphysics so startling is the consequences he draws from that conception.

Spinoza argues that any possible substance has to exist by necessity, because nothing external can prevent a possible substance from existing (1p7d). This is an extremely interesting claim, and it is not quite clear whether Spinoza takes it as a self-evident truth – perhaps some background assumptions are needed. It is true that Spinoza endorses a

version of the principle of sufficient reason. For Spinoza, this principle says not only that for the existence of a thing a cause is needed but also that the nonexistence of a thing requires a cause (1p11d2). One might, then, give the following indirect proof for the necessary existence of a possible substance *s*: suppose that *s* does not exist. From the independence of substances, it follows that nothing external to *s* can be the cause of the nonexistence of *s*. Thus, the cause of its nonexistence has to be somehow internal to *s*. But this can hold only if *s* has a contradictory nature; that is, only if *s* is not a possible substance. So we can conclude that any possible substance has to exist by necessity.

In 1d6, Spinoza defines God as a substance that has an infinity of attributes, each of which is infinite in its own kind. From this definition and from the necessary existence of any possible substance, it follows that God necessarily exists. However, the proof of the existence of God involves a difficulty that is absent from the proof of the necessary existence of substance. Even if it were granted that there have to be completely independent things, this is not enough to show that God, defined as a substance having an infinity of attributes, is possible. To understand the problem and Spinoza's solution to it, the notion of attribute has to be investigated. Let us first call the position that there are several independent things, that is, substances, which ground the existence of everything else, *substance pluralism* and Spinoza's view that only one such thing exists, *substance monism*. In substance pluralism the different substances have their own natures, that is, attributes that are responsible for the distinctness of the substances. Attributes are what could be called individuators, and so in Spinoza's substance monism it is assumed that all these distinct individuators, or individual natures, can be had by one thing (1p10s). However, this assumption is problematic, because it is not at all easy to understand how one thing can have several natures. But once the assumption is made, substance monism follows directly from the following three premises: (i) attributes are individuators; (ii) any possible substance exists by necessity; (iii) God, that is, a substance having all possible attributes, is possible. It is easy to show that substance monism really follows from these premises: suppose that besides God some other substance *s* exists. Because attributes are individuators, *s* must have an attribute that differentiates *s* from God. This, however, is impossible, because God has all possible attributes.

Spinoza's ontology and its relation to those of Aristotle and Descartes are considered in Valtteri Viljanen's chapter 'Spinoza's Ontology'. After having given a detailed overview of different interpretations of Spinoza's basic metaphysics, Viljanen emphasizes the importance of Spinoza's transition from considerations concerning concepts to propositions concerning real entities, the essence of which is causal power. Chapters by

Andreas Schmidt and by Jon Miller, 'Substance Monism and Identity Theory in Spinoza' and 'Spinoza and Stoics on Substance Monism', respectively, shed light on different aspects of Spinoza's monism. Schmidt pays close attention to different interpretations of Spinoza's argument for monism and he also considers the problem of how it is possible that Spinoza's God, a simple substance, has several natures or attributes. In Schmidt's interpretation, the key to the solution of this problem is to be found in Duns Scotus's concept of formal distinction. Schmidt also shows how Spinoza's view of the mind–body relation is partly based on monism. Jon Miller argues in his chapter that Spinoza's monism was not something he just borrowed from the Stoics. Whereas the Stoic arguments for monism rely on wholeness and teleology, Spinoza's monism follows from his theory of *per se* individuation.

For Spinoza, contingency is closely related to interaction. Only things that are in interaction can be said to have some of their features contingently. For example, we might be willing to say that a painted floor is only contingently brown, because brownness does not result from the nature of the floor. A necessarily existing substance, however, is in no interaction with other things, and thus all its properties somehow emanate from its inner nature; thus an independent thing completely determines itself (1p16 and 1p16d). Hence it seems that necessitarianism follows directly from substance monism.

