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NOTES ON SPINOZA'S CONCEPTION OF GOD.

THE authoritative and final presentation of Spinoza's teaching in regard to God is to be found mainly in the first parts of the *Ethics;* but for its thorough understanding and adequate valuation the student must of course keep in view the whole of the *Ethics* and the other works, more especially the Correspondence and the treatise *De deo et homine*. Difficult though this first part is found to be when we try to elucidate all its details, and to correlate the different conceptions which it brings together, yet as regards the treatment of its main subject-matter and the general trend of its reasoning it is the simplest and clearest of the divisions of the great work to which it belongs. A very brief *résumé* of the subject-matter will be sufficient. God, or substance, is that which is one, absolutely infinite, indivisible, self-caused, eternal, conceivable through itself alone; and by virtue of this, its nature, it possesses attributes infinite in number, and, therefore, each infinite after its kind, eternal, and indivisible. Through two of these attributes, thought and extension, is substance apprehended by the finite intelligence of man, and its "modes," or finite presentations are perceived by the senses and imagination as individual things or ideas, the mode being always, in contradistinction to substance, finite, divisible, transitory, and dependent. Within this threefold schematism, of substance, attribute, and mode, Spinoza includes everything—consciousness itself and all that enters or can enter into it.

For Spinoza the two terms, 'God' and 'substance,' are practically equivalent. The most casual reader sees at a glance that

for him the word God has not at all the meaning which the ordinary theist attaches to it. To him God is not the all-wise creator, the supreme ruler, the holy judge; nor yet the Trinity in unity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Personality, moral and emotional qualities, intellect, and will, as these are commonly understood, are throughout the *Ethics* explicitly, definitely, and consistently excluded from the nature of God. Spinozism is utterly abhorrent of the least taint of anthropomorphism, unless as a mere emotional concession to the weakness of the ignorant and the irrational. What meaning then did he attach to the words 'God' and 'substance'? What is the true content of the conception which unquestionably lies at the very heart of his philosophy? To answer this question is the object of the present paper, and it may be premised that a necessary condition to the study of the great Jewish thinker's meaning is an entire freedom from prejudice, theological or philosophical, as to what the terms in question ought to signify.

In Definition i, Part I, of the *Ethics*, we are told that the self-caused (*causa sui*) is that of which the essence implies existence, or that the nature of which is only to be conceived as existent. Substance, by Definition iii, is that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself. God, by Definition vi, means "being absolutely infinite, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, of which each one expresses eternal and infinite essence." The meaning of the latter part of this definition depends upon the significance to be given to the word 'attribute,'—a point to be considered later. Passing on to Proposition vii of Part I, we find that existence belongs to the nature of substance, so that the latter can be identified with that of which the essence involves existence, namely the *causa sui*. Proposition viii with its corollaries shows it to be infinite and one, which identifies it with God. The whole doctrine, so far as yet given, is summed up in Proposition xi, "God or substance necessarily exists"; while in Proposition xx we find the illuminating statement, "The existence of God and his essence are one and the same." To the present writer it seems quite clear from these passages and other cognate ones, as well as from the whole tenor of Spinoza's philosophy, that

what is meant by 'God,' 'substance,' *causa sui* is universal existence, or *being itself*. God is the 'is' of all things—the 'real' if we regard reality, not as some modern writers tend to regard it, as that which is supposed to lie external to thought, the material or sense-given fact, but rather as that which is essential to both thought and thing, both subjective and objective experience, since both 'are.' To say of any individual fact that it is, is to refer it to being; its finiteness is just the limit set to its existence. Thus, any fact, whether it be an idea in a man's mind, a plant in the field, or a star in the sky, is a manifestation of existence; while its limitations, its transitoriness, its dependence upon other facts, show it as but a finite phenomenon through which infinite existence is revealed to the mind—itself one of these limited 'modes' of being. Till we understand that for Spinoza, God is just 'being' itself, '*ens*,' his proof of God's existence must seem but a flagrant case of circle-reasoning; whereas if we take the word in this sense he is merely pointing out that the existence of God must be admitted as a self-evident and necessary truth. Every student of philosophy is familiar with Descartes's formulation of the ontological argument for the existence of God—with its criticism by Kant, and with its restatement with fresh significance by Hegel; but its value for Spinoza is something quite independent of that which attaches to it in the teaching of Anselm, or of Descartes, or of the later German idealists, because of this absolutely different content which in his system of thought belongs to the term 'God.' For him, God is indeed "the all-perfect being," but by perfection is not meant the possession in supreme degrees of moral and intellectual characteristics, such as justice, wisdom, fore-knowledge, and love, but simply completeness of existence,—existence without limit or qualification. God, the all-perfect, is just being in its absolute and eternal infinity; it is reality, and it is only the not-real that is non-existent. Thus to say that "God is," is but to assert that "being is." We may note in passing that with the right apprehension of Spinoza's use of the word 'God,' an objection often urged against his method in the ethics falls away, since it becomes apparent that he does not start with an unproved and

