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Spinoza and the Coherence Theory of Truth

RALPH C. S. WALKER

I

Why should one study Spinoza? This question lacks an obvious answer. By tradition Spinoza's name appears in the lists of the great philosophers, and he is catalogued with Descartes and Leibniz as one of the three principal Rationalists. But while Descartes and Leibniz have much to say that is interesting and still of philosophical importance, it is not so evident that Spinoza does. He is often credited with being more consistent than they are; this may or may not be just, but a consistency which is purchased by grounding one's system in a set of unappealing metaphysical axioms is not of very great value. Descartes and Leibniz are of interest because their problems are genuine problems, and their efforts to deal with them are worthwhile attempts even when they are unsuccessful. Spinoza may present some conclusions that one may find attractive, and they may have been sufficiently attractive to other past thinkers to earn him a place in the history of ideas. But since he apparently reaches these conclusions from premisses that few people feel much inclination to accept it is natural to doubt whether there is much in his work that is of serious interest to the philosopher; a doubt that may be indirectly strengthened when one observes the great dearth of recent philosophical literature on Spinoza, in contrast with the superabundance of writing on the other philosophers traditionally accounted great.

Spinoza was not always so neglected; and it is my contention that he should not be so neglected now. He was not so neglected by the absolute idealists, who saw him as providing an early, but well worked out, version of the coherence theory of truth. It has now become fairly common to repudiate this interpretation, and to regard Spinoza as a correspondence theorist of a rather conventional kind. I shall try to show that that is a mistake, and that he is not only a coherence theorist, but finds himself constrained to be one by epistemological pressures which retain their force today and have a very similar effect on a number of present-day philosophers. I want also to suggest that this account of truth is far more important to his system as a whole than even the idealists claimed. For if one sees him as *starting* from these epistemological concerns and formulating his coherence theory in response to them, one can then see his principal metaphysical doctrines as following naturally from it. This makes far more sense of his system than the more usual view, which derives his epistemology

from his metaphysics and grounds the whole upon a set of disparate and unconvincing assumptions.

That he is a coherence theorist at all requires to be established. That his coherence theory is motivated epistemologically, rather than adopted as a consequence of metaphysical axioms he took to be obvious, must also be shown. And if I am right in suggesting that it is from epistemological considerations that his system starts, rather than grounding itself in the metaphysical axioms of the *Ethics*, it must certainly be explained why he does not make that clear; for I cannot deny that at least in the *Ethics* he gives quite the contrary impression. But before dealing with these issues there is an anterior question which must be got out of the way, if the whole discussion is not to be bedevilled by unnecessary confusion. That is the question what a coherence theory of truth is.

II

A coherence theory of truth is a theory about the nature of truth; a theory about what truth consists in. It is not simply a theory about how we find out what is true; that we often make use of coherence as a test of truth, and reject as false a belief that fails to cohere with the rest of the things that we believe, is not very controversial. The coherence theory is not the theory that coherence is a likely guide to truth, but rather the view that coherence is all there is to truth, all that truth amounts to.

As such it is not, of course, to be confused with the coherence theory of knowledge. The coherence theory of knowledge is a theory about justification, which the coherence theory of truth is not. The coherence theory of knowledge holds that knowledge claims require justification, but also that no belief can be justified except by reference to other beliefs. Since these other beliefs require justification likewise, and since no infinite regress from belief to belief is possible for finite creatures like ourselves, claims to knowledge must ultimately be justified by their coherence with the whole system of our beliefs. (They cannot, for example, be grounded in Russellian knowledge by acquaintance, or founded on epistemologically basic beliefs that require no further justification; such possibilities are ruled out.)

One can get from the coherence theory of knowledge to the coherence theory of truth if one takes a verificationistic step, and argues that truth cannot be unknowable: it would not be possible for our beliefs to form a fully justified, coherent set and yet be false of the world. But one can hold the coherence theory of knowledge without the coherence theory of truth if one is prepared to deny that, and admit the sceptical possibility that however good our justifications for our knowledge claims might be, those claims might yet be false. However, many of those who find the coherence theory of knowledge attractive do also find the verificationistic step attractive, and so come to adopt the coherence theory of truth. Bradley and Neurath both

moved in this way; in more recent times Quine has done so, and analogous moves have been made by Putnam and Davidson.¹ This is not the place to examine their arguments in detail, but it is worth observing the appeal that the coherence theory of truth continues to have on epistemological grounds.

Indeed, the appeal is not confined to those who are drawn to the coherence theory of knowledge. Quite independently of that, one may be worried by the problems raised by scepticism; and to such problems the coherence theory of truth has a dramatic solution to offer. The sceptic draws attention to the gap that seems to exist between the world, or the facts, on the one hand, and the judgements that we make about them on the other. Our judgements may be justified by all the standards of justification or of rationality that we ordinarily consider satisfactory, but the sceptic asks what right we have to be satisfied with these. Our standards of rationality and justification are *our* standards, after all, and what assures us that our standards are such as to lead us to the truth about the world, and not just reflections of our psychological habits? When the question is posed in so radical a form, many contemporary philosophers are inclined to follow Hume in thinking it unanswerable. But the coherence theorist does have an answer to offer, and for this reason deserves to be taken seriously even though his answer may be at first sight a strange one. For he holds that the truth is not independent of these standards at all: it is what these standards make it, and nothing else. Thus the sceptical gap between our judgements and the world actually does not exist—or at any rate, does not exist when the judgements in question are as fully rational as we can make them. Again, much needs to be said by way of elaboration and assessment of this suggestion, but this is not the place for it. As we shall see, though, this was the line of argument that made the coherence theory attractive to Spinoza.