However, Spinoza's modal theory has been a subject of a long controversy. Spinoza no doubt accepts the necessity of all truths, but it is not quite clear whether he accepts the absolute necessity of all truths. Truths about finite things have what is called relative necessity, or necessity by reason of cause (1p33s1), and it has been argued that this kind of necessity is consistent with contingency. In his chapter 'Spinoza on Necessity', Charles Jarrett discusses different interpretations of Spinoza's modal theory, reaching the conclusion that Spinoza has only one notion of necessity. Jarrett also compares Spinoza's ontological argument for the existence of God with that presented by Kurt Gödel.

Ethics, part 2

In Part 2 of the *Ethics*, 'On the Nature and Origin of the Mind', Spinoza first gives content to the highly abstract metaphysics of Part 1. In the first two propositions Spinoza purports to prove that thought and extension are attributes of God. Even though the official demonstrations of these propositions are somewhat problematic, the scholium to 2p1, where Spinoza offers an alternative demonstration for thought's being an attribute of God, is illuminating. What Spinoza seems to claim there is that if we can conceive some property *F* so that it can be had to an

infinite degree, then that property is an attribute. But because we can conceive a being that is infinite in respect of its power of thinking, thought is an attribute of God. In the same way, even though Spinoza does not do that, we could demonstrate that extension is an attribute of God: we can conceive a being that is infinite in its extension; therefore extension is an attribute of God.

The situation looks like this: God exists and is thinking and extended. One wonders whether these aspects of God are in any way related to each other. What does God think? At 2p3 Spinoza argues that God's thought is directed to himself. He can form the idea of his essence and of everything that flows from that essence. So he acquires the objects of thought from other attributes and because of his infinity in respect of thinking he is able to form an idea of everything. After this, Spinoza goes on to argue that the acts of thought (i.e., formation of ideas) are not caused by the objects thought about in these acts (2p5–p6). This means that God's intellect is not passive, but from his own infinite power of thinking God spontaneously thinks everything that it is possible to think about. This suggests a kind of parallelism between thought and extension; that is, that there are modes of thought that are purely mental that somehow represent the extended realm in such a way that the modes of thought do not have modes of extension, or modes of any other attributes, as their constituents. Thought does not borrow its content from other attributes.

However, there are reasons to think that this picture of parallelism cannot be accurate. One is tempted to endorse it because for Spinoza attributes are conceived through themselves (1p10). This is easy to read as a kind of conceptual independence, which suggests that any necessary tie between thought and what the thought is about is due not to the nature of these attributes but to some other force, as it were. We would like to suggest instead that the conceptual distinction is between the *acts of thinking* and *acts of extending*. God's infinite intellect does not think about a mode of extension because the mode is there, but the intellect affirms the mode's existence from its own power. The infinite intellect, however, obtains its objects from the extended realm. Without objects given to the intellect the intellect could not think about them, but the *act of thought* performed is due to God's infinite power of thinking and is in no way caused by the object. This is how thought–body unions come to be generated.

The aforesaid helps us to understand one of the most famous propositions of the *Ethics*, viz. 2p7 according to which '(t)he order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.' From what has been said, it follows that God forms an idea of every thing. Moreover, he cannot form those ideas without the existence of

the things the ideas are about. In 2p7, by 'order and connection' Spinoza means, as the proof makes evident, their causal order and connection. Read in this way, 2p7 says that if *x* causes *y*, then the idea of *x* causes the idea of *y*. Given what has been said above, it follows that if *x* causes *y*, the idea of *x* and the idea of *y* exist. According to Spinoza's so-called causal axiom, 1a4, the idea of an effect cannot exist without the idea (knowledge) of its cause, which means that the idea of an effect depends on the idea of its cause. Thus, causal dependency between things is matched by dependency between the ideas of those things.

In 2p7s, Spinoza explains his position on the idea–object relation by claiming that in fact any idea and its object are one and the same thing but explained through different attributes. Even though identity theories in general are difficult to understand, what Spinoza says here is in conformity with what we have argued above. When an idea is seen as an act of thought, or a modification of a mind, it is explained through the attribute of thought; but an idea can also be seen as the object of the act of thought (*ideatum*). In this case, the idea is conceived through the attribute of the object.