illicit assumption of a something called God or substance, and then deduce his whole system from this purely problematical premise; rather he takes as his *point d'appui* a self-evident and irrefragable truth—what Descartes would have called an 'innate' idea. The most ruthless scepticism cannot deny the fact of existence, however vulnerable it may find any particular interpretation of it. Each datum of consciousness is a direct witness to being, since it itself *is*. Descartes had shown that a doubt of the existence of consciousness is self-destructive, in as much as such doubt is a form of consciousness. But the passage from this firm ground to a proof of God's existence had proved for him an uncertain and slippery path. For Spinoza, it needs but one direct step; any fact, be it what it may, *is*; 'being' is, and 'being' is what Spinoza means when he writes 'God.'

But to such identification of God with existence itself the modern philosophical critic, with Hegel before him, is ready to oppose an objection. Being is indeed a necessary, even a fundamental thought-category; we cannot think of anything without implying its existence, at least in consciousness. But just by reason of this universality of application is it the vaguest and most shadowy of conceptions—the most meager of all terms in its connotation, the most abstract of all abstractions; so that, taken in its intrinsic nakedness, it is indistinguishable from its own verbal opposite, non-being, nothingness. Thus it is only the simulacrum of the real that we lay hold of when we try to grasp the general notion 'being.' The real is the vital and the concrete, it is this, if anything, that we can fittingly call 'God,' not the empty schema to which the mind by successive acts of abstraction at last reduces it.

Now this Hegelian objection would undoubtedly be well taken were it true that Spinoza had identified God with the abstract or general idea 'being.' But this is not the case; indeed such a doctrine could readily be refuted from his own works. As a thorough nominalist he characterized the abstract ideas represented by the terms being, thing, something (*ens*, *res*, *aliquid*), as "in the highest degree confused," and the terms themselves he regards as due to the limitations of the human imagination, which,

unable to retain clearly a number of individual images, readily combines them into a confused whole.[1] The general notion is, in proportion to its generality, removed from reality. But we may go further and maintain that it would be a *reductio ad absurdum* of Spinoza's whole system were he to take as the fundamental fact of the universe *any* mere idea, whether abstract or concrete. The philosophy of Spinoza is not an idealism in the sense in which we apply that term to the metaphysics of Fichte and Hegel. He never builds up the existent world out of the thought-material of consciousness. For him the fact of facts, *la vraie vérité*, is not a thought, which is but a mode or phenomenon of reality, nor yet is it thought in general or consciousness, though this constitutes one necessary aspect or attribute of the infinite real—it is the real itself, in and of which every conceivable thought is—the real not as presented in determinate, and therefore finite manifestations to sense and imagination, but as whole and infinite, and therefore indeterminate and indivisible, and so only to be apprehended by rational thought. Spinoza, in short, does not deduce his system from being as an idea, but from being as fact, as the sum and substance, the essence and truth, of all fact, whether we regard it as psychical or physical.

From this standpoint, Spinoza's assertion of the unity, indeterminateness, and indivisibility of God or substance becomes perfectly intelligible, and is seen to be obviously true. *That which is*, the manifold of existing things, is determinate, divisible into parts, and susceptible to change, but the "is," existence itself, cannot be limited, nor divided, nor can it suffer change. Nor is the category of number applicable to it; it is not a mere unit to which conceivably, even if not actually, other units might be added; its unity means that as truly infinite the more or the less cannot be thought in relation to it. This is clearly brought out in Letter l, where it is shown that to affirm the unity of God is not to assert that he is only one and no more, for God is not an individual belonging to a genus, and so cannot be conceived numerically at all.

