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Francis S. Haserot

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SPINOZA AND THE STATUS OF UNIVERSALS¹

THE QUESTION of the status of universals constitutes, because of its pervasive implications, an essential problem for Spinoza interpretation. If Spinoza is a nominalist his philosophy is one thing; if he is a realist it is another, and quite different, thing. The latter interpretation can have little in common with the former. Spinozists are one in name only. According as they represent one interpretation or another they represent one philosophy or another. At their extremes these philosophies are opposites. Unfortunately Spinoza's words are not unambiguous. Some support may be derived from the texts for contrary or incompatible views. Clarification, if it is to be reached, must be attained (1) by considering the demands of consistency that follow from the philosopher's basic theses, and (2) by comparing verbally opposed statements in the text for the purpose of distinguishing whatever primary tendency may be present. Both of these methods will here be applied.

Before proceeding to this a note as to the specific bearing of the topic should be added. The question of the status of universals is connected with the problem of the nature of the attributes. The attributes, although not modes, are common properties of their respective modes. They are, as common properties, universals — using the term “universal” in its present-day sense — and if Spinoza is interpreted as a nominalist the attributes must be considered as *entia rationis*, i.e., as subjective. In this case the word *tanquam* in the definition of the attribute will be translated “as if” rather than “as,” or the word *constituens* will be taken to modify *intellectus* rather than *quod*.² God becomes inherently unknowable and the whole philosophy of the *Ethics* takes the form of a mental construct in accordance with which

¹ Read before The Virginia Philosophical Association at Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia, October 27, 1949.

² *Ethics*, pt. I, Def. IV. *Per attributum intelligo id, quod intellectus de substantia percipit, tanquam ejusdem essentiam constituens.*

Cf. Lewis Robinson, *Kommentar zu Spinozas Ethik* (Leipzig, 1928), p. 64.

we conjecture a reality that, in its true nature, lies beyond our ken. The attributes become primary categories of the understanding, and philosophy, on this interpretation, becomes essentially epistemology, for ontology is impossible.

As opposed to this, if Spinoza is considered to be a realist on the ground that he admits certain kinds of universals, then the definition of an attribute can, at least, possess objective reference; the word *tanquam* can be considered to mean "as" and the term *constituens* can be construed as referring to *quod*. The attribute, in this case, becomes an ontological character of substance; God or reality is conceived as knowable; the attribute is a common property of its respective modes; the second and third kinds of knowledge yield objective truth, and the *Ethics* becomes an ontology based on logical presuppositions. The two views are *toto caelo* different.

The problem of the status of universals has thus direct relevance to any general interpretation of Spinoza. For to hold that Spinoza is a nominalist is not compatible with the premise that the attributes have real as compared to mental existence. The sole way to escape this circumstance is to deny that common properties are universals; but this is scarcely intelligible. The one thing that the nominalist rejects is the notion of common properties. Otherwise no point attaches to his position. Occam's razor cuts off common properties as unnecessary entities, and in their place substitutes similarities or likenesses. One red rose has nothing in common with another red rose; one circle has nothing in common with another. The redness of the one rose is a particular redness of its own, and is merely *like* that of the other rose. And the same relation pertains to the circles. Each circle is unique; and, although different circles are similar, they have no form, or, for that matter, anything else in common. To the nominalist, words other than proper nouns can be signs for things only as a consequence of the likenesses of the things; but, in point of accuracy, such words refer to nothing common in the things, and the classes they supposedly represent are *entia rationis*. Since this is the case, there can be no joint assertion of nominalism and common properties. If one is affirmed, the other is, by definition, denied.

With these remarks I shall pass to the first method of investigation, that is, the method of consistency. Are the views historically associated

with nominalism, or those that follow as logical consequences of it, consistent with Spinoza's basic conceptions? This question must be answered by an inspection of these views and a comparison of them with Spinoza's conclusions. To this we may turn.

Since for nominalism particulars alone exist, and logical generalizations are subjective constructs, the chief topics of concern for nominalism are those of knowledge and truth. Its main problem is concentrated in the question: how is knowledge possible? From this point on, nominalism is primarily an epistemology. Its one existential dogma, namely, that particulars alone exist, having been summarily reached by the use of Occam's razor (itself an epistemological consideration), nominalism is henceforth exercised with the problem as to how we can know anything at all, particular or universal. Since all propositions except those whose subject and predicate are singular have general connotations (and even these are scarcely meaningful without such connotations) the question becomes: how can language as a system of conventional signs signify things and thus yield truth? Nominalists, following their native economical bent, find in language a means for economizing mental activity. Language provides a mechanism whereby the endless number of singular things can be thought of in relatively few terms. Language is an instrument of simplification. But the fact is always recognized that real things are complex. They possess all the diversity of their particular determinations. Hence, though language may be simple, things are not. How then are particulars to be initially apprehended? Here a priori knowledge is inapplicable, and the cognition of particulars, in so far as it can occur, is understood to be a matter of the senses — inner or outer. Sense perception is the origin of all knowledge, and nominalism leads directly to empiricism.

But a branch of the nominalist school, while recognizing the foregoing conclusions, affirms another source for knowledge of particulars, that is, for knowledge of any kind, namely, direct intuition. Sense perception is incomplete and external. How then do we apprehend the inner and real nature of individual things? The answer is: by direct intuition, and here nominalism passes into mysticism.

Although nominalism may thus develop into mysticism it perhaps more frequently takes another course. Since all logical universality is *ens rationis*, a thing of the mind, and finds its expression in words or

signs that may, but that in no sense necessarily do, apply to existence, and since sense perception is relative, incomplete, and essentially private, the consequence becomes evident that all avenues to real particulars are cut off; confirmable knowledge is impossible; truth is relative, and all knowledge, such as it is, is nothing more than probable. In other words there is no knowledge — simply opinion. Belief cannot be based on knowledge; if it arises it must rest on faith. Nominalism here passes from empiricism to skepticism, which is perhaps its most natural outcome.