After giving this kind of account of the relation between ideas and their objects, Spinoza begins his descent from God's mind to finite minds. Human beings are not substances because their nonexistence is conceivable; in this sense they are contingent. However, this does not contradict Spinoza's necessitarianism, because even though particular human beings are not necessary existents in the way substances are, it still holds, as we read Spinoza, that if a human being exists at a certain time, then it is absolutely necessary that he or she exist at that time.

For Spinoza, a human mind is an idea. It has to be an idea of an existent thing because the existence of the idea requires the existence of its object; and the object of the human mind has to be such that the changes in it result in changes, that is, perceptions, in the human mind (2p11–p12). But the only thing with which we have such direct acquaintance is what we call our body. Moreover, Spinoza goes on to deny that the mind could have some other object besides the body (2p13). The argument for this fascinating denial is a compelling one: suppose *X* is not a body and is the object of your mind. Because everything that exists must have some effect, you should by 2p7 have ideas of the effects of that object; but Spinoza holds that you simply do not have ideas of such effects.

The picture drawn of the human mind and of the whole human being in Spinoza's top-down strategy can, then, be summarized as follows: a human being is generated by God's beginning to think an object that we call the human body. Because of this, all human minds are parts of the infinite intellect of God.

After this, Spinoza goes on to consider the nature of the human body and the natures of bodies in general (2p13). Once it is granted that the object of the human mind is the human body, this kind of investigation sheds light on the nature of mind. Spinoza's physics of the body has been much studied, and here we are satisfied to report how Spinoza uses the results of his physics in his epistemological considerations. What motivates Spinoza to give the basics of physics is that for him the body is the vehicle through which we are in contact with the world outside us – we can be affected by things outside us.

Having explicated the nature of human beings as mind–body unions, Spinoza begins to consider our status as knowers. Let us take an example that helps in understanding the situation Spinoza has left us with. Suppose Mary is looking out of the window and says that she sees or perceives a tree. Spinoza would claim that in this case Mary is having an idea the object of which she describes as a tree. The idea has begun to exist because of her contact with the external bodies. Stones do not have ideas of trees, not at least in the same way as we do, and, therefore, there is something special about Mary that makes this idea possible. It is partly due to her bodily structure that she has this idea of the tree. It is conceivable that somebody else, with a different bodily structure, would, due to this same external stimulus, have an idea whose object we would describe as a cow. The ideas we have depend on how we are affected by external things, and this depends partly on our intrinsic bodily nature. Mary has no direct distinct knowledge of the object of her idea, which she calls a tree, and is inclined to believe that the object of her idea exists in the external world the way she perceives it, even though the object in fact is an affection of her body. She sees the process in her body as a tree. A question worth posing is, what explains the fact that Mary, who has an idea of a process going on in her body, locates this object outside her body? Spinoza might want to give the following explanation. The process in Mary's body is an effect of something we call a tree. According to Spinoza's causal axiom 1a4, the idea of this process involves the idea of its cause, and, therefore, this idea of the process in her body is also an idea of something else. Thus, the mind's spreading itself onto external objects is part of the meaning of the causal axiom.

It is no wonder that because of this Spinoza believes that our sense perception gives us very inadequate and confused knowledge (2p28). When Mary perceives the tree, the causal flow from the tree and the input from her own body fuse together, and it is, on the basis of sense perception alone, impossible to separate these influences from each other and to have distinct knowledge of one's own contribution on the one hand and the contribution of the tree on the other hand. To obtain

adequate knowledge of this would require that one could somehow step outside one's body and see the tree and its causal influence as they are. This helps us to understand Spinoza's characterization of inadequate knowledge at 2p11c:

> [W]hen we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human Mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human Mind, then we say that the human Mind perceives the thing only partially, *or* inadequately.

