



Remarks on Spinoza's Ethics

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IV.—REMARKS ON SPINOZA'S *ETHICS*.

BY R. G. BOSANQUET.

[Richard Guy Bosanquet, son of Geoffrey Courthope Bosanquet and Mildred Eleanor Bosanquet (*née* Simeon), was born in London on 24 June, 1918, and was killed in action in the fighting south of Rome on 6 June, 1944, while serving as a Major in the Royal West Kent Regiment. Educated at Eton (where he was a Scholar on the Foundation) and at King's College, Cambridge (where he was first an Exhibitioner and afterwards a Foundation Scholar), he was placed in the First Class in Part II of the Moral Sciences Tripos in 1939, and would have continued his philosophical studies but for the outbreak of war, when he joined up immediately. The following pages formed part of the draft of an essay, written at various times during his service throughout the African and Italian campaigns, which, when completed, would probably have been submitted to King's College as a fellowship dissertation. The object of the essay was to try to elucidate the status of metaphysics and its relation to analytical philosophy as practised at Cambridge. For this task Bosanquet's rare combination of a passionate interest in metaphysics with an acutely critical intelligence made him eminently fitted. His death removes a most promising philosopher as well as a very attractive and lovable personality.—R. B. BRAITHWAITE.]

IN Part 5, Prop. 35 of the *Ethics* Spinoza asserts that *Deus se ipsum Amore intellectuali infinito amat*.

It is clear that we cannot hope to understand this statement if we merely study it by itself. In the proof which Spinoza gives of the proposition in question he refers to certain other propositions. In the proof of these other propositions, he refers to yet other propositions; and so on. If these references are traced back, it will be found that the original proposition involves almost the whole of Parts 1 and 2 of the *Ethics* and a certain proportion of Parts 3, 4 and 5. In order to understand Part 5, Prop. 35, we have got to study the rest of the *Ethics*.

One thing must be made clear at the start, and that is that Spinoza was using words in senses quite different from their normal sense. To illustrate this, I suggest that Part 5, Prop. 35 be translated into English as 'The World worships itself with an infinite mystical worship'. Consider the word 'intellectualis'. This does not mean intellectual. Spinoza explains in Part 5, Prop. 32, Coroll, what he means by *Amor Dei intellectualis*. He says: 'Amor Dei . . . quatenus Deum aeternum esse intelligimus . . . hoc est, quod Amorem Dei intellectualem voco'; and it will not be the case that Deum aeternum esse intelligimus, unless we use faculties other than our intellectual faculties. Again, 'aeternus' does not mean 'eternal', either

in the sense of 'everlasting' or 'timeless'. Spinoza says in Part 1 Def. 8 'Per aeternitatem intelligo ipsam existentiam quatenus ex sola rei aeternae definitione necessario sequi concipitur'. 'Necessarily existent' is perhaps a good phrase to have in mind when we come across the word 'aeternus'. He explains immediately after his definition that if a thing is 'aeternus' it is necessarily timeless ('Talis enim existentia . . . per durationem et tempus explicari non potest'); but it is important to remember that it is chiefly the necessity of a thing's existence which he has in mind when calling it 'aeternus'. Of course, 'intellectualis' and 'aeternus' normally correspond fairly accurately with the English words 'intellectual' and 'eternal'. But Spinoza needs words to express meanings which normally are not expressed by words; he therefore uses ordinary words and changes their meanings. That is why one has to be so cautious in offering translations or explanations of Spinoza's words; for there are no words in our normal language which exactly correspond to Spinoza's words. This is partly because he has seen certain similarities which we do not normally see; and in pointing out these similarities he finds it helpful to apply a single word to all things which are similar in one of these new ways and then to explain what the word means. That is why we cannot wholly understand the meanings of Spinoza's words from his definitions. For his definitions are translations into other words, and these translations will never be wholly accurate. We can only see what Spinoza meant by seeing how he uses the words in question.

It is as if Spinoza started by telling us that *Deus est aeternus* (as he does in Pt. 1, Prop. 19) and spent the rest of the *Ethics* in explaining what he meant by that. As a matter of fact, that is an excellent way of regarding the *Ethics*; for one might say that the rest of the *Ethics* shows what is implied by that proposition, and one of the best ways of finding out what someone means by a certain statement is to find out what he considers it to imply.