This uncompromising assertion of the absolute unity of God

[1] *Eth.*, II, xl, Schol., 1.

—a unity which excludes division within as well as addition from without—must be kept well in mind when we attempt to elucidate one of the most difficult subjects of Spinozistic exegesis—the nature of the attributes and their relation to the one substance. The limits of the present paper will only permit its consideration in as far as may throw light on the significance of the conception of God.

And, once more, the student must be warned against the assumption that Spinoza means by the term "attribute," or indeed by any particular term he employs, just what preceding or contemporary thinkers meant by it. One of the most potent causes of the many misunderstandings and misrepresentations of which the great Jewish philosopher's system has been the victim, lies in the utter inadequacy of the speculative terminology of his time, which forced him to put his new and strong wine into the worn-out wine-skins of scholastic phraseology. The 'attributes' that are referred to in the *Ethics* of Spinoza bear no essential resemblance to the divine 'attributes,' as these are represented by the orthodox theologian, nor is the word used in just the same sense in which Descartes used it. The absolute indeterminateness on which Spinoza lays stress, determination belonging wholly to non-being (Letters xli and li), renders the ascription to being, *per se*, of qualities or faculties wholly inadmissible. What then are the 'attributes'? For the true answer we must look into Spinoza's own statements. From Part I, Definition iv, we learn that the attribute is "that which the intellect perceives in regard to substance as constituting its essence." By Definition vi, God is said to mean "being absolutely infinite, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, whereof each one expresses eternal and infinite essence." *Per Deum intelligo ens absolute infinitum, hoc est, substantiam constantem infinitis attributis, quorum unumquodque æternam et infinitam essentiam exprimit.* Proposition iv of Part I also is important to the understanding of the true significance of the 'attribute'; in the proof it is stated that "outside the intellect there is nothing but substances and their affections"—*Extra intellectum nihil datur præter substantias earumque affectiones. Nihil ergo extra intellec-*

tum datur, per quod plures res distingui inter se possunt, præter substantias, sive quod idem est (per Definition iv), earum attributa, earumque affectiones." Proposition ix asserts, the only proof being a reference to Definition iv, that the more reality or being a thing has, the more attributes belong to it. In the scholium to Proposition x, Spinoza says, "nothing consequently is clearer than that being absolutely infinite is necessarily defined (as we have shown in Definition vi) as consisting in infinite attributes; each of which expresses a certain eternal and infinite essence." Of great interest in this connection is Proposition i of the Second Part, which proves that "thought is an attribute of God, or God is a thinking thing." "Individual thoughts, or this and that thought, are words which express the nature of God in a certain and determinate manner; God, therefore, possesses the attribute, the conception of which is involved in all particular thoughts, *which latter are conceived thereby.*" And in the scholium we read, "As, therefore, from the attending to thought alone we conceive an infinite being, thought is necessarily one of the infinite attributes of God." Letter xxvii is also instructive; here we find Spinoza, writing in 1663, giving an earlier form of Definition iii of the first book of the *Ethics*, "By substance, I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, of which the conception does not involve the conception of anything else. *By attribute, I mean the same thing, except that it is called attribute with respect to the understanding, which attributes to substance the particular nature aforesaid.*" He then illustrates the relations of substance and attribute by examples, showing how one and the same thing may be stamped with two names; the third patriarch being called both Israel and Jacob, and a colorless surface being also denominated a white surface, "with this difference, that a surface is called white with reference to a man looking at it."

From a study of these, and of the other passages in which the attributes are referred to, it becomes evident that the attributes are not elements nor "parts" of the divine nature itself, nor yet are they a third order of existence lying between the real substance and its multiform appearance, the modes, but that they