The point here is that God has adequate knowledge of everything. But to have adequate knowledge of an external thing represented by our idea requires that one has direct knowledge of that external thing. However, our ideas in perception cannot reach beyond our bodies and, therefore, our knowledge of external bodies is inadequate. Moreover, because our bodies are constantly affected by other things, there is no possibility for us to acquire knowledge of our bodies as they are, but only as they are affected.

Even though through sense perception we can only have a distorted picture of reality, adequate knowledge is possible for human minds. Spinoza sees two routes open for reaching this kind of adequate cognition. The first one is affection-based and gives us common notions that function as the starting points of our reasoning process: we reach adequate ideas when it so happens that we are affected by external things in such a way that we come to think something that is in each and every thing, as it were. According to Spinoza, that which is equally in the part and in the whole is something that can only be adequately conceived (2p38). The thought behind this may be the following. In our example of Mary perceiving the tree, the idea refers outside its direct object, namely to its cause. But suppose that the tree somehow modified the perceiver so that there would be a perfect copy of that tree in her mind. In this case, to reach knowledge of the nature of the tree, there is no distance to be travelled. Thus, when something affects the mind through a common feature, the mind can begin to think of that feature and is able to have adequate knowledge of it (or perhaps more accurately, to form adequate knowledge on the basis of it). So the idea is that, via body, there is a way to adequate knowledge and to axioms that constitute the principles of reasoning in physics.

The second route to adequate knowledge is made possible through Spinoza's startling idea that the human mind possesses adequate knowledge of the essence of God (2p47). This is a rather surprising view, especially when contrasted to the inadequacy of our knowledge both of our minds and bodies. However, that there has to be this kind of adequate knowledge follows rather directly from Spinoza's basic metaphysical and

ontological views. The reasoning seems to be the following. In the beginning of Part 1, it is made clear that substances are both ontologically and conceptually prior to everything else. Moreover, modes are conceived through their substances (1d5), and because besides substances (with their attributes) nothing but modes exist (1a1), it follows that any idea involves the idea of a substance. But in Spinoza's monism it holds that there is just one substance through which everything else is conceived. Thus, any idea involves an idea in which God is conceived through itself. However, Spinoza does not mean that in being conceived through itself, God is not being conceived *under* any of his attributes. Any identification, according to Spinoza, is property-based, which means that God has to be conceived under an attribute that the intellect perceives to constitute God's essence (1p10s). Thus, in order to have any idea, we must have an idea of an attribute of God, and thus of an essence of God. Even though this may sound strange, things become more understandable when attention is paid to what Spinoza thinks to be the attributes a human being participates in: thought and extension. My thought of a finite thinking thing necessarily treats that thing as limited by an infinite thinking thing, and any idea of a finite body necessarily sees that body as limited by an infinite space. Thus, any idea we have involves an idea of God under some attribute.

The abovesaid may be somewhat confusing, because it seems to go against experience that we should be constantly having ideas of God's infinite thought and infinite extension. However, this oddity is removable. In saying that any idea involves an idea of the essence of God, Spinoza means, as we interpret him, that on the basis of any idea, the mind can form a clear and distinct idea of God; in other words, any idea makes God cognitively accessible to a human being. Spinoza's panpsychism holds that a worm has an idea of its body and thus an idea that involves infinite extension, that is, extension as an attribute, but it would be rather absurd to say that the worm has a clear and distinct idea of God under the attribute of extension. What we have but the worm lacks is the power to realize and work out what the ideas of bodies involve. We have a sort of primordial understanding of space, which makes geometry and, Spinoza thinks, also the basics of physics possible for us to understand. Moreover, for Spinoza there is a kind of geometry of the mind. In this kind of geometry, we have to think of our own finite mental life as being embedded in God's infinite thought, of which we can also form adequate knowledge. Once we make the adequate knowledge of God's essence involved in all of our ideas clear and distinct, we are able to form new adequate knowledge; on that basis, we are able to deduce properties of God. Maybe the easiest way to clarify this is to consider the knowledge we have of geometry. A geometer does not