

ETHICS
Proved in Geometrical Order
AND
Divided into five Parts
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Excerpt

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First Part of the Ethics

I

OF GOD

Definitions

1. By cause of itself I mean that whose essence involves existence *or* that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.
2. A thing is said to be finite in its kind if it can be limited by another thing of the same nature. For example, a body is said to be finite because we always conceive bodies that are greater. Similarly a thought is limited by another thought. But a body is not limited by a thought nor a thought by a body.
3. By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e. no concept of any other thing is needed for forming a concept of it.
4. By attribute I mean that which an intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence.
5. By mode I mean affections of a substance *or* that which is in another thing through which it is also conceived.
6. By God I mean absolutely infinite being, i.e. substance consisting of infinite attributes, each one of which expresses eternal and infinite essence.

Explanation

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I say absolutely infinite, and not infinite in its kind. For we can deny infinite attributes to anything that is infinite only in its kind; but if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation belongs to its essence.

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7. A thing is said to be free if it exists solely by the necessity of its own nature, and is determined to action by itself alone. But a thing that is determined by another thing to exist and to operate in a specific and determinate way is necessary or rather compelled.

8. By eternity I mean existence itself insofar as it is conceived as necessarily following solely from the definition of an eternal thing.

Explanation

Such existence is conceived as an eternal truth just like the essence of the thing, and therefore cannot be explained through duration or time, even if duration is conceived as without beginning or end.

Axioms

1. All things that are, are either in themselves or in another thing.
2. Anything that cannot be conceived through another thing must be conceived through itself.
3. If there is a determinate cause, an effect necessarily follows, and conversely if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow.
4. Cognition [*cognitio*] of an effect depends upon cognition of its cause and involves it.
5. Things which have nothing in common with each other cannot be understood through each other, *or* the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other.
6. A true idea must agree with its object.
7. The essence of anything that can be conceived as not existing does not involve existence.

Proposition 1

A substance is prior by nature to its affections.

Proof

This is clear from *def*3 and *def*5.

Proposition 2

Two substances with different attributes have nothing in common with each other.

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Proof

This too is clear from *def3*. For each substance must be in itself and be conceived through itself, *or* the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other.

Proposition 3

If things have nothing in common with each other, one cannot be the cause of the other.

Proof

If they have nothing in common with each other, it follows (*by a5*) that they cannot be understood through each other, and therefore (*by a4*) one cannot be the cause of the other. *Q. E. D.*

Proposition 4

Two or more different things are distinguished from each other either by differences of the attributes of their substances or by differences of the affections of their substances.

Proof

All things that are, are either in themselves or in another thing (*by a1*), i.e. (*by def3 and def5*) outside the intellect there is nothing besides substances and their affections. Therefore outside the intellect, there is nothing by which several things can be distinguished from each other besides substances *or* – and (*by def4*) this is the same thing – their attributes and their affections. *Q. E. D.* 4

Proposition 5

There cannot be two or more substances in the universe with the same nature or attribute.

Proof

If there were several distinct substances, they would have to be distinguished from each other either by a difference of attributes or by a difference of affections (*by the previous proposition*). If they are distinguished only by a difference of attributes, it will be admitted that there is

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only one substance with the same attribute. But if they are distinguished by a difference of affections, it follows, since a substance is prior in nature to its affections (*by p1*), that if we strip it of its affections and consider it in itself – i.e. if (*by def3 and a6*) we consider it truly – it will not be possible to conceive it as distinguished from any other substance. That is (*by the previous proposition*), it will not be possible for there to be several substances but only one.

Proposition 6

One substance cannot be produced by another substance.

Proof

There cannot be two substances in the universe with the same attribute (*by the previous proposition*), i.e. (*by p2*) two substances that have anything in common with each other. Therefore (*by p3*) one cannot be the cause of the other *or* be produced by the other. *Q. E. D.*

Corollary

It follows from this that a substance cannot be produced by something else. For there is nothing in the universe besides substances and their affections, as is clear from *a1 and def3 and def5*. But a substance cannot be produced by a substance (*by p6*). Therefore a substance absolutely cannot be produced by something else. *Q. E. D.*

Alternatively

This is also proved more easily from the absurdity of its contradictory. For if a substance could be produced by something else, cognition of it would have to depend on cognition of its cause (*by a4*), and therefore (*by def3*) it would not be a substance.

5 Proposition 7

It belongs to the nature of substance to exist.

Proof

A substance cannot be produced by something else (*by the corollary of the previous proposition*); it will therefore be the cause of itself,

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i.e. (*by def1*) its essence necessarily involves its existence, *or* it belongs to its nature to exist. *Q. E. D.*

Proposition 8

Every substance is necessarily infinite.

Proof

A substance of one attribute cannot exist unless it is unique (*by p5*) and it belongs to its nature to exist (*by p7*). Therefore, by its nature it will exist, whether as finite or as infinite. But not finite. For (*by def2*) it would have to be limited by another substance of the same nature which would also have to exist necessarily (*by p7*), and therefore there would be two substances with the same attribute, which is absurd (*by p5*). It therefore exists as infinite. *Q. E. D.*

Scholium 1

Since to be finite is in truth partly a negation and to be infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of any nature, it follows from *p7* alone that every substance must be infinite.