What sort of relationship constitutes coherence is something that different coherence theorists have different views about. Most if not all of them would agree that coherence is a considerably stronger notion than consistency, and that the consistency of a set of beliefs is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of its coherence. And they would all hold that the coherence is a coherence amongst *beliefs*, not simply amongst propositions considered in abstraction from whether or not they are believed. Coherence cannot simply be a relationship amongst propositions, for (at least on any account of coherence which is at all plausible) virtually every consistent proposition belongs to some internally coherent set,² but it would be intolerable to have to admit virtually every consistent proposition as equally true.

¹ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', unpublished but cf. his 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 1974. See further my 'Empirical Realism and Transcendental Anti-Realism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplement 57 (1983), pp. 162–3.

² On this, and on the problems to which it gives rise for coherence theories, see my 'Empirical Realism and Transcendental Anti-Realism', cited above.

The coherence theory of truth is sometimes contrasted with the correspondence theory, but this contrast is at the least misleading. The coherence theory holds that truth consists in nothing more than a relationship of coherence between beliefs; it contrasts with any theory which denies that. It is not however clear that someone who says 'Truth is correspondence with fact' need be denying it at all. The coherence theorist can accept that there are facts, and that true beliefs correspond with them, provided he can give his own account of what the facts and the correspondence ultimately consist in: they ultimately consist in coherence. For the coherence theorist no more seeks to reject what we ordinarily believe than Berkeley sought to reject our ordinary beliefs about the objects around us; what he does is to offer an account, and no doubt a surprising account, of what such beliefs amount to. He does deny that the truth of a belief can ever consist in its corresponding to some reality which is metaphysically independent in the sense that its nature is not determined by the coherent system of beliefs, for if it did then the coherence of the belief system could at best be a guide to truth and not what truth consisted in. But he can perfectly well accept that true propositions 'correspond with the facts' or 'say how things are in the world' if these phrases are understood in the ordinary and commonplace way, not as making a claim about a metaphysically independent reality but as virtual synonyms for 'are true'.

He can even accept some philosophical accounts of truth (or of the word 'true') that can be called correspondence theories—Austin's, for example. Such accounts are compatible with his position just so long as there is nothing in them to prevent the facts or the reality to which they refer from being ultimately determined by the coherent system of beliefs. So he can agree with the much-quoted remark of Aristotle's that 'to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true', and he need not dispute the scholastic description of truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. Such issues as the adequacy of Strawson's account of 'is true', or the usefulness of Tarskian truth-definitions, he may well regard as open questions and discuss along with the rest of us.

It is therefore by no means possible to establish that Spinoza did not hold a coherence theory of truth simply by pointing out that he sometimes makes remarks one might expect from a correspondence theorist. Most clearly and conspicuously, the sixth axiom of the first part of the *Ethics* says that 'a true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea (*cum suo ideato*)'. But this would show Spinoza not to be a coherence theorist only if it could also be shown that he took the objects of ideas—their *ideata*—to constitute a reality metaphysically independent of beliefs, in the sense that its character is not determined by the coherent system of beliefs. And this cannot be shown, because it is false.

It is false because 'the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things', and because this is no mere external

parallelism between two distinct orders (such as might have been effected by the will of Descartes' benevolent God) but an essential identity.

Thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that. So, too, a mode of Extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, expressed in two ways. This truth seems to have been glimpsed by some of the Hebrews, who hold that God, God's intellect and the things understood by God are one and the same (E II: 7 Schol.).³

That 'the order and connection of ideas' is such as to constitute a rational and coherent system no reader of Spinoza can seriously doubt. It raises, of course, the question of the relation between the ideas in that rational system and the seemingly confused and incoherent ideas that most of us usually have, but that is a question Spinoza recognizes and to which, as we shall shortly see, he has an answer of some interest. What he is here saying is that the material world, the typical object of thought, is equally a rational order, because it is actually identical with the rational order of thought. The material world is to be equated with coherent thought about it; or in other words, for p to be the case in the material world is for the idea that p to belong in the coherent system. 'Idea that p ' is not a mistake: Spinoza is very firm in regarding all 'ideas' as propositional in form, and so as being in effect beliefs. 'An idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves affirmation or negation' (E II: 49 Schol.).

Of course, not all truths are truths about the material world. Spinoza seems to have found the existence of truths of other kinds puzzling, and there are unclarities in his handling of them. What he is consistently clear about, however, is that the relation between the true idea and its object must be of just the same kind in these cases too. This is made entirely explicit in the case of ideas of ideas: the idea of an object is firmly identified with the (rationally coherent) idea of the idea of that object, despite the obvious difficulties that this entails (E II: 21 Schol.). And truths about things that are merely possible are said to bear the same relation to potentialities that truths about actual things bear to actualities; mathematical truths are included in this class, being taken to be truths about potentialities contained within the attribute of extension (E II: 8 Coroll.).⁴ So one is entitled to conclude quite generally that for all values of p , the truth of p consists in the idea-that- p belonging to the coherent system.