One might look on the *Ethics* as an attempt to rationalize and justify what Spinoza believes to be true. Consider, for instance, the following propositions. '*Beatitudo non est virtutis praemium, sed ipsa virtus*' (Pt. 5, Prop. 42). '*Mens humana non potest cum Corpore absolute destrui, sed eius aliquid remanet*'. (Pt. 5, Prop. 23). '*Deus expers est passionum, nec ullo Laetitiae aut Tristitiae affectu afficitur*' (Pt. 5, Prop. 17). These are statements which have been made by many people who are not Spinozists. They were not formulated for the first time by

Spinoza, and it seems probable that Spinoza believed these propositions to be true before he worked out his proofs of them. This makes it sound like the case of a scientist who may first come to believe a certain proposition to be true and later may prove it to be so. In fact the two cases are quite different ; and in order to see that they are different, we shall have to see what purpose these proofs fulfil.

First of all, the proofs are formally invalid. For instance, in Pt. 1, Prop. 7, Dem. Spinoza writes 'Substantia non potest produci ab alio (*per Coroll. Prop. praeced.*); erit itaque causa sui, id est (*per Defin. 1*) ipsius essentia involvit necessario existentiam'. A glance at Def. 1 will suffice to show that 'Substantia non potest produci ab alio' does not entail 'erit itaque causa sui'. For in order to show that something is *causa sui* as defined in Def. 1, it is necessary to show much more than that non potest produci ab alio.

This formal invalidity would be very serious in a mathematical calculus, but is less important in a metaphysical system, because metaphysical statements are not true and false in the same sense as mathematical statements. It will be sufficient to point out that the invalidity could perhaps be eliminated by the introduction of new axioms. Let us now suppose that there are no formally invalid arguments in the Ethics and thus see what purpose the arguments would fulfil if they were valid.

Consider a primitive tribe which had very little knowledge of geometry. They speak more or less the same language as ourselves, but they never use geometrical terms exactly. For instance, they call two lines parallel if they run in more or less the same direction ; and they would still call them parallel even if they met after a few hundred yards. A man then introduces Euclid's calculus into the tribe. What is the effect ? A few of them might feel doubtful about the axioms and definitions, but after a bit they accept them. For although words like 'Line', 'Parallel', etc. were not used in their language in the same way as Euclid defined them, yet their rough usage corresponded more or less with Euclid's more precise usage. When they accept Euclid's definitions and Euclid's calculus, their use of mathematical words changes ; the meaning of geometrical terms changes and becomes more precise. And each of Euclid's proofs may be said to add something to the definition of a term. For instance, Euclid proves that the diagonals of a parallelogram bisect one another ; and this tribe might use this to decide whether a certain figure was a parallelogram. That is to say, whereas previously they would have unhesitatingly called two

sets of lines parallel, they now measure the diagonals of the quadrilateral formed by their intersection and find them not to bisect each other; they therefore say that the lines are not really parallel. They have used one of Euclid's propositions to decide whether a certain thing is an instance of a certain concept. And the proof of that proposition may be looked upon as a way of persuading people to accept a certain criterion of whether something falls under a certain concept; in other words the proof of a proposition may be looked upon as an amplification of the definitions.

Much the same can be said of metaphysical proofs. When Spinoza proves that a good act is one which is active and not passive, he is introducing a new criterion of goodness. He is trying to make us use 'Good' in such a way that an act is not good unless it is in this sense 'active'. He is trying to persuade us to accept a new definition of 'Good'. Thus his proof that p , consists of building up a connection between p and some definition d . This connection consists in showing that p can be included in d in the sense that p can be used as a criterion for d . In the case of mathematical calculi, there is a fairly clear-cut distinction between the propositions which can and the propositions which cannot be connected in this way with a certain definition. But in a metaphysical calculus there is considerable latitude allowed to the author of the calculus; that is to say, it is to a considerable extent a matter of choice whether a proposition can or cannot be 'proved'.