Scholium 2

I am sure it is difficult for all who judge things confusedly and are not used to getting to know things by their first causes, to understand the proof of *p7*. This is surely because they do not distinguish between modifications of substances and the substances themselves, and because they do not know how things are produced. Consequently they wrongly apply to substances the origins that they see in natural things. Those who do not know the true causes of things confuse everything. They have no more intellectual qualms about conceiving of trees talking than of people talking.¹⁸ They as easily suppose that human beings are formed from stones as from semen.¹⁹ They imagine any form being changed into any other form.²⁰ Similarly, people who confuse divine nature with human

¹⁸ Maimonides ridicules the view that trees may speak, in *The Guide for the Perplexed* III, 29.

¹⁹ The notion that men may be made from stones is suggested by the legend of Deucalion and Pyrrha. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1, 395–415.

²⁰ The possibility that things of one form may be transformed into things of another form is suggested by miracles, as Maimonides points out in *The Guide for the Perplexed* II, 29.

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- 6 nature readily attribute human emotions to God, especially so long as they also remain ignorant of how emotions are produced in the mind.

But if people kept in mind the nature of substance, they would not doubt the truth of *p*₇. In fact, this proposition would be an axiom for everybody and would be regarded as a common notion. For by substance everyone would understand something that is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e. something that does not require for its cognition the cognition of anything else. By modifications they would understand that which is in another thing and the concept of which is formed from the concept of the thing in which they are. This is why we can have true ideas of modifications that do not exist, since even though the modifications do not actually exist outside of our intellect, yet their essence is so thoroughly included in something else that they can be conceived through it. But the truth of substances is not outside the intellect unless it is in the substances themselves because they are conceived through themselves. Therefore if anyone were to say that he has a clear and distinct, i.e. a true, idea of a substance and yet doubts whether such a substance exists, this bit of nonsense would be the same as saying that he has a true idea and yet wonders whether it may be false – as is obvious to anyone who thinks about it. Or if anyone states that substance is created, he has at the same time stated that a false idea has become a true one, and obviously nothing can be conceived that is more absurd than that. Therefore it must necessarily be admitted that the existence of substance, just like its essence, is an eternal truth. From this we can also by a different route reach the conclusion that there is only one substance of the same nature, and I think it is worthwhile to show this here.

But to do so in an orderly manner, we must notice some preliminary points. (1) The true definition of each thing involves or expresses nothing but the nature of the thing defined. It follows from this (2) that no definition either involves or expresses any specific number of individuals since it expresses nothing but the nature of the thing being defined. For example, the definition of a triangle expresses nothing but the simple nature of a triangle and not any specific number of triangles. (3) We must note that for each thing that exists there is necessarily some specific cause on account of which it exists. (4) Note finally that this cause on account of which a thing exists must either be contained in the very nature and definition of the existing thing (namely that it belongs to its nature to exist) or it must be outside it.

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Given these points, it follows that if there exists in nature some specific number of individual things, there would necessarily have to be a reason why just those individual things exist and not more nor less. If for example 20 human beings exist in the universe (for greater clarity, I suppose that they exist at the same time and that no other human beings have existed in nature before), it will not be enough (in order to give the reason why 20 human beings exist) to show the cause of human nature in general. It will also be necessary to show the reason why not more nor less than 20 exist, since (*by point 3*) there must necessarily be a reason why each one exists. But (*by points 2 and 3*) this cause cannot be contained in human nature itself, since the true definition of a human being does not involve the number twenty, and therefore (*by point 4*) the reason why these twenty human beings exist, and consequently why each one exists, must necessarily be outside of each one.

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Therefore we must conclude absolutely that everything that is of such a nature that several individual instances of it can exist, must necessarily have an external cause in order for them to exist. Now since (*by the proofs already offered in this scholium*) it belongs to the nature of substance to exist, the definition of it must involve necessary existence, and consequently its existence has to be inferred from its definition alone. But (*as we have already shown in points 2 and 3*) the existence of several substances cannot follow from its definition. Therefore it necessarily follows from it that only a unique substance of the same nature exists, as we proposed.

Proposition 9

The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it.

Proof

This is evident from *def4*.

Proposition 10

Each attribute of a single substance must be conceived through itself.

Proof

An attribute is what the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of a substance (*by def4*), and therefore (*by def3*) it must be conceived through itself. *Q. E. D.*

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8 Scholium

It is evident from this that even though two attributes may be conceived as really distinct, i.e. one can be conceived without the aid of the other, we can still not conclude from this that they constitute two beings *or* two different substances. For it is of the nature of substance that each of its attributes is conceived through itself, since all the attributes which it has have always been in it simultaneously. Nor could one have been produced from another, but each one expresses the reality *or* being of the substance. It is not at all absurd therefore to assign several attributes to one substance. In fact nothing is clearer in nature than that each being has to be conceived under some attribute, and that the more reality *or* being it has, the more attributes it has that express both necessity *or* eternity and infinity. Consequently too it is perfectly clear that an absolutely infinite being (*as we said in def6*) must necessarily be defined as a being that consists of infinite attributes, each one of which expresses a specific eternal and infinite essence.

But if in the light of this anyone now asks what the criterion is by which we shall be able to recognize differences between substances, he should read the propositions that follow. They show that there exists nothing in the universe but a unique substance; that this substance is absolutely infinite; and for this reason the search for that criterion would be fruitless.

Proposition 11

God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes each one of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.

Proof

If you deny this, conceive, if you can, that God does not exist. It would follow (*by a7*) that his essence does not involve existence. But (*by p7*) this is absurd. Therefore God necessarily exists. *Q. E. D.*

Alternatively

For each thing there must be a cause, *or* reason, both for why it exists and for why it does not exist. For example, if a triangle exists, there must be a reason *or* cause why it exists; and if it does not exist, there must be a