One might suppose that this typical series had now reached an end, and that the final consequences of nominalism are either mysticism or scepticism. Such however is not the case. The contingencies of life persist regardless of philosophy, and the will to believe asserts itself whether it has grounds to do so or not. Since universals are relegated to the mind or to language, and since all laws of logic are universals, there is not the least necessity of supposing that such laws have anything whatsoever to do with existent things. The sole basis on which we have a right to assume that existent things are rational, on this view, is an empirical one; and empirical information, being forever incomplete, can give us no such report. No imperative to believe that reality, whatever it may be, is rational either is or can be established. From scepticism nominalism reasons itself into irrationalism. The world may be anything. The mind knows no limits to possibility. No grounds can be affirmed to take the world as an analogue of reason; we must take it as we sense it, or as we feel it. As such it is a perpetual flux dominated by an inner urge, an urge frequently designated by the generalized term "will."

Will — the inner activator both of things and of men — makes truth as it makes the world. The will is not limited by reason but it creates reason along with other things, and reason or intellect becomes its instrument. The primacy of will is taken to be complete; the surge of the will is time itself, which is the incessant creation of novelty; the changeless logical structures of reason vanish as mirages into the flux; the present is a spontaneous ejection of the self-transforming will, and the future is an indeterminate manifold of unpredictable contingencies. The will is not led, but leads; it sets up its own objectives or ideals and changes them according to its own inner fluxions. There is no final

direction to its path or to the path of change. Reality is never complete but is perpetually becoming; its partial consummation occurs only in its moment-to-moment self-realization. Thus from irrationalism, nominalism passes to voluntarism, to temporalism, and to indeterminism.

From this point of view the postulated objective truth of the intellect is an *ignis fatuus*. Values, in the form of transitory aspirations or desires, take precedence over any such hypostatized truth. Knowledge is never disinterested, and truth is interpreted in terms of value rather than value in terms of truth. Truth is relative, changing; it is made by separate valuing subjects. Ideas are not cognitive but instrumental, and their truth, i.e., in the sense of their value, is determined by their effectiveness in controlling the flux and attaining self-engendered ends. Truth is interpreted in terms of usefulness; and nominalism, through voluntarism and irrationalism, passes into pragmatism and instrumentalism. On this view metaphysics as ontology is professedly abandoned, for there is no independent and transpersonal truth about any objective reality. The very terms *world*, *universe*, *reality* have illicit connotations of unity supported by no experiential evidence. The so-called world is an endless aggregate of particulars more or less conjoined, but if conjoined, then merely by external relations. There is no connected whole, but rather a loosely joined congeries of essentially independent individuals. Pragmatic nominalism favors pluralism as an essential hypothesis. The world outside the mind is and remains a question mark, and its significance is known only as it bears on human life through experience. The primary question becomes: how may this world be controlled for human ends set up at an historical human moment? The answer is to be found in science, for it is science that most patently gives control over nature.

What, however, is science? It is not the discovery of rational laws in things, for such laws are universals and have long been discarded. Science is a set of formulae, essentially verbal, by which the more orderly sense-data can be described and partially predicted. By giving empirical interpretations to symbols, the symbols can be so combined as to yield propositions that are verifiable by experiment or observation. But the logic and the mathematics through which the symbols are combined are pure inventions of the mind and have no inherent relevance to the objective world. They are conventional rules only. In

spite of this, however, and for no reason in the nature of things, they happily find exemplifications in experience and are hence serviceable in describing the behavior of sense-data. Scientific laws are of a like nature; and, although they are verbal or symbolic forms, they are forms that, for the time being, find content in the immediate presentations of sense. Such laws represent the maximum of human knowledge; and with this conclusion nominalism finds a consistent resting place in positivism.

The purport of this whole development is as follows: when universals are excluded from existent items, reason or rationality is removed from things; it is relegated to the mind. Once it is enclosed within that confine it is in an epistemological prison from which it can never escape. The world is made unknowable; metaphysics is reduced to futility, and man, whatever he may be, is and can be guided only by faith or practicality.

Now the object of this account of the transformations of nominalism is not to give a criticism of it, but to show its bearing on the thought of Spinoza. Not only does Spinoza not profess any of these consequences but he is diametrically opposed to every one of them. Scarcely a thinker could be found who rejects them so completely.

That reality is rational is, for him, axiomatic. Truth is one, absolute, and unchanging. Epistemology is not primary; it is deduced from ontology. Part II of the *Ethics* is unintelligible without Part I. Empiricism is successful only in producing inadequate ideas. It is not conclusive even in science. Nor is Spinoza an empirical mystic. If he is a mystic at all, his mysticism is rational. What is, is intelligible; but what he does not know, as the infinite attributes beyond thought and extension, he does not pretend to know. There is, in his conception, a rational intuition of essence, but no suprarational intuition. He rejects skepticism as a general epistemological position and affirms it only in regard to those things about which the nominalists are inclined to deny it, namely, the data of sense perception. So far as knowledge of God or reality is concerned he not only affirms such knowledge but goes so far as to say that everyone has an adequate idea of God. That his rejection of irrationalism is absolute and complete requires no exposition. And as to voluntarism he denies that the will, either divine or human, is anything distinct from the intellect. It is constituted simply by the

affirmation or denial inherent in ideas themselves.³ Nothing is produced by will, and the notion of free will is a natural fiction arising from ignorance of causes. The correlates of voluntarism, i.e., temporalism and indeterminism, are both expressly rejected. Time and determinate duration are ways of imagining things, results of inadequate ideas. Things cognized in their true being are seen *sub specie aeternitatis* and this applies even to individuals. This being so, indeterminism is wholly excluded, and chance is held to be simply another name for ignorance.