are infinite expressions of the all-inclusive infinite existence. They are the one and ultimate reality as it presents itself to our apprehension. It is as consciousness and as extension that we cognize reality; and it is through and by means of the real as so presented that we perceive individual things or "modes." While, on the one hand, it is an impossible hypothesis that substance *per se* should possess qualities or determinations inherent in it, it is, on the other hand, inaccurate to describe the attribute as pertaining to the finite mind and by it imposed upon substance. Thus when Erdmann, for example, asserts that "the attributes are predicates" which the understanding must attach to substance, not because the latter, but because the former has this particular constitution,[1] he is attaching the attributes to the understanding, and his comparison of them to colored spectacles is misleading on the same ground. Trendelenburg[2] has pointed out that this view is inconsistent with the eternity of the attributes, which is expressly demonstrated in *Ethics*, I, Proposition xix. The attribute is God's attribute, not man's, though it is God's nature as viewed by man. To revert to Spinoza's own simile, it is as the whiteness of the surface that reflects all rays of light without altering them. "The surface is called white in reference to a man looking at it." Perhaps we shall not do injustice to Spinoza's meaning if we say that thought and extension are the infinite and eternal real, in so far as we can know it; we can know it as an infinite physical universe and as an infinite psychical universe; under such aspects alone do we apprehend it, but from other points of view it may be quite otherwise, yet equally adequately presented.

Spinoza tells us that the attributes are infinite in number, though only two of them condition and enter into our experience, viz. thought and extension. We know existence as at once physical and psychical, and as these alone. The infinity of the attributes is apt to seem, therefore, an irrelevant and an unnecessarily confusing conception. It is, however, not difficult to see why Spinoza maintains, and even emphasizes it in spite of the obscurity of

[1] Erdmann, *History of Philosophy*, Vol. II, p. 73, Note (Eng. trans.).

[2] Trendelenburg, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, Band II, s. 41.

which he was himself not unaware, surrounding this vague formulation of unknown, and to us unknowable, presentations of ultimate reality. He is in this manner denying the conceivability of any restriction of the real to that which comes within our consciousness or the consciousness of any beings like ourselves. These unknown attributes of God are thus merely implications of the illimitable reality of being. This is his manner of asserting the inexhaustibility of the universe of existence, the 'perfection' of God, not only in respect to content (which is implied in the infinite number of things that follow from the necessity of the divine nature), but in respect to form, as including all that can enter into an infinite intellect. It is not without interest to compare these somewhat shadowy conceptions of Spinoza with the equally ghostly noumena of the *Critique of Pure Reason.* The student of Kant will recall his dictum, "the concept of a noumenon is, therefore merely limitative, and intended to keep the claims of sensibility within proper bounds, it is therefore, of negative use only." So we might say that the Spinozistic attributes (other than thought and extension) are intended to keep the claims of finite consciousness within proper bounds; they are for the freeing of reality from limitations of all kinds, and are, therefore, epistemologically of negative use only. It must be observed, however, that Spinoza is not hereby positing the existence of an ultimate reality which by its nature is unknowable and unapproachable like the Spencerian Absolute; rather he claims for the infinite real that it is the knowable, and as infinite must be knowable by an infinite number of ways, of which, however, but two lie open to us.

But there is another point, the apprehension of which is of vital importance to the right understanding of the central conception of Spinozism. The *ens infinitum*, God, substance, is active, or rather *it is activity itself.* God is being, but for Spinoza 'being' is a conception, not merely static, but dynamic. What is, *ipso facto*, acts. This is implied in the use he makes of the expressions *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, in *Ethics*, I, Proposition xxix, Scholium; but it is also explicitly stated in numerous passages. Thus *Ethics*, Part I, xxxiv, xxxv, identify God's essence with activity, since His essence and power are

one, and power is no mere possibility of acting, but action itself. In the appendix to Part I, we find the expression *ex absoluta Dei natura, sive infinita potentia.* In the Scholium to *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition iii, Spinoza says: "We have shown that God acts by the same necessity as that by which He understands Himself, in other words, as it follows from the necessity of the divine nature (as all admit) that God understands Himself, so by the same necessity it follows that God performs infinite acts in infinite ways. We further showed that God's power is identical with God's essence in action; *therefore it is as impossible for us to conceive God as not acting as to conceive him as non-existent.*" Examples might easily be multiplied were they needed to show that Spinoza meant by God or substance no merely inert and passive mass. God is being, but being in its very essence is active. It has often been pointed out that the Eleatic philosophers of Greece anticipated Spinoza's identification of being with the real. But we must add to this as an element in Spinoza's conception of God the distinctly Aristotelian thought of ἐνέργεια as constitutive of reality. Being and only being is, but since it is, it acts. God's essence and His power are one, and this power is not mere potentiality (δύναμις), for the infinite things which come from His infinite nature He necessarily does.