Thus a true idea needs nothing outside itself to guarantee its truth or to

³ References to the *Ethics* appear in this form; I use the translation by S. Shirley, ed. by S. Feldman (*The Ethics and Selected Letters*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1982). On the present matter see also Letter IX, p. 231 in Shirley's translation or in C. Gebhardt, ed., *Spinoza: Opera* (Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1925), IV: 46. In later notes Gebhardt's edition of Spinoza's works will be referred to simply as 'G'.

⁴ Cf. Letter LX, G. IV: 270-1, and sect. 8 of A. Wolf's introduction to his *Correspondence of Spinoza* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1928).

constitute its correspondence with reality. ‘Truth is its own standard’; or again, ‘just as light makes manifest both itself and darkness, so truth is the standard both of itself and falsity’. These statements, from the scholium to Prop. 43 of Part II, make so clear a commitment to the coherence theory that it seems hardly necessary to protract the case for ascribing it to Spinoza.⁵ Writers like Curley⁶—with whose interpretation I am otherwise, as will be clear, in considerable sympathy—consider that he cannot be a coherence theorist because of his axiom that a true idea must agree with its *ideatum*, and they must therefore interpret statements like these as saying something very different from their clear and obvious sense. I hope I have made it clear that there is no difficulty in holding to a coherence theory while subscribing to that axiom, or to any of the other familiar things we might be inclined to say about true propositions corresponding with facts. What the coherence theory of truth cannot allow is that truth consists in a relationship between a proposition and a reality whose character is not determined by the coherent system of beliefs. But Spinoza does not hold that, and none of his remarks commit him to it; quite the contrary.

However I do not want the case for calling Spinoza a coherence theorist to rest here. For all that has been said so far, the coherence theory might have been comparatively unimportant to him, of interest only as one consequence among others drawn from his metaphysical premisses. He might not have considered it particularly interesting in its own right, or thought its ramifications through. If that had been so, the fact that Spinoza was a coherence theorist might still be worth noting, but it would be a point of rather minor significance in the history of ideas. It cannot be denied that his presentation of it in the *Ethics* lends support to such an interpretation. I shall turn in section V to the question why the *Ethics* is written in that way, but setting that aside for the moment I should like to show first—in section III—how the motives for his coherence theory can be found in his reaction to the epistemological problems set by Descartes; and then—in section IV—how the main principles of his metaphysics can be seen as following from his coherence theory rather than the other way round. Viewed in this fashion his system becomes a comprehensible answer to a set of genuine philosophical questions, instead of the scholastic elaboration of a

⁵ Against this ascription T. C. Monk (*Spinoza’s Theory of Truth*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1972) contends that on a coherence theory we can determine whether an idea is true only by examining its relations with other ideas, whereas Spinoza denies this, holding that a true idea can be recognized as true without considering other ideas at all (p. 47). But so far as Spinoza’s philosophy goes this contrast must be a false one. Since the knowledge of an effect depends upon and involves the knowledge of its cause (E I: Axiom 4), no idea can be properly understood without understanding the eternal and infinite essence of God (E II: 46), which is tantamount to understanding the coherent rational system which constitutes the truth. Monk himself thinks that Spinoza takes us to know true ideas by a sort of intuitive grasp, ‘an intuitive understanding of the essence of the idea as identical with its ideatum’ (p. 69); but to leave it at that would be to show an epistemological naivety quite different from what we actually find, especially in the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding*.

⁶ E. M. Curley, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics* (Harvard University Press, 1969), ch. 4.

set of archaic dogmata. It is this that should remove any remaining doubts as to whether it is right to ascribe to him a coherence theory of truth.

III

That the work of Descartes was of great importance to Spinoza can hardly be denied, but it is sometimes thought that all he took from him on philosophical method was the geometrical style of laying out proofs, and that Spinoza was quite insensitive to the worries of Cartesian doubt. This is clearly untrue. His earliest work, *The Principles of Descartes' Philosophy*, begins with a prolegomenon devoted to the method of doubt and to the Cartesian Circle; and his later, unfinished *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding* is wholly concerned with the problems of method and of how to secure certainty in the face of sceptical doubt.

It is true that in many respects *The Principles of Descartes' Philosophy* is a presentation of Descartes' views rather than Spinoza's own.⁷ But on the Cartesian Circle he explicitly criticizes Descartes, and attempts to improve on him. Like Arnauld, Gassendi, and many others since, he thinks that Descartes is caught by the accusation of circular reasoning, and can prove that every clear and distinct idea is true only by relying on the truth of his clear and distinct ideas. Spinoza's own argument⁸ seeks not so much to prove that our clear and distinct ideas are true as to show that once one has a clear and distinct idea of God one cannot reasonably doubt them. The clear and distinct idea of a triangle, he says, 'compels us to conclude that its three angles equal two right angles';⁹ similarly once we have the clear and distinct idea of God that idea 'compels us to affirm that God is in the highest degree truthful'.¹⁰ But there is a difference between the two cases. In the case of the triangles it is possible to stand back from the proof and raise a doubt whether we may not be deceived, even in so evident a matter, by a malevolent deity. With the idea of God, however, no such standing back is possible. For to possess the clear and distinct idea of God is already to see that the hypothesis of the malevolent deity is ruled out.

This may not be adequate to resolve the difficulty, but it is a serious attempt to tackle it—not a set of offhand remarks by someone for whom the problems of sceptical doubt had no significance. There are, however, two reasons why it will not do. In the first place the sceptic will say that the same kind of standing back *is* possible with the idea of God: for although when I attend to the content of the idea I must find myself convinced of God's benevolence, I can also turn my attention away from that content and raise

⁷ Cf. Letter XIII, G. IV: 63, and also Meyer's preface to the *Principles*, G. I: 131–2.