Values, as interests or desires, are not the determinants of truth but are a primary cause of its obfuscation. Value for man is derived from truth, not truth from value — in fact, it is by attaining truth that man attains value, and if he is to reach beatitude at all it is through the vision of God. An idea is not true because of its use but because of its intrinsic rational nature. And the most significantly useful ideas are so because they are true. Truth moreover is neither many, relative, nor changeable; nor is it dependent on the motives of individuals. No man ever strove so single-mindedly to rid his thought of anthropomorphism in any of its aspects. Thus Spinoza's philosophy represents the antithesis of pragmatism. And since (for Spinoza) the world has a fully integrated rational structure, things can be known by their essences, and the objects of nature can be known by their common properties; and, since true definitions are real, not nominal, the order of nature is ever present to be discovered whether it is so discovered at any historical moment or not. Logic is not a verbal invention, science is not an essentially hypothetical or mental construct, and nature is not an occult and unknowable mystery. As a consequence, however true or false these premises may be, they are sufficient to indicate that Spinoza is not a positivist. Nor can he be considered a pluralist for, as it is unnecessary to explain, this view is rejected in Part I of the *Ethics*.⁴

It would appear then that all of the basic views either implied by nominalism or most closely associated with it are not simply rejected by Spinoza but are directly and emphatically disavowed. It follows that if all, several, or any one of them can be held to be logical con-

³ *Ethics*, pt. II, Prop. 49 and Corollary.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pt. I, Prop. 14.

sequences of nominalism then Spinoza is not a nominalist. This circumstance together with the fact that there is an obvious incompatibility between nominalism and rationalism (since rationalism presupposes that logical laws are inherent in reality, and such laws are universals)—this circumstance creates the strong presumption that whatever language Spinoza used (and he was not obliged to use the language of Plato) he was not a nominalist. We cannot argue indubitably from what appear to us to be considerations of consistency to what Spinoza actually thought, as psychological indeterminates always play a role in surmises of this kind; but it is doubtful whether, in the present case, such evident incompatibilities could be overlooked, and reasons which show that they were not will shortly be examined.

At this point we may pass to the second and main part of our inquiry, namely, that concerned with textual interpretation. In accordance with this, evidences derived from Spinoza's text, and from theses therein contained, will be compared, with a view to determining his real position. References purporting to deny universals will be considered first; thereafter, those that imply universals.

In regard to the former it may be said that not less than twelve significant passages that have an apparently nominalistic ring might be indicated in Spinoza's writings.⁵ These passages possess a fairly close resemblance and it is not necessary here to treat them separately. In lieu of so doing I shall select one only for consideration — one however that contains the gist of the others, and that also gives the fullest available account of Spinoza's argument. This passage is found in the well-known Scholium to Prop. 40, Part II of the Ethics. It reads as follows:

But not to omit anything which is necessary for us to know, I will briefly give the causes from which terms called Transcendental, such as *Being, Thing, Something*, have taken their origin. These terms have arisen because the human body, inasmuch as it is limited, can form distinctly in itself a certain number only of images at once. (For the explanation of the word *image*, see Schol. Prop. 17,

⁵ *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, pt. I, ch. vi; *ibid.*, pt. I, ch. x; *Cogitata Metaphysica*, pars I, cap. i; *ibid.*, pars II, cap. vii; *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, ed. Van Vloten and Land, (The Hague, 1914), p. 16; *ibid.*, p. 24; *ibid.*, p. 30; *Ethica*, pars II, Prop. XL, Scholium I; *ibid.*, pars II, Prop. XLVIII, Scholium; *ibid.*, pars IV, Praefatio; *Epistolae*, ed. Van Vloten and Land (The Hague, 1914), Epistola II, p. 6; *ibid.*, Epistola LVI, p. 192.

pt. 2.) If this number be exceeded, the images will become confused; and if the number of images which the body is able to form distinctly be greatly exceeded, they will all run one into another. Since this is so, it is clear (Corol. Prop. 17, and Prop. 18, pt. 2) that in proportion to the number of images which can be formed at the same time in the body will be the number of bodies which the human mind can imagine at the same time. If the images in the body, therefore, are all confused, the mind will confusedly imagine all the bodies without distinguishing the one from the other, and will include them all, as it were, under one attribute, that of being or thing. The same confusion may also be caused by lack of uniform force in the images and from other analogous causes, which there is no need to discuss here, the consideration of one cause being sufficient for the purpose we have in view. For it all comes to this, that these terms signify ideas in the highest degree confused. It is in this way that those notions have arisen which are called *Universal*, such as, *Man, Horse, Dog*, &c.; that is to say, so many images of men, for instance, are formed in the human body at once, that they exceed the power of the imagination, not entirely, but to such a degree that the mind has no power to imagine the determinate number of men and the small differences of each, such as colour and size, &c. It will therefore distinctly imagine that only in which all of them agree in so far as the body is affected by them, for by that the body was chiefly affected, that is to say, by each individual, and this it will express by the name *man*, covering thereby an infinite number of individuals; to imagine a determinate number of individuals being out of its power. But we must observe that these notions are not formed by all persons in the same way, but that they vary in each case according to the thing by which the body is more frequently affected, and which the mind more easily imagines or recollects. For example, those who have more frequently looked with admiration upon the stature of men, by the name *man* will understand an animal of erect stature, while those who have been in the habit of fixing their thoughts on something else, will form another common image of men, describing man, for instance, as an animal capable of laughter, a biped without feathers, a rational animal, and so on; each person forming universal images of things according to the temperament of his own body. It is not therefore to be wondered at that so many controversies have arisen amongst those philosophers who have endeavoured to explain natural objects by the images of things alone.⁶

Spinoza here makes clear what he means by “universals” or, as he elsewhere calls them, “species.”⁷ He employs these terms to refer to composite images derived by abstraction from inner or outer perception. On the mental side “universals” or “species” are not composed of ideas, since ideas, in Spinoza’s sense of the word, are conceptions of the mind and are not images. “Universals” or “species,” for Spinoza,

⁶ *Ethics*, pt. II, Prop. 40, Scholium I, translation by W. H. White in *Spinoza Selections*, edited by John Wild (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1930). I am indebted to Charles Scribner’s Sons for permission to quote this, and other passages from this book, used in the present paper.