We can now see more clearly the machinery of proof which uses sentences with abnormal meanings. Spinoza starts with a word which is normally used in a certain unprecise sense w ; and he defines it in a certain sense w' . He then 'proves', in the way indicated above, a certain proposition p' ; and this leads one to suppose that the normal sense p of that proposition is true. But in fact the proof does not show in the direct way that p is true; what it does is to attempt to persuade us to use words in the Spinozistic sense rather than in the normal sense. And in the Spinozistic language w' does entail p' . All this, of course, depends upon w and p being nearly the same as w' and p' ; and Spinoza's proof can be considered as a proof that w almost entails p .

Let us look at the proofs of a few of Spinoza's earliest propositions, so that we may see more clearly the mechanism of proof and definition. "Prop. 1: *Substantia prior est natura suis affectionibus*. Dem: *Patet ex Definitione 3. et 5.*" Now 'prior natura' is not a perfectly clear phrase; it might be used

to mean several different things. It does not occur in either Def. 3 or Def. 5. We cannot tell whether the proof is valid or not until we know what meaning Spinoza attaches to 'prior natura'. But it will be profitable when reading Spinoza to assume that this proof is correct. Thus we shall have learnt something about the meaning which Spinoza attaches to 'prior natura'; for he attaches to it a meaning such that Prop. 1 follows from Deff. 3 et 5. If we read Spinoza in this way, Prop. 1 ceases to be something about whose truth or falsity we argue. It is true because it is a part of Spinoza's calculus; it is true because Spinoza uses words in such a way that he makes it true. Prop. 1 can, in fact, be considered not as an argument or a proof but as a partial definition of the phrase 'prior natura'.

"Prop. 2: *Duae substantiae, diversa attributa habentes, nihil inter se commune habent. Dem: Patet etiam ex Def. 3. Unaquaeque enim in se debet esse, et per se debet concipi, sive conceptus unius conceptum alterius non involvit.*" Here again the same thing occurs. The proposition is true or false according to the interpretation that one places on Deff. 3 and 4 and on 'Nihil inter se commune habent'. But it will be profitable to make it true by interpreting those definitions and that phrase in such a way that it is true. Thus this proposition may be considered partly as a partial definition of the phrase 'Nihil inter se commune habent' and partly as a partial explanation of the meanings of Deff. 3 and 4. This explanation may lead us to the conclusion that Spinoza is using the words 'Substantia' and 'Attributum' in an abnormal sense; but never mind that for the moment.

Prop. 3 follows quite strictly from Ax. 4 and 5, provided that 'Conceptus unius alterius conceptum non involvit' entails 'Cognitio unius alterius cognitionem non involvit' and we may therefore say that Spinoza is using words in such a way that that entailment does hold. In the proof of this proposition, however, we are dealing with axioms; and one might well think that these axioms are most unconvincing, especially in view of the meanings which we are now learning to attribute to such phrases as 'Nihil inter se commune habent'. But wait; perhaps Spinoza is using such words as 'Cognitio' and 'Causa' in a sense quite abnormal.

To go further would be tedious. We have gone far enough to be able to see what was meant by saying that a metaphysician is allowed a certain amount of latitude in deciding what propositions may or may not be proved in his system, and that the

propositions may be considered as explanations of the definitions and axioms. Spinoza does not start with definitions and axioms whose meanings are so strictly fixed that certain propositions and only those propositions can be deduced from them. For the meanings of the definitions and axioms can only be fixed by fixing which propositions they entail.

I do not want you to think that Spinoza's proofs are therefore bogus. The same sort of things can be said of Euclid's proofs as I have said of Spinoza's. The difference is chiefly that Euclid was dealing with concepts which contained few borderline cases and therefore the latitude which he was allowed was in practice very small; whereas Spinoza is dealing with concepts which contain many borderline cases. To put it another way, Euclid dealt with similarities which are obvious to everyone; Spinoza deals with similarities which can be seen only by a few. This does mean that the element of reasoned argument is smaller and the element of extra-logical persuasion is greater in Spinoza than in Euclid. But that does not mean that the element of reasoned argument in Spinoza is absent or bogus, nor that it should be discarded altogether. If you believe that it should, try expressing Spinoza's vision in any other way!