⁸ Arguably also Descartes'; but that is not my concern here.

⁹ G. I: 147.

¹⁰ G. I: 148.

a doubt as to whether I may not be deceived even in those things that seem to me immediately self-evident, as this did.¹¹ In the second place, and more fundamentally, Spinoza's argument would at best show that our clear and distinct ideas could not rationally be doubted. But it is one thing to show this, and another and very different thing to show that they are actually true. Any *malin génie* who was doing his job properly would presumably make sure that we were not only mistaken, but incapable of recognizing the fact.

Spinoza may have a reply to the first of these points, for he regards it as important that, once one has the clear and distinct idea of God, it should simply be self-evident that he is no deceiver. In contrast, it is not immediately self-evident, but only known by demonstration, that the internal angles of a triangle equal two right angles. He apparently thinks that it is only in the case of what is clearly and distinctly known *as a result of demonstration* that a guarantee of truth is needed, and that Descartes went wrong in trying to provide this guarantee by a proof of God which was itself demonstrative and not immediately self-evident.¹² But if this is how he thinks of the matter one can only reply that sceptical doubt can arise over what seems self-evident as much as over what seems to have been demonstrated. For why should the fact that something seems to us obvious, even very immediately obvious, be a sign of its truth? In a world arranged by a *malin génie*, it would not be.

Descartes was aware of this.¹³ And if Spinoza was not aware of it here, he was aware of it when he wrote the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding*. In the *Treatise* he is also well aware of the difference between showing that something cannot be doubted and showing that it is true. And it is in the *Treatise* that he works towards the coherence theory of truth as providing his own answer to these difficulties.

He still holds that the key to philosophical method lies in possessing the clear and distinct idea of God. But it is no longer offered as sufficient by itself for avoiding the circle and providing a guarantee of truth. It is recognized that it is not, and three separate—though complementary—moves are made in response to that recognition. All of them are remarkably modern in character, and are of types that have come in for much recent discussion.

The first is to suggest that no guarantee of truth is necessary in order to possess knowledge (though Spinoza obscures his argument here by using the word 'certainty'—*certitudo*—where he should have stuck consistently to

¹¹ Cf. Descartes, *Meditation III*, in C. Adam and P. Tannery, eds., *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris, Cerf, 1897-1913), VII: 35-6, or in E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, trs., *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed. 1931-4), I: 158-9. (These two will from now on be abbreviated A.T. and H.R. respectively.) See also A. Kenny, *Descartes* (New York, Random House, 1968), pp. 182 ff.

¹² This appears from his exposition of Descartes' argument, and from his statement of the problem that he and Descartes are trying to answer—it is described as resting on the assumption that 'the existence of God is not known to us through itself' (G. I: 146). Cf. W. Doney, 'Spinoza on Philosophical Skepticism', in M. Mandelbaum and E. Freeman, eds., *Spinoza: Essays in Interpretation* (La Salle, Open Court, 1975), p. 141.

¹³ See note 11.

'knowledge'). His point is that one possesses knowledge if one's 'idea' is true, and captures the relevant essence. It is not necessary that one be able to *show that* one's idea has this status; it is enough that it should simply have it. It may be necessary to show that it has it if one is to know that one knows, but that is a different matter; to know, one does not have to know that one knows. The sceptic's argument may perhaps show that we do not know that we know; but it does not show that we do not know; and it is therefore less worrying than he makes it appear.¹⁴

Evidently this is disputable. Many (including myself) would still think that one must standardly be able to justify a belief before one can be said to know it. But theories of knowledge such as Goldman's or Nozick's, which dispense with any such condition of justification, allow their adherents to make very much the same point against the sceptic.¹⁵

The second move takes the form of a transcendental argument—an argument of the kind much used by Kant or Strawson. Spinoza has started by assuming that we do have some grasp of the truth: we possess 'a true idea', which provides us with a tool for the discovery of more and more truth.¹⁶ But what if some sceptic calls this assumption into question? The reply is that he could not mean it, or he could not even be self-conscious.

Such persons are not conscious of themselves. If they affirm or doubt anything, they know not that they affirm or doubt: they say that they know nothing, and they say that they are ignorant of the very fact of their knowing nothing . . . In fact, they ought to remain dumb, for fear of haply supposing something which should smack of truth . . . If they deny, grant, or gainsay, they know not that they deny, grant, or gainsay, so that they ought to be regarded as automata, utterly devoid of intelligence.¹⁷

Again this is not immediately convincing as it stands; Spinoza is apparently overlooking the fact that someone might possess some knowledge, e.g. about his own mental states, without having the kind of 'true idea' that he is really arguing for, one that is capable of giving its possessor the key to the whole rational system of knowledge. Again, though, he has provided a form of argument against the sceptic which is much used nowadays (though whether with greater success is another matter).

If the argument were successful it would not, of course, show that we do

¹⁴ *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding*—henceforth abbreviated TdIE—sects. 33–6, G. II: 14–15, or in R. H. M. Elwes's translation (*The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, London, G. Bell, 1883), II: 12–14. In quoting from the *Treatise* I use Elwes's translation except as indicated.