⁷ For example, *Cogitata Metaphysica*, pars I, cap. I; Epistola LVI.

are made up of confused images. They are, as it were, simulacra of the individual thing, reduced and emaciated by the perceptive process. Moreover they are not conceived alike by all minds, but differently by each mind. They are private impressions rather than common principles of reason. And again they are not, as here considered, essences, or the elements of essences, nor are they common properties. They are extracted from things not by reason or rational intuition but by imagery and mnemonic blending.

Spinoza took the expressions *notiones Universales* and *termini Transcendentales* from the scholastics. In using these expressions he makes it clear toward whom he is directing his criticism. He rejects Universal notions and Transcendental terms as "intelligible species" derived by abstraction from sense perception. Since they are thus derived they can have, for Spinoza, no ultimate ontological connotations. They are not obtained from real definitions nor are they deduced from proximate causes, i.e., anterior principles. They have therefore no rational ground. Spinoza's own theory of sense perceptions, namely, that perceptions are simply affects recording the immediate modifications of one's own body, required him to reject the scholastic conception of "intelligible species" — the conception on which universal notions were based — as well as the inductive method employed to reach these mental constructs. It likewise required him to reject the scholastic contention that knowledge originates in sensation. His objection to "intelligible species" is precisely that they are derived from sensation and are in fact not true concepts but are only confused perceptual pictures. Further, they are not held together by any inherent logic; they are not connected by any deductive linkage. The logic invoked to give them order is the inductive logic of external classification and of the syllogism, employed by the scholastics — a logic which, as Spinoza conceived, discovered nothing, but merely arranged what was already given it by perception into an abstract, relative, and subjective order. To this logic Spinoza was opposed, and in place of it he recommended an intensional logic of mathematical deduction, a logic of concepts, as described in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*. From these dual conditions then, i.e., the inadequacy of "intelligible species" as forms of generalization, and the limitations of the logic that goes with them, derive the grounds for Spinoza's rejection of scholastic univer-

sals. What Spinoza is in effect saying is that if universals are constituted by so-called "intelligible species" and thus are abstracted from perception, then they must be recognized as fictions.

Such universality, as is plain, for Spinoza, is invalid. There is, however, another kind of universality, a kind that is valid. This is rational universality. That Spinoza's system incorporates — in fact, requires — this kind of universality is evidenced by his most central teachings. Imbedded in these are the premises that affirm universals. To these elements of his thought I shall now turn, distinguishing them as they appear in the doctrines of essence, attribute, mode, substance, and man.

With regard to essence the primary question is: can an essence be embodied in two or more things? If it can, then here is a point where universality is posited. Now in an important passage in the Scholium to Prop. 8, Part I of the *Ethics* Spinoza uses language that unequivocally implies that the same essence pertains to several particulars. Here Spinoza is showing that from an essence or nature no definite number of individuals can be deduced. He says: "The definition of a triangle, for example, expresses nothing else than the simple nature of a triangle, but not a certain number of triangles." From this and from what he later says it is clear that any number of individual triangles can exemplify the same nature. This same conception is applied to man, and, by implication, to any finite things that may have essences. Here rational universality is plainly posited. But this is not all. Previously in the same scholium he points out that true ideas may be had of the essences of nonexistent things:

By modifications, however, [men should understand] those things that are in another thing and whose conception is formed from the conception of the thing in which they are; whence it follows that we can have true ideas of nonexistent modifications, since although these modifications do not actually exist outside of the intellect, their essence nevertheless, is so comprehended in another thing that through this thing they can be conceived.⁸

Here we not only have *universalia in re* but *universalia ante rem*, not only universal form in things but form subsisting without actually existent exemplifications. This view is suggested also by Spinoza's example of a true idea:

⁸ *Ethics*, pt. I, Prop. 8, Scholium. My translation.

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...a true idea is distinguished from a false one, not so much by its extrinsic object as by its intrinsic nature. If an architect conceives a building properly constructed, though such a building may never have existed, and may never exist, nevertheless the idea is true; and the idea remains the same whether it be put into execution or not.⁹

Now the idea here referred to is derived from the eternal laws or principles of nature. *That* is what gives it its truth. Although the architect may be concerned with the construction of a single house the house must embody these principles. The idea is true because a house, to be a house, must conform to these principles, i.e., any house must embody them. Spinoza is here referring to a rational, as opposed to an imaginative, universal essence — and not merely this, but to a universal *ante rem*. A more clear-cut expression of Platonism would be difficult to find.

Passing now to the Scholium, Prop. 17, Part I of the *Ethics*, we find the same conception not simply repeated and confirmed but set forth with the added specification that essences are eternal.

For example, one man is the cause of the existence but not of the essence of another, for the essence is an eternal truth; and therefore with regard to essence the two men may exactly resemble one another, but with regard to existence they must differ. Consequently if the existence of one should perish, that of the other will not therefore perish; but if the essence of one could be destroyed and become false, the essence of the other would be likewise destroyed.

Here it is stated: (1) essences are eternal; (2) several individuals can agree in the same essence; (3) if the essence is removed the individuals are removed (the individuals are dependent on the essence and without it are impossible); (4) if the individuals are removed the essence is not affected (the essence is not dependent on its individual representations). Three further items only are requisite to make Spinoza's Platonism complete: (1) the essences are not dependent on mind; (2) they are not perceived or known by the senses; (3) they are the objects of all real knowledge. The first point, i.e., that the essences are not dependent on mind, scarcely needs elaboration. The attributes possess a one-to-one correspondence in their modifications but they are, in themselves, independent. That is, thought is independent of extension. The essence of an extended thing is not an idea although it is known by an adequate idea. And the same is true, for the infinite intel-

⁹ *Improvement of the Understanding*, in *Spinoza Selections*, p. 26.