Now, having seen something of the mechanism of argument and of the different ways in which an argument may be understood, we are in a position to attempt to understand what Spinoza meant by writing Pt. 1 of the *Ethics*. In other words, what was Spinoza trying to express? What had he got at the back of his mind while he was writing Pt. 1? It will be easier to attempt the second question first. Of course, the things which he had in mind were enormously complex; and out of them it will be convenient to select two groups of things. First there were his mystical experiences. There is no doubt that Spinoza did have mystical experiences and that they affected his writings. Indeed, I should say positively that from the *Ethics* we can come to see something of the nature of those experiences. In those experiences he felt above all things the unity of the universe, as other mystics have also felt it. Normally we do not feel this at all strongly. We feel things as separate from each other. If one considers a fountain pen, one can either think of it as two things—the body and the cap—or as one thing. In the former case one sees the similarity between the fountain pen and two pennies on a table (the paradigm of 'two') and in the latter case one sees the similarity between the fountain pen and one penny alone on a table. In the latter case one feels the unity of the cap and the body and in the former case one feels

their separateness. It is possible, of course, to consider the pen as one or as two without having any such feelings at all. But it is possible to have such feelings : it is possible for it to strike you definitely as one or as two. These feelings are not very important when dealing with fountain pens. But even quite ordinary men who are not mystics do sometimes have feelings which can only be described by saying that the separateness between different objects, even between one's own body and the external world, disappears ; that one feels very strongly the unity of things. Even those who have not had such experiences can understand that there might be such an experience because of its similarity to the fountain pen experience which everybody has. I believe that one element in Spinoza's mystical experiences was his feeling of the unity of things. But the difference between that experience in him and in most other people was (1) that it was very much more intense ; (2) that it did not cease but continued in a lesser degree in his ordinary life ; (3) that he valued the experience very highly ; (4) that it affected his way of looking at almost everything else ; (5) that it affected his actions. As a result of all this, he tried to get us to sympathise with his experience ; and in order to do this he builds a metaphysical calculus for us. He tries to get us to sympathise with his vision of the unity of the world by building a metaphysical calculus in which the whole world is one substance and things are only *modi* of the one *substantia*, *i.e.* ways in which the substance is moulded. He is thinking of a piece of clay which can be moulded into various objects ; the objects *are* the clay in various forms. Spinoza wants to show the similarity between the relation of the objects to the clay and the relation of ordinary things to the one substance. By making us see this similarity he hopes to make us see more clearly the unity of things and to make us see less clearly their separateness. And he tries to make us see this similarity by saying that the world is one indivisible substance. His statements that this substance is infinite, unique, and all-containing clearly spring from the same experience. They are additional ways of explaining the experience and trying to make us sympathise with it.

Spinoza's statements about cause and necessity also spring from his mystical experiences. As he felt strongly the unity of things, so he began to look upon the relation of cause and effect in an abnormal way. For first he felt very strongly the predetermination of every thing. He saw the similarity of the world to a machine which must go on working in a certain and predetermined way. He felt himself, too, to be part of this

process, so that he and all other things seemed to be necessarily as they are. He felt himself and everything to be in the grip of this necessity. He felt everything not only to be part of the whole but to be necessarily part of the whole. And secondly, consequent upon his feeling of the unity of things, he felt the relation of cause and effect to be very close. Since things are felt to be all modes of the same substance, their causal relations to each other are felt to be much closer than when they are not felt to be of the same substance. Just what the closeness was felt to be, just what Spinoza felt the causal relation to be similar to, is difficult for those of us who are not mystics to understand. For here his experiences begin to pass altogether beyond the experiences and consequently beyond the comprehension of the ordinary man. We can only say that he expressed this experience by saying that he felt as if the cause explained and contained the effect.

Is all this nonsense? No; emphatically, no. It is merely that we are dealing with indescribable similarities. And as these similarities become less and less like those which we normally see, it becomes more and more difficult to understand them. But if the preceding few paragraphs are read 'sympathetically' by one who has realised that there may be indescribable similarities between different things, it will be seen that Spinoza is talking sense. That he is talking important sense will have to be shown later.