¹⁵ A. Goldman, 'A Causal Theory of Knowing', *Journal of Philosophy* 64 (1967); R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981), ch. 3. Not that they would be willing to concede to the sceptic that we do not typically know that we know: see Nozick pp. 245–7.

¹⁶ TdIE sects. 30–2, G. II: 13–14, Elwes II: 11–12.

¹⁷ TdIE sects. 47–8, G. II: 18, Elwes II: 17. Doney, op. cit., p. 143, must be wrong to equate the doubt here discussed with the verbal doubt of sect. 77, for in sect. 47 the possibility that the sceptic is speaking *contra conscientiam* is set aside (as is shown by the adoption of the plural verb forms after the first sentence). But he is right to hold that the sceptic here considered is not thought of as having a reason for his doubt.

possess 'a true idea'. What it would show would be that we could not doubt it. If we attempted seriously to doubt it we should lapse into an incoherence which could not even constitute a doubt.¹⁸ This would not show that the idea was actually true: independent reality might fail to correspond, however impossible it was for us to entertain that suggestion seriously. Some epistemologists feel that at this point the argument against scepticism can go no further, and they may be right; but Spinoza was not among them. For he has a third move to make.

The third move consists in giving an account of truth: the coherence theory. This is the most radical of the three moves, and it is not fully worked out in the *Treatise*. It is also the most effective, for if truth consists in coherence the problem is solved: there is no question of our ideas or our beliefs having to match an independent reality about which a malevolent god could deceive us. Truth is now an internal relationship within the rational system of beliefs. There may be problems about determining which of our beliefs belong to the rational system; indeed there undoubtedly are, and it is one of the things Spinoza is most concerned about. But they are problems of a quite different kind from the intractable problem of match with an independent reality. They are to be resolved by the rational examination of our ideas themselves; and this exercise of rational examination will be sufficient to give us the truth, without the need to rely on God to ensure a harmony between the rational order of thought and the order of facts in the world.

Spinoza is explicit about this being an account of the nature (*forma*) of truth.¹⁹

It is certain that a true idea is distinguished from a false one, not so much by its extrinsic object as by its intrinsic nature . . . Thus that which constitutes the nature of a true thought must be sought in the thought itself, and deduced from the nature (*natura*) of the understanding . . . Thus *falsity* consists only in this, that something is affirmed of a thing, which is not contained in the conception we have formed of that thing.²⁰

He supports it by an argument his opponents might not find convincing, to the effect that there are truths to which nothing in the world corresponds, so that there is nothing their truth can consist in except coherence. Thus, he says, an architect's plan can be 'a true idea' though the building in the plan is never built; or again the geometrical conception of a sphere as produced by a revolving semicircle, 'although we know that no sphere in nature has ever actually been so formed'.²¹ This is not the view of the *Ethics*, where, to

¹⁸ Cf. Strawson, *Individuals* (London, Methuen, 1959), p. 35.

¹⁹ I follow Joachim (in his *Spinoza's Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940), and common sense, in translating *forma* in this context as 'nature'. Elwes renders it as 'reality', through association with *essentia formalis*. This has the disadvantage of rendering the text unintelligible.

²⁰ TdIE sects. 69, 71, 72, G. II: 26-7, Elwes II: 26-7.

²¹ TdIE sect. 72, G. II: 27, Elwes II: 27.

maintain the identity between the order and connection of ideas and the order and connection of things, he holds rather obscurely that mathematical truths and truths about unactualized possibilities have as their counterparts potentialities in the attribute of extension (E II: 8). But it is not, perhaps, a thought to be dismissed out of hand, since puzzlement over the character of mathematical truth has often led people to think that in that area, at least, truth must consist in something like coherence.

These three moves having been made, Spinoza has given his answer to the problem of the Cartesian Circle. He can now repeat the argument about the clear and distinct idea of God, from *The Principles of Descartes' Philosophy*. But that argument now only purports to show the impossibility of rational doubt, once one has that idea. The gap between what we cannot rationally doubt and what is actually the case has already been bridged, by the coherence theory.

IV

The *Short Treatise* is not an epistemological work, and is therefore less enlightening over the motivation for Spinoza's coherence theory. But it does contain a gnomic remark which helps us to see how his coherence theory leads on to the rest of his metaphysics. This is the observation 'that God is the Truth, or that *the Truth is God himself*'.²²

We have seen that the truth is equated with the rational system of coherent ideas. But this system is not the content of any ordinary mind; indeed, if there are more than finitely many truths, it cannot be the content of any finite mind. Could it then be that it exists in the abstract, without being the content of any mind at all? Spinoza would say not, for ideas are actual, particular. That is not an implausible reply, for to hold the contrary would be to regard these ideas not as beliefs but only as propositions, potential beliefs, and we have already seen that if the coherence were a coherence merely amongst propositions the difficulty would arise that virtually any proposition belongs to some coherent set. Hence the rational system of ideas must be the content of some infinite mind: which can be called the mind of God.²³ This has the incidental advantage that it allows Spinoza to provide a proof that the truth is actually unique, for he can simply draw on more or less traditional arguments to show the uniqueness of God (E I: 5 and 14).

It is true that coherence theorists are not compelled to admit God in this way; though it was on largely similar grounds that Bradley and T. H. Green felt themselves obliged to postulate absolute Spirit: the relations which on their view constitute nature must be the work of some mind, but not of any

²² *Short Treatise* part II ch. 15, G. I: 79, = p. 103 in the translation by A. Wolf (London, A. & C. Black, 1910).