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lect, of the essences of modes in any other attribute. Essences are things known and, for finite minds, things discoverable, but they are not simply ideas. The second point, i.e., that essences are not perceived by the senses, is affirmed in so many words by Spinoza himself: . . . *nam experientia nullas rerum essentias docet*.¹⁰ On the third point, i.e., that the essences are the objects of real knowledge, the passage in Scholium 2, Prop. 40, Part II, concerning the third kind of knowledge, namely, intuitive science, is explicit: "Besides these two kinds of knowledge, there is a third, as I shall hereafter show, which we shall call intuitive science. This kind of knowing advances from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things." Elsewhere Spinoza explains that by an idea he does not mean a perceptual image: "For by ideas I do not understand the images which are formed at the back of the eye, or, if you please, in the middle of the brain, but rather the conceptions of thought."¹¹ From these references it is clear that essences involve logical universality and that they are the objects of knowledge. The assertions stand in direct opposition to the thesis of nominalism and if negated would reduce Spinoza's philosophy to sensationalistic empiricism.

At this point however two considerations bearing on the universality of essences arise which cannot be passed over. They refer (1) to Spinoza's definition of what pertains to an essence, and (2) to his expression of the view that each singular thing has an unique and singular essence.¹²

The definition indicated is stated: "I say that to the essence of anything pertains that, which being given, the thing itself is necessarily posited, and being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken; or, in other words, that, without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which in its turn cannot be nor be conceived without the thing."¹³ This appears to say that the essence is dependent on its object and to contradict the statement above that if the individuals are removed the essence is not affected, i.e., that the essence is not dependent

¹⁰ *Epistolae*, ed. Van Vloten and Land, Epistola X.

¹¹ *Ethics*, pt. II, Prop. 48, Scholium.

¹² *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, in *Spinoza Selections*, pp. 76, 83.

¹³ *Ethics*, pt. II, Def. 2.

on its individual representations. The opposition here is verbal and not real. It is dependent on a dual sense that Spinoza attributes to the term "existence." Existence is real as it follows from God; durational as it is apprehended by the imagination.¹⁴ An essence does not imply existence in the second sense; it may have being and yet not have any perceptual exemplification. Essences are eternal and hence independent of the duration of their objects. In what sense this is to be understood may be seen from Spinoza's account of nonexistent modes. In Prop. 8 of Part II Spinoza refers to ideas of nonexistent modes as also in Corol., Prop. 24, Part I. If however there are ideas of nonexistent modes there are essences of nonexistent modes and the being of the essence, though related to, is not dependent on the existence of the modes. The point is that the nonexistence here referred to is durational, not real, nonexistence. In this sense essence and existence may be separate. If real existence however is contemplated, i.e., existence as constituted by implication in God's nature, then essence and existence are compresent. But here also the essence is not dependent on the existence of the mode. Both the essence and the real existence of the mode follow from the nature of God and are dependent on that nature, not on one another. This was the first point.

As to the second, namely, that of the being of unique essences of single individuals, e.g., of Peter or Paul, it is to be said that these essences do not preclude essences relating to several individuals as is seen from the references given above and as will be further evidenced in considering the elements of universality in Spinoza's conception of man. A sense may be designated in which everyone is a unique example of himself but this does not imply that no essences subsist except those confined to singular things. For if this were the case the essence of one man could be removed without affecting the essence or existence of another, and, as the individuals were separate and disconnected, so likewise would be their essences. This however is incompatible with Spinoza's own account.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pt. II, Prop. 45, Scholium: "By existence I do not understand duration, that is, existence considered abstractly as if it were a certain kind of quantity, but I refer to the nature itself of existence which is attributed to singular things because from the eternal necessity of the nature of God infinite numbers of things follow in infinite ways (Prop. 16, pt. I). I mean, I say, the true existence (*ipsa existentia*) of singular things in so far as they are in God." My translation.

The study of essences leads us next to the conception of method as revealed in the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding* and the *Ethics*, since this method is the method of definition and definitions are the expressions of essences: "...the true definition of any one thing neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined."¹⁵ The object of the method is to apprehend essences, to express them in real definitions, and to deduce from the definitions the properties of the things and other essences implied by them. If such a deduction could be carried to its completion it would embrace an implicative network of definitions that would include all possible things, and all things would be viewed logically *sub specie aeternitatis*. This emphasis on definition is another Platonic parallel in Spinoza. The method here indicated is mathematical and synthetic. It employs a logic of intension that must cover in its application any things subsequently amenable to extensional logic. For Spinoza it is a productive as contrasted with an exclusively receptive logic. The logic of extension merely receives its classes ready made and fixes them in an order of inclusion. Intensional logic does not receive its elements from without but, by its own inherent process, discovers them. Extensional logic is basically a matter of induction or perception. Intensional logic — or the logic of concepts and definitions — is a matter of reason or deduction. Spinoza rejects definition by genus and differentia¹⁶ since it is an extensional definition and is not productive of further knowledge. He advocates (in the case of all things except substance) definition from proximate cause,¹⁷ i.e., definition from an immediately anterior essence or definition. A more rigorously deductive method could hardly be conceived, and the method, to be applicable, must postulate an objectively deductive linkage of essences.

But here we are in the presence of another primary element of universality in Spinoza's philosophy, and one that is of necessity inherent in any rationalist world view, namely, the laws of logic, i.e., the laws of consistency and implication. These laws are universals and are implicit in the nature of things. Nominalism cannot postulate these laws as in things without contradicting itself, and as a result it is channeled into

¹⁵ *Ethics*, pt. I, Prop. 8, Scholium.

¹⁶ *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, pt. I, ch. 7, in *Spinoza Selections*, p. 79.