It would have been impossible for students of Spinoza to have so often overlooked the importance of the reiterated expressions of this identification of God's essence with his action, had they endeavored to follow out consistently the application which the philosopher makes of his fundamental metaphysical conception to the problems of psychology and ethics. Thus, for example, the activity of thought he finds to be the essential element in true knowledge, and this activity pertains to the human mind as part and parcel of the 'infinite intellect' by which God or being is conceived under the attribute of thought. The 'endeavor to persist,' which is intrinsic to each finite thing, is the source and mainspring of man's moral life; while the highest outcome of that life is the "intellectual love of God," that is, the full recognition of, and joyful acquiescence in, the universal existence in which and by which the individual life is. Spinoza's language in

regard to the love of God would be mere meaningless jargon, if God meant for him nothing but an inert and inactive somewhat lying behind the living, moving manifold of experience. It was really against such a misconception of Spinoza's doctrine that Hegel uttered the protest that Spinoza made God to be substance, but failed to recognize him as subject or person. He says in the *Logik* that, as accepted by Spinoza without previous dialectical mediation, "substance is like a dark formless abyss, which swallows up and annihilates all definite content, and produces from itself nothing that has a positive subsistence."[1] But Hegel's own oft-repeated teaching that the unity of the real must from its very nature differentiate itself into variety, and that it is the apprehending the unity through and by means of its differentiations which is the work of thought, is only the counterpart, though of course viewed from a different philosophical standpoint, of Spinoza's assertions that from the necessity of the divine nature an infinite number of things must follow in infinite ways, and that the highest knowledge is the knowledge of God.

Much of such misunderstanding is doubtless due to Spinoza's having weighed down his system by his claim to follow a purely mathematical method of exposition. His promise "to treat of human actions and desires in the same manner as though he were concerned with lines, planes, and solids," has been misinterpreted as if we were thereby led to suppose that he held psychical facts to be identical in character with lines, planes, and solids. The real animus of his claim is that all facts, whether viewed as psychical or physical, "follow from the necessity and efficacy of nature," and that "nature is everywhere the same." In other words, he recognizes the universality of law, and the need for exact methods of procedure in the investigation of psychological and ethical problems. Writing in an age when scientific psychology was unknown, and when the physical sciences were in their infancy, Spinoza takes mathematics, the one branch of science in which substantial progress had been made, as the type of a rational system of investigation built upon the

[1] *Encyclopädie*, Theil 1, § 115.

irrefragable base of ascertained knowledge. Hence the, for us, unfortunate form within which, in his chief work, his philosophy is cribbed, cabined, and confined; hence too, the misleading appearance of deducing the whole actual furniture of heaven and earth from the fundamental unity of God. Spinoza, like every other thinker, must start from the data of experience, for it is the things which appear, whether they be psychical or physical appearances, which offer to a philosopher the problem to be solved; but regarding these as manifestations of a reality without which they could not appear at all, he takes this conception of reality for the foundation stone of his philosophizing, and then claims to explain deductively the manifold of appearance from the unity of existence. To do this mathematically is in one sense impossible. Why substance, for example, should have for us the aspects or attributes of thought and extension and these alone, is from the very nature of the case, insusceptible of explanation by a mere reference to the all-embracing fact of infinite existence itself. In another sense it is a superfluous or even tautological procedure, since it is obvious that the 'being' which we have come to cognize through and by means of its manifestations does, as a matter of fact, so manifest itself.

Spinoza indeed does not deny that his system is founded on experience. Thus in *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition xvii, Schol., he says "all my assumptions are based on postulates which rest almost without exception on experience." But it is an unfortunate misunderstanding to suppose that Spinoza really worked out his system with conceptions that were purely geometrical. God is not for him, as Erdmann suggests, merely what the plane surface is to the figures that may be drawn on it. To make such a metaphor adequate we should have to suppose a surface that should from itself necessarily and spontaneously generate its own figuration, while yet the limits and character of each figure should be immediately determined by its relation to the other figures. There is a temptation to the modern commentator to endeavor to translate his thought into terms of physics instead of those of geometry; for the conception of motion as intrinsic to matter is suggestive of Spinoza's recognition of substance as from the