²³ TdIE sect. 73, G. II: 27-8, Elwes II: 27-8.

ordinary mind since far more relations obtain than any ordinary mind is ever aware of.²⁴ It would nowadays be more usual to hold not that all of the propositions in the coherent system are actually believed, but only that some are—including perhaps some particularly important principles which *would*, if properly applied, yield a coherent theory of the appropriate sort. (The principles themselves presumably determine the standards for their own proper application.) This approach has its difficulties, however, if only because it relies so heavily on counterfactual conditionals concerning the application of the principles; many would be unhappy about giving counterfactuals so fundamental a role. This is not the place to do more than observe that the position of Spinoza, Bradley, and Green is not an absurd one for a coherence theorist, and to point out the obvious parallel between their position and that of Berkeley. For whereas modern phenomenologists often follow Mill in making great use of counterfactuals in their analyses of material object statements, and are often thought to get into serious difficulties as a result, Berkeley avoids the need for this by relying on God instead.²⁵

However, if the ideas that are true are not our ideas but the ideas that constitute the mind of God, a question arises: can the sceptic not return with all his doubts again? The gap that worried him would seem to have reappeared, for if there was a problem as to whether our standards of justification were such as to give us the truth about an external reality, there is just as much a problem over whether they are such as to give us the truth about the mind of God. Indeed it is exactly the same problem, since the mind of God would seem to be a reality independent of us and of our thought about it. What is to guarantee that our rationality—what we call rationality—corresponds to God's? But Spinoza, of course, has an answer. The problem can be resolved if, but only if, our minds are not independent of God's mind but somehow parts of it. Our thoughts *are* God's thoughts (E II: 11 Coroll.). So that those of our thoughts that pass the coherence test—our adequate ideas, as Spinoza calls them—are bound to be true, because they are identical with God's coherent thoughts and these constitute the truth.

The suggestion that our minds are somehow parts of God's is not, at first sight, easy to make sense of. One problem it raises is how our minds are to be distinguished from one another, and to that Spinoza returns the most natural answer: as people are in practice usually distinguished by their bodies, so my mind can be distinguished from other minds as being God's idea of my body. In support of this he points out how intimately my mind

²⁴ T. H. Green, *Prolegomenon to Ethics* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2nd ed. 1884), book I, ch. 1; F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (London, Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), ch. 22.

²⁵ On the difficulties raised by the use of conditionals in the phenomenalist analysis see my *Kant* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 108–9, or Ayer, *The Central Questions of Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976), pp. 106–7.

and my body are related, and how privileged my access is to what goes on in my body (E II: 12, 13).

To say that my mind is God's idea of my body sounds very peculiar; indeed at first it sounds very obviously false. God's idea of my body is taken to be sufficiently complex to contain within it many subsidiary ideas, which I call my thoughts, and which are really God's ideas of my body's parts. But if God's ideas are simply the true beliefs then God's idea of my body will presumably be some set of true beliefs about my body and its parts; and to identify my mind with any such set would seem distinctly unpromising. For one thing it seems evident that there is more to my mind than a set of true beliefs, and for another such true beliefs as I do have are fortunately not so limited in their subject-matter.

Spinoza is hardly unaware of these obvious points. His attempts to deal with them lead to some of the most characteristic, and at the same time some of the most obscure, parts of his philosophy of mind. It may well be that they are ultimately quite unsatisfactory; but at least if one can see how they are motivated by the demands of his theory of truth one can recognize them, not as gratuitous confusions, but as serious attempts to follow through the consequences of a view that seemed for good reasons compelling.

To the objection that there is more to my mind than true beliefs he has a twofold reply. Both parts of it are bold, and involve claims that are counterintuitive but of some philosophical sophistication. One part consists in repudiating the suggestion that there is more to my mind than beliefs; the other, in holding that strictly speaking all these ideas are true, since 'there is nothing positive in ideas whereby they can be said to be false' (E II: 33).

The first of these leads him to his denial of the Cartesian (and natural) distinction between intellect and will, and to his refusal to distinguish between a concept and a belief on the grounds that 'an idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves affirmation or negation' (E II: 49 Schol.). It also leads to his extraordinarily intellectualistic account of the emotions: he defines a passion as a kind of assertion,

a confused idea whereby the mind affirms a greater or less force of existence of its body, or part of its body, than was previously the case, and by the occurrence of which the mind is determined to think of one thing rather than another.²⁶

But the most radical, and much the most important philosophically, of the conclusions to which it brings him is his denial of the substantiality of the self. The Cartesian view was that so far from being a set of beliefs, or even a set of beliefs together with volitions and passions and other ideas, the self was a subject which had these beliefs, volitions, etc. Spinoza regards this as quite misconceived. Properly I am only a collection of thoughts in the mind of God, linked together (in a manner not fully explained) by their all belonging within that complex idea, God's idea of my body (E II: 10, 11, 13). It

²⁶ General Definition of the Emotions, at the end of Part III of the *Ethics*.

may, indeed, be a fair accusation that Spinoza did not fully assimilate the consequences of this startling idea of a non-substantial mind; but not even Hume did that.