¹⁷ *Improvement of the Understanding*, in *Spinoza Selections*, p. 37.

semantics and positivism. Logical laws, for it, are exclusively conventions. As such they can be used rigorously but they can tell you nothing necessary about the existential world. Now our purpose here is not to give a criticism either of the one view or the other but simply to determine the nature of Spinoza's philosophy. For Spinoza, both on the score of consistency and that of his own words, the laws of logic are absolutely and unexceptionally universal.¹⁸ If this is denied his method of the deduction of essences is meaningless and his thought, instead of having the absolute ontological validity that he posits, is simply a *jeu d'esprit* with his own ideas — which from a nominalistic point of view any rationalist philosophy must be.

Our results so far then are that some essences at least are universals (in the present-day sense) and that the laws of logic are universals. Here, however, we are confronted with another element of universality in Spinoza's system. The liaison of essences resulting from their implicative interconnections establishes for the modes of any attribute an inherent order and connection. Every one of the infinite sets of modes of each of the infinite attributes has its own order and connection. But is the order and connection of each modal system different and distinct from that of each of the others? No. It is one and the same. We have here one formal order common to all of the infinite attributes: many realms but one order in them all. If this is called nominalism, whose distinguishing mark is that it denies any one in the many, any single form in a plurality of instances, we may reasonably abandon any attempt to find a distinction between nominalism and realism. The acceptance of this conception as nominalistic would simply be the admission that nominalism itself is inconceivable without the postulation of universals, in other words, that nominalism implies its own opposite. This is one major reason why the nominalist interpretation of Spinoza demands the subjectivity of the attributes. Without such an assumption its case is lost.

Turning now from the general doctrine of essences to that of attributes, we may ask whether the attributes themselves possess characters of universality, and it seems clear that they do. An attribute, as previously remarked, is not a thing nor is it the sum total of the modes

¹⁸ *Ethics*, pt. I, Axioms II, III, IV; *ibid.*, pt. I, Prop. 11, Demonstration. Here the law of sufficient reason is stated categorically. *Ibid.*, Part II, Prop. 40.

subsumed under itself. Such sum totals of modes, in their respective organizations, are mediate infinite modes, not attributes.¹⁹ Then what are the attributes? They are ultimate and irreducible natures, of which their modes are respective modifications. They are, in other terminology, the ultimate categories of being. Spinoza asserts that the essence of an attribute is the attribute itself, i.e., that an attribute is itself a nature or essence. It follows that the modes of an attribute are modes of that attribute because they possess the attribute in common as a common nature.²⁰ The attribute is not sufficient to constitute the essence of any one of its modes, but without it the essences of the modes would be impossible. Again we have the case of one nature in many things and the attribute is a universal even though it may be conceived as a universal *in re*. In the rational order of things the modes cannot escape their attributes nor the attributes their modes.

The attributes moreover must be considered in their relation to substance as well as to the modes. In this respect the simple observation becomes relevant that though each attribute is different from the others they all nevertheless have this in common, namely, that they are all attributes. They are infinite in number but they all possess this universal feature of identity, and without it their intelligibility vanishes. The matter is not one of mere resemblance, nor is it reducible to a sign or vocable. It is an objective meaning, and the meaning *attribute* is the same for each of its infinite exemplifications. Otherwise they could be subject to no single definition. In this case also the presumption of universality can be avoided, and then but speciously, only on the assumption that the attributes are subjective.

Now directing attention primarily to the modes, one might suppose that here if anywhere nominalism, were it Spinoza's essential view, would assert itself with maximum emphasis. Every mode would be particular, unique, separate, and discontinuous in respect to other things. It might bear similarities to, but it could have nothing in common with, other modes. There could be no one nature in many things. But, as is well known, the modes are inconceivable without common properties, which are not only in the whole but in the part. The lan-

¹⁹ *Epistolae*, ed. Van Vloten and Land, Epistola LXIV; *Spinoza Selections*, p. 463.

²⁰ *Ethics*, pt. I, Prop. 25, Corol.; *ibid.*, pt. II, Prop. 13, Lemma 2.

guage is Spinoza's own.²¹ The properties referred to are no more in one mode than in another but are equally shared by all modes of a given attribute. They constitute the only avenue between the finite mind and the world at large, and without them every subject would be shut into a tight solipsism of his own inadequate ideas. And it may be inferred that under such a circumstance, since all our ideas are associated with internal conditions of the body, we could have no ideas, adequate or inadequate, in common with any other individual; communication, linguistic or otherwise, would be cut off as an impossibility. According to Spinoza, however, these common properties are the points of origin of our initial adequate ideas;²² they form the basis of public as compared to private knowledge; they are adequately perceived by everyone and are the grounds for scientific knowledge. We can know other bodies in so far as we have properties in common with them, for knowing the properties in ourselves we know them everywhere and they give us the power to discover general laws of nature.

Such laws are causal laws, since physical or existential causation is not only possible but logically necessary in Spinoza's view. It is possible because things have something in common. On this condition and only on this condition can causation pertain. It is necessary because things participate in a common order. Causation and implication for Spinoza are correlative; and existential or particular causation is simply one form of implication. It involves the same necessity as that which holds between premise and conclusion. Such causation is necessary because the possible relations or interactions of things follow necessarily from their essences; and from the interrelations of eternal essences follows an interconnected complex of eternal laws which constitute the common order of nature.²³ We are thus once more in the presence of the one in the many, the common form in the multitude of instances, continuity within differentiation. The laws of nature are universals. They are the existential principles that determine the interrelations of the modes.

From these observations concerning the topic of universality as it applies to modal nature we may now turn to that of universality as it pertains to substance. Substance possesses logical universality not as

²¹ *Ethics*, pt. II, Prop. 38, Demonstration and Corollary.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Cf. *Ethics*, pt. II, Prop. 13, Axiom I following Lemma 2.

a common form but as an all-inclusive individual. All things have this in common that they are in substance as logical derivatives; they are expressions of substance. And substance commands universality as the common origin of all things. But a further universality issues from the fact that, as we have seen, substance implies the same order and connection in all attributes.²⁴ If, by an impossible assumption, an attribute subsisted that did not attach to substance or that pertained to a supposedly different substance, then by no necessity would the order and connection of modes of such an attribute be the same as that of the other attributes. Identity of order in the modal systems of the attributes is a consequence of the unity of substance and this order and connection implies, in turn, that things, of necessity, are as they are. Hence substance, as an ultimate individual, determines the nature of all its infinite and finite products. And substance, though not a formal universal, expresses its nature universally in all the modes.