necessity of its own nature active. But we must beware of mistaking an analogy for an identity of meaning. Spinoza's position is as far as possible from that of the modern materialist who considers consciousness to be a "function" or "by-product" of matter. It is absolutely certain that for Spinoza reality was no whit more physical than psychical. God is *res cogitans* as well as *res extensa*, and existence is as adequately and truly cognized under the aspect of thought or consciousness as under that of extended matter. It is then a serious error to regard Spinoza's 'thought' as the same as 'energy,' as is done for example by Monsieur Emile Ferrière,[1] for the activity which is of the very essence of being pertains to God as much when viewed as 'thought' as when viewed as 'extension,' while energy in the sense which physical science gives it can be referred to the *res extensa* only.

One point remains to be briefly considered. Is God, in the Spinozistic sense of the word, conscious? Those who see in Spinoza chiefly the religious mystic and the typical pantheist, tend to answer this question in the affirmative; those who regard him rather as the forerunner of the modern scientific investigator, who eliminates the supernatural from the explanation of natural fact, give it an emphatic denial; each interpretation can claim support from individual passages in the *Ethics*. We can easily see, however, that there is an ambiguity in the question which may be misleading. On the one hand, it is certain, as has already been indicated, that Spinoza is emphatic and definite in his statements that God is *res cogitans*, that he is essentially active, and that in him there is necessarily the idea not only of his essence but also of all things which follow from his essence (*Ethics*, II, Prop. iii). On the other hand, we cannot forget that anthropomorphism is repeatedly rejected with something like contempt from his philosophy. And though Spinoza frequently refers both to the divine power and to the "infinite intellect" of God, yet he also expressly warns us that we cannot ascribe intellect and will to God save in a sense wholly unlike that in which we apply them to human beings. In regard to this latter use, however,

[1] *La Doctrine de Spinoza*, p. 131.

we may bear in mind that his nominalism leads him to depreciate the value of these terms even in relation to human psychology, and to do away with any real distinction between them. Intellect and will he finds to be merely general terms indifferently summing up the same individual psychical facts which alone have existence. "The intellect and will stand in the same relation to this or that idea, or this or that volition, as 'stoniness' to this or that stone, or as 'man' to Peter and Paul."[1] The denial of their applicability to the totality of being does not seem then to carry with it any refutation of a Divine consciousness. Undoubtedly Spinoza rejects wholly the conception of God as a person, but equally certain is it that consciousness or 'thought' is an essential and eternal aspect of being. The true statement as to the consciousness of Spinoza's God, is that God as "being absolutely infinite" is consciousness *per se*, eternal, all-embracing, and self-sufficient; and that such consciousness is cognizable by our reason, which pertains to it, though it cannot be pictured by our imagination, which misleads us when it represents it as analogous to our own, since the latter being only a 'mode' is finite, transitory, and dependent. Our relation to being viewed under the attribute of thought is, therefore, not similar to that which one person bears to another. Our 'love' to it is the happiness given in the recognition that it is that from which, and in which, we are. In the life of the universe we live, in its activity we share, and in the knowledge of it is all knowledge—the highest good of the mind—comprised. *Summum, quod mens intelligere potest, Deus est, hoc est. Ens absolute infinitum, et sine quo nihil esse neque concipi potest; adeoque summum mentis utile, sive bonum, est Dei cognitio.*[2]

It is not possible in the present paper to trace out the corollaries from Spinoza's declaration that God is *ens absolute infinitum*, that is, existence itself, which just because it is infinite must manifest itself infinitely, and which, presented to the senses and imagination in the fulness and richness of innumerable modifications, is capable of being apprehended in its timeless unity by

[1] *Ethics*, II, Proposition xlviii, Schol.
[2] *Ibid.*, Part IV, Proposition xxviii.

reason alone. It will be found, however, that by a rigid adherence to this interpretation of the word 'God,' much in Spinoza's epistemological and ethical doctrine, which from his mystical and sometimes scholastic phraseology has proved a stone of stumbling to his modern disciples, will be found to be self-consistent, rational in spirit, and in perfect harmony with the scientific temper of his clear and far-seeing mind.

E. RITCHIE.