In defence of the thesis that all my ideas are strictly true he develops an account of error whereby it consists in nothing more than incompleteness. God has a complete idea of everything there is, and no incomplete or false ideas, for as we have seen, God's mind just is the locus of all the truths. But although God therefore has a complete idea of this sheet of paper, it does not follow that God's idea of my body involves that complete idea, and thus it does not follow that the complete idea of the sheet of paper is in my mind. God's idea of my body involves the idea of the sheet of paper only very partially and incompletely; inevitably so, because much that relates to the sheet of paper has nothing to do with my body or God's idea of my body. Quite generally, whenever some idea is contained within God's idea of my body but only in a partial and incomplete way, that idea is said to be in my mind 'inadequately'; and such inadequate ideas are the source of error. (Cf. E II: 25, 26, 28, 32, 35.)

This theory of error has not commended itself to many, and it evidently gave trouble to Spinoza himself at a variety of points. Most importantly, it required him to distinguish (in a way that has sometimes confused commentators) between the strict truth-conditions of a proposition and those we colloquially assign to it, since it is quite evident that by the colloquial assessment many beliefs are false and not just incomplete. He does this in the Scholium to Prop. 17 of Part II, where he distinguishes Paul's 'idea of Peter' from God's. God's idea of Peter is the idea which is correlated with Peter's body and which constitutes Peter's mind. What we call Paul's idea of Peter is not really in that sense an idea of Peter at all, for its correlate in the attribute of extension is not Peter or his body but rather something in the body of Paul (and more exactly, no doubt, something in his brain or sensory organs). Considered from God's point of view, then, Paul's 'idea of Peter' is perfectly true, because it matches its correlate. It does involve the nature of Peter, if for example Paul's sense-organs have been affected by Peter's body, for no effect can be properly understood without understanding its cause;²⁷ but it is a very imperfect reflection of the nature of Peter, and only a small and not specially important part of the information that God has on the subject. Considered from Paul's point of view, and assessed for truth in the colloquial fashion, it may very well be false, if for instance Peter has altered since Paul met him, or if Paul has misread his character.

Since the proper correlate of each idea of Paul's is a state of his body or his brain, it is not surprising that all his ideas should be true in the strict and non-colloquial sense, for they match their correlates all right. This applies, of course, just as much with those of Paul's ideas that he takes to concern

²⁷ E I: Axiom 4; E II: 16 and 26. See also Daisie Radner's useful article 'Spinoza's Theory of Ideas', *Philosophical Review* 80 (1971).

non-physical things; in every case the idea has its correlate in the attribute of extension, and this is a condition of Paul's body or brain. Spinoza is thus committed to the position that strictly speaking what makes true Paul's belief that Peter is Dutch, or in pain, is some physical state of Paul himself (no doubt the physical state that some would be inclined to identify with that very belief). And if this is so, and if there is the close connection between meaning and truth-conditions that we normally expect, it would seem to follow that we very commonly mean something different by our words from what we think we mean.

Some would regard this as a ridiculous position to have got oneself committed to, and perhaps it is. At the same time it may be worth remembering that many respectable philosophers have held something rather similar, including Russell and the early Wittgenstein. It is an important feature of their view that the hidden semantic content of what we say can be uncovered by rational analysis of the appropriate sort, but that is an important feature of Spinoza's view as well. Indeed, it is crucial. The problem of sceptical doubt is not avoided unless the coherence that constitutes truth is a coherence accessible to us, and it is therefore essential to Spinoza that rational reflection should be capable of leading us to a clear awareness of the truth as such—which will require that we come to understand the difference between strict and colloquial truth-conditions in the manner indicated. Not that reason can ever lead us to the whole truth; our minds being limited, a great proportion of our ideas are bound to be inadequate. Nevertheless reason can put us in possession of those general truths about God and the world which Spinoza's metaphysics describes, and can give us sufficient knowledge of our own place in the world to achieve that reconciliation with our lot which he regards as blessedness.

Setting aside Spinoza's account of the human mind and the problems to which it gives rise, we ought to notice before concluding another important area in which it is again easy to see how his conception of truth naturally leads on to the characteristic position of the *Ethics*. This is the area of freedom and determinism. His determinism is clear-cut and unambiguous: 'Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and to act in a definite way' (E I: 29). What commits him to this is his standard of rational coherence; his paradigm of rationality is the deductive method of geometry, so that in his view the rationally coherent system of ideas will have to start from the idea of God or Substance, as a being necessary in its own right, and to derive from it, with the help of the intrinsically rational axioms and common notions, all the more particular truths about the world. Everything that happens, therefore, is determined, because the necessity of its occurrence can be established in the same kind of way that a geometrical theorem can be proved. Admittedly such things cannot in general be established by *us*, because our minds are too limited to be able to carry most such derivations through and to see how the

determination works; and that limitation leaves us room for the illusion of free will. But there is no room for freedom as the libertarian conceives of it; 'he could have done otherwise' is always strictly false. Incidentally this does not require, as most forms of determinism do, that nature be governed by fixed general laws (apart of course from the laws of deductive logic), though no doubt Spinoza thought it actually was governed in that way. *Prima facie* at least, the coherent system of ideas might describe a universe very far from Laplacean in character. What makes Spinoza's system so ineluctably deterministic is not the inevitable ubiquity of causal laws, but the uniqueness of that rational order which constitutes the truth.

The theses we have been discussing—about the human mind and its relation to God on the one hand and to the objects of its knowledge on the other, and about determinism—are the key theses of the first two parts of the *Ethics*. They are therefore the key theses of the *Ethics* as a whole, for it is clear enough that the later parts are based on the first two. But, as we have seen, they develop naturally from his coherence theory of truth. And this, it seems to me, is the principal argument for saying not only that Spinoza was a coherence theorist, but that the coherence theory was fundamental to his system; which should therefore be seen not as a baroque exercise in the elaboration of scholastic themes, but as a sustained attempt to work out a radical solution to a genuine epistemological problem, the problem of Cartesian doubt.