Leaving now the doctrine of substance we come to our last topic, that is, the nature of man. This is a primary topic in the *Ethics* and one which, in the conception of Spinoza, cannot be treated apart from a consideration of man's relation to God. Said in another way, Spinoza considers that a philosophical anthropology must be derived from ontology. The question may therefore be asked: was Spinoza's conception of man nominalistic? In his book on Plato, A. E. Taylor is confident that it was, basing his interpretation on the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics* and the Preface to Part IV, and also on the contention that, in Spinoza's view, Nero is as good an example of man as anyone.²⁵ The notion of man, on this ground, is not recognized to involve ethical perfection, whereas Taylor believes that in Plato's view it must. If this was Spinoza's thought, a case could well be made for the thesis that, even on a realistic basis, Spinoza would be right. If there is any such thing as the form of man, an object cannot participate in it by degrees. A thing cannot be more or less a man with any greater meaning that it can be more or less a triangle. If the thing is an example of man at all it possesses the whole form of man and is as good an example as any other. If the point is raised as to whether

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pt. II, Prop. 7, Scholium.

²⁵ A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (London, 1926), p. 197.

Nero is an example of a *good man*, it might well be answered in the negative; but that, it is clear, is another matter.

Let us take up directly, however, the question as to whether Spinoza's conception is or is not consistent with nominalism. In not one place alone but in a number of places Spinoza has referred to *humanity* in contrast to individual men and has either explicitly or by implication deprecated the term as an *ens rationis*, a confused imaginal universal, and a mere nothing.²⁶ Again in the much quoted Scholium to Prop. 40, Part II of the *Ethics*, he designates the concept Man (as well as that of Dog or that of Horse) as an example of fatuity in thinking. He not only does this but shows why he does it, namely, because the generalized Man, in the sense here meant, is an intentional species, an abstraction derived from the fortuitous impressions of this or that person. It is not an *intima essentia rerum*. It is distinguished from other things in different ways by different definers and is characterized by means of external and accidental features. Any such designation, Spinoza asserts, is trivial, since it shows nothing about the true essence of man. *Man*, in the rejected sense of the term, is simply another case of empirical generalization. Does this mean therefore that Spinoza's account is nominalistic (as Taylor asserts) and that it foregoes any elements of rational universality?

Some reasons occur to believe that it does not. In the first place there is the statement, previously mentioned, in Scholium, Prop. 17, Part I of the *Ethics*, that if you take away individual men you do not take away the essence of man, which is eternal. But if you take away the essence of any man you take away the essence of all. This is scarcely nominalism. Next there is the Axiom at the beginning of Part II: Man thinks (*Homo cogitat*). What does this axiom mean? It means that if anything is a man it thinks, or thinking is involved in the nature of man, or thinking is common to men. The implication of universality is not obscure. *Homo cogitat*, it is to be noted, is not a comment by the way; it is an axiom. Had Spinoza so desired he could have said: *Homines cogitant*. Had he done so however his meaning would have been different.

Again in Prop. 10, Part II, we find a designation, somewhat sur-

²⁶ Cf. *Ethics*, pt. II, Prop. 40, Scholium; *ibid.*, pt. II, Prop. 48, Scholium; Letter II, *Spinoza Selections*, p. 406.

prising for a nominalist, namely, "the form of man," *formam hominis*. The proposition is stated as follows: *ad essentiam hominis non pertinet esse substantiae, sive substantia formam hominis non constituit*. Later in the Scholium he says: *Cum autem plures homines existere possint, ergo id, quod hominis formam constituit, non est esse substantiae*. Now we are not here concerned with the denial that the being of substance pertains to the essence of man. What is evident is that a common form pertains to a plurality of men. The realistic implication is manifest. In the Corollary Spinoza adds: *hinc sequitur essentiam hominis constitui a certis Dei attributorum modificationibus*. Even if the *essentiam hominis* were interpreted to mean: all the unique essences of all men — in which case the essence of one man could be removed without removing either the essences or existences of other men — even in this case all of these essences would have something in common, namely, that they are all modifications of the same attributes, which in itself is the undoing of nominalism.

These considerations, however, are subsidiary. We may more justly approach the central feature of Spinoza's conception of man, i.e., his treatment of the intellect and the emotions. In Part II of the *Ethics* Spinoza has given us an account of man's intellect. The imagination engenders inadequate ideas; the intellect, adequate ideas. And no possibility subsists that two different adequate ideas may refer to the same essence. Corresponding to each essence there is a single adequate idea. Truth is one. The intellect however is constituted by adequate ideas. It follows that, in so far as men have adequate ideas, the minds of all men are the same. Spinoza's conception of truth and adequacy conflict with a nominalistic interpretation of man.²⁷

²⁷ The same is true of reason which is itself a rational universal and is the same for all men or reasoning beings, i.e., it is the same in all of its manifestations. Cf. *Ethics*, pt. IV, Prop. 26, Demonstration. Indeed, if reason were not the same in all men there would be no grounds to assert that it would lead universally to the same results, i.e., adequate ideas. This is one of the conditions that makes nominalism and rationalism incompatible.

In Scholium, Prop. 18, pt. IV, Spinoza endeavors to show the principles, common to men, which reason prescribes:

"It remains for me now to show what it is which reason prescribes to us, which affects agree with the rules of human reason and which...are opposed to these rules....I should like to set forth here these dictates of reason in order that what I have in my mind about them may be easily comprehended by all. Since reason demands nothing which is opposed to nature, it demands, therefore, that every person should love himself, should seek his own profit...should desire

But let us turn to Part III in which the emotions are deduced. We begin with an inherent tendency to persist, not only common to all men but to all bodies.²⁸ And being a common property it is adequately known. This character, as known, is, in man, the *conatus* and is the actual essence of man, hence something common to all men. It follows that as a man knows it is in himself he knows it in others. Every man may feel his *conatus* differently according to the nature of his own body, but it is the *conatus* that he feels. The *conatus* follows from the nature of body itself and for this reason cannot be equated to a mere vocable — nor to a species abstracted from a manifold of images. Now from the *conatus* as aided or opposed, i.e., from pleasure, pain, and desire, Spinoza deduces the whole mechanics of the emotions. It is not necessary here to go into his deduction. There is a logic of the emotions. The emotions are determined by laws which, since they spring from the *conatus*, are continuous with the natural laws of bodies. Man's nature is not a separate domain isolated from the rest of nature; it is logically incorporated in nature. The emphasis here is upon law, i.e., the one principle in the many instances, and the emotions have a nexus of laws which are continuous with other natural law. Now wherein lies the descriptive power of this deduction of the emotions? Is it a fiction imagined by the mind and applicable to nothing, or is it a true deduction of properties from an essence, and applicable to all individuals that possess this essence? Were it the former Spinoza would never have taken the trouble to make the deduction. The essence of man and his properties are true universals, i.e., rational universals, and constitute the significant features of "the form of man" as contrasted with the accidental superficialities of his durational existence. In fact, durational existence can do nothing more than elicit or exemplify these laws in particular circumstances. And the laws are common to all men. For if they are not, the path to salvation, the love of God arising from the third kind of knowledge, and its consequent and causal effect on the emotions, must be different for different men and there can be no

everything that really leads man to greater perfection, and absolutely that every one should endeavor, as far as in him lies, to preserve his own being." If reason were not a rational universal, i.e., the same in all men, how could it prescribe these common rules for them? But as is evident, reason is not one thing for one man and another for another.

²⁸ *Ethics*, pt. III, Prop. 6.

single or absolute path to beatitude. If there were a million men there would be a million such paths — or none; or every man would find his salvation, if at all, in a way peculiar to himself. But the laws of emotion and the laws of knowledge, and the laws of relation of emotion to knowledge are universal and invariable; the path to salvation, the way to freedom, is, for all rational beings, one and the same. What remains of the hypothesized nominalism in Spinoza's conception of man may be left to the reader to judge for himself. On such an interpretation the philosopher's language relinquishes intelligibility.

A man can be a man, in Spinoza's view, without being a good man. But even here Spinoza advances a conception that implies universality. Goodness and badness for man are, like man himself, deductive prolongations of the logical structure of nature. What is good for man depends on his nature and consists in what is useful to him in terms of that nature. But his nature follows from a larger nature as do the laws determining what is useful and what is noxious to it. Spinoza's ethics are naturalistic but are not therefore relative to, and dependent on, individual determination or private judgment. They apply equally to all men. The notion of the good man can be expressed through an exemplar which itself follows from the conditions of *man in nature* and is not one thing for one individual and another for another. Men exist in a variety of differences but wherever and however they exist the exemplar is the same, namely, that of man under the guidance of reason. Spinoza's words are as follows:

If anybody asks, What if the highest good of those who follow after virtue were not common to all? Would it not thence follow that men who live according to the guidance of reason, that is to say men in so far as they agree in nature, would be contrary to one another? We reply that it arises from no accident, but from the nature itself of reason, that the highest good of man is common to all, inasmuch as it is deduced from the human essence itself, in so far as it is determined by reason, and also because man could not be or be conceived if he had not the power of rejoicing in this highest good. For it pertains to the essence of the human mind to have an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God.²⁹

With this passage, which is hardly susceptible to misconstruction, I will conclude this examination of Spinoza's conception of man. It is doubtful whether additional reference could manifest more distinctly the realistic implications of that conception.

²⁹ *Ethics*, pt. IV, Prop. 36, Scholium.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

In conclusion, we have now distinguished the following elements of logical universality in the philosophy of Spinoza: essences common to a plurality of individuals, the laws of logic, the order and connection of modes in relation to their respective attributes, the attributes themselves, the common properties of the modes, the laws of modal nature, the nature of man as a finite mode, and the common origin of all dependent things in substance. Without these elements of universality Spinoza's world would either be pulverized into an unending aggregate of discontinuous particulars or else collapsed into a blank, logically sterile, and undifferentiated substance. In either of these extremes universality would be eliminated, but at the cost of intelligibility. In the first case reality would be an indefinite multiplicity without any unity, which, being devoid of the last shred of rationality, the nominalists find so ineffably congenial. In the second case reality would be nothing but the simon-pure abstract being that Spinoza himself characterized as the final distillation of ideational confusion. Nominalism, in short, would be the *reductio ad absurdum* of his philosophy. Unsolved problems, it must be granted, remain for Spinoza interpretation, but this, I think, cannot be counted as one of them. No philosopher either does or can finish his philosophy down to the last dot, nor can any philosopher attain perfect verbal, as compared with real, consistency. Spinoza did not complete the details of his ontology or of his epistemology. If he had, the question of nominalism in his thought could scarcely have arisen. He is not aware that the universal validity of reason can constitute a problem, but rather, as his axioms show, presupposes it as the common ground either of thought or of existence.

Spinoza is not a William of Occam nor is he a modern semantic positivist. The philosopher to whom he is closest both in his method and in his ontology is Plato. Certain features of Platonism he would not have accepted, e.g., Plato's cosmology, but so far as the eternity and immutability of the elements of rational universality are concerned, the two philosophers are one. Spinoza did not refer to these elements in the same language, or always with the same special applications, as did Plato, but that they are present in his conceptions is a consequence implied in the rational character of the conceptions themselves.

FRANCIS S. HASEROT

Williamsburg, Virginia