V

The question that remains is why, if Spinoza's grounds for his metaphysical views are as I have been suggesting, he should not have made this clear but should rather have given a quite contrary impression instead. But the answer to this may not be very far to seek. We should bear in mind first that neither the *Ethics*, nor the *Short Treatise*, nor the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding* was published by Spinoza himself, and that the last of these was very far from completed. We should also recall the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic method.

Descartes distinguishes clearly between the analytic and the synthetic presentation of a philosophical or a mathematical result.²⁸ The difference is that 'analysis shows the true way by which a thing was methodically discovered', whereas the synthetic method disregards how the conclusion was actually reached and

uses a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems and problems, so that if someone denies any of the consequences, he is made to see how they are contained in what goes before, and the reader's consent is exacted however stubborn and obstinate he may be.²⁹

²⁸ *Replies to the Second Objections*, A.T. VII: 155-7 = H.R. II: 48-50. He does not invent either the distinction or the terminology (cf. R. Goelenius, *Lexicon Philosophicum*, Frankfurt 1613, s.v. *Methodus*), but sharpens up a standard rough dichotomy.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, A.T. VII: 156 = H.R. II: 49.

The paradigm of the synthetic method is Euclid's *Elements*, which in Descartes' opinion provides an excellent model for the setting out of geometrical proofs but a far less adequate one for putting forward proofs in philosophy. His own *Meditations*, as he says, are set out analytically; in answer to the request of the authors of the Second Objections he provides a short example of what his argument would look like laid out synthetically, 'in geometrical fashion', but he expresses great reservations about the utility of that method in philosophy. This is because, whereas Euclid's axioms and postulates are 'readily granted by all', those required for the synthetic presentation of metaphysics are not. They are, indeed, 'in their own nature intelligible', but they are not immediately obvious to most people, who are blinded by the preconceptions of the senses.³⁰

Spinoza differs from Descartes on the usefulness of the synthetic method in philosophy. That much is clear from his having taken the trouble to write a book presenting Descartes' system synthetically, for that is what *The Principles of Descartes' Philosophy* is: the epistemological considerations which we have discussed do not come in the main body of that work, but in the Prolegomenon. His reason, no doubt, is the one given in Meyer's Preface and indeed hinted at by Descartes himself, that many people found Descartes' analytical arguments unconvincing and hard to follow.³¹ This may have been because they were accustomed to systems laid out synthetically, and perhaps because of an undue respect for Euclid's geometry as the model for *scientia*; but whatever the reason it is clearly the synthetic method that he chose to adopt himself in setting his own views out in the *Ethics*. By doing so he committed himself to the view that the axioms and postulates that he uses have the status Descartes claimed for his: they are 'in their own nature intelligible', but not necessarily immediately obvious. Nothing in the account that I have suggested of Spinoza's thought is inconsistent with that. But because they are not immediately obvious we need an argument to persuade us of their truth, and to show us why Spinoza should have been convinced of them. It is just such an argument that we should have been given if Spinoza had provided us with another treatise set out as Descartes' *Meditations* are set out, following the analytic method.

Why did Spinoza not write such another treatise? It is arguable that he did, or rather that he began it. The *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding* sets out in the Cartesian style to tackle the problems of

³⁰ Ibid., A.T. VII: 256-7 = H.R. II: 49-50. In the Conversation with Burman (A.T. V: 153) he is reported as saying that the method of the *Principles* is synthetic, but this must be in a looser sense since that work is by no means rigorously set out and opens with epistemological reflections. Curley ('Spinoza as an Expositor of Descartes', in S. Hessing, ed., *Speculum Spinozanum*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) thinks the looser sense reflects Descartes' proper view of the distinction between the analytic and synthetic methods, and that in understanding it in the other way Spinoza misunderstood Descartes. For present purposes it is unimportant whether this is so; what matters is what Spinoza took Descartes' distinction to be.

³¹ G. I: 129-30; for Descartes, see A.T. VII: 155-6 = H.R. II: 49.

epistemology and of philosophical method, and we have seen how seriously it takes these problems and how it ultimately develops the coherence theory of truth in response to them. It then breaks off. But it was intended to go much further than this. It was intended to lead on to a complete account of his philosophy.³² Since it presents us with the coherence theory, and since the coherence theory does naturally lead on to the rest of Spinoza's metaphysics—some of the key steps, and in particular the recognition that our minds must be part of God's, occurring in the *Treatise* itself—it seems difficult to doubt that the completed work would have taken the lines I have been suggesting, and developed his metaphysics from his epistemological concerns.

The *Treatise* is a relatively early work, in which the coherence theory has not yet been fully assimilated. It seems reasonable to conjecture that he wrote it in the process of developing his views, but postponed the completion of it once his metaphysical position was formed, preferring instead to organize his results in the synthetic form of a Euclidean deductive system. But it also seems clear that he never abandoned the project of rewriting and completing his earlier work.³³ If he had lived long enough to do so, we should have had from Spinoza a work analogous to Descartes' *Meditations*; and perhaps Spinoza would have had a juster appreciation from his philosophical successors.

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³² Cf. Joachim, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–15.

³³ *Ibid.*, ch. I.