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SPINOZA'S DOCTRINE OF PRIVATION

RAPHAEL DEMOS, Ph.D.

ACCORDING to Spinoza, the categories of good and bad—in fact, all categories of value—are relative. The only valid category is that of substance; value as distinct from reality has no genuine meaning. Spinoza's attack on valuation is based on two sets of arguments, one rationalistic and scientific, the other religious and theological. We will consider each in turn.

(A) The world is governed by law; whatever happens, does so by necessity. Now, we easily believe this of external nature, but we balk when we come to human nature; we say man is free to do what he likes. Yet man is not a kingdom within a kingdom; he is part of nature, subject to the same general processes. Human emotions such as hatred, anger, envy, follow from the same necessity as other things, and can no more be reviled or criticized than the cold dampness of the rain or the screeching of the wind. So, Spinoza proceeds to say, "I will consider human actions and appetites just as if I were considering lines, planes, or bodies."

What are the forces which control human conduct? They are both internal and external. (a) We are determined by our own respective characters. "The infant believes that it is by free will that it seeks the breast; the angry boy believes that by free will he wishes vengeance; the timid man thinks it is with free will he seeks flight; the drunkard believes that by a free command of his mind he speaks the things which when sober he wishes he had left unsaid. Thus the madman, the chatterer, the boy, and others of the same kind, all believe that they speak by a free command of the mind, whilst in truth they have no power to restrain the impulse which they have to speak; so that experience itself, no less than reason, clearly teaches that men believe themselves to be free simply because they are conscious of their actions, and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined" (*Ethics*, Bk. II, Prop. II, Scholium). The rose is fragrant by the necessity of its own nature, and a thorn pricks; similarly a man with a bad character behaves badly, and should no more be blamed for that than the thorn for pricking. All things, all bodies and all minds, have a determinate nature; as we know to-day, water is a determinate ratio of oxygen and hydrogen, coal is a ratio of other elements, and out of this determinate nature inevitably flow the various properties and behaviour of things.

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(b) Causation is, moreover, external. We are determined by our characters, and our characters come from heredity and from the environment. The individual is an inseparable part of the universal scheme of things. We are a particular confluence of the forces of nature, or, as Spinoza would express it, we are modes of the Infinite Substance. Our actions and our desires and our make-up are a necessary outcome of the nature of things. We are what we are because the Universe is what it is. In such a scheme, obviously there is no place for freedom, and therefore no place for moral judgment. We come at the conclusion of a long process of development; we issue from the dark womb of Being. We are aware only of the last stages of this continuous process, and are unaware of its deep sources; therefore we have the delusion that we are independent individuals controlling our destinies. Imagine, suggests Spinoza, a stone, hurled high by a man; imagine further that the stone, as it reaches the peak of its curve, comes to consciousness. The stone then would naturally think itself as free because it is ignorant of the forces that launched it; and the stone would then congratulate itself on its success on rising so high. So are we, human beings, missiles flung into the air of life by the hand of Nature, and we delude ourselves with the thought that the course of our lives is traced by our will.

From all this, the denial of the categories of good and evil, of praise and blame, follows as a matter of course. Praise and blame of action presuppose that the act might have been other than it actually was. You blame me for going to the show instead of staying at home and working, you praise me for rushing into the water and saving the drowning man instead of staying on the bank, because, presumably, the other alternative was equally open to me. Otherwise your praise or your blame are as ridiculous as Xerxes' chastising of the waters of the Hellespont because they wrecked his ships. In other words, in order that the ethical attitude be significant, possibilities must be real. But, as Spinoza says, possibility is a confused idea. What is, must be; what is not, is determined not to be by a cause. There is no middle ground of possibility, and everything happens, or fails to happen, of necessity. We conclude, therefore, that the ethical attitude of valuation belongs to a primitive stage of thought, and must retire as soon as the rational, scientific view of things comes on the scene.

The "ought" then has no objective meaning. It is futile to say to ourselves: I ought to do this or that, for I will do what I will do. Similarly, striving, aspiration, the ideal of self-improvement, are attitudes which arise from a confused idea. You do something because you are compelled to do it by your nature; you will do it anyway; and effort of will adds nothing to the result. In fact,

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Spinoza maintains that the doctrine of self-improvement is vicious; it means altering your nature, in other words, destroying yourself. By changing yourself, you have become somebody else; you are not yourself any more, therefore you have not even improved yourself. But of course such a thing is impossible, because it entails a contradiction. You cannot make yourself other than you are; you and your acts are a manifestation of your nature, and the two are logically inseparable.

(B) The ethical standpoint sins not only against science but religion as well. Theology, as well as reason, is an opponent of our moral ideas. How so? God is infinite; nothing limits Him, nothing is outside Him. God encompasses everything; He is in the world, and the world is in Him. If so, we cannot describe anything in the world as evil since the world is an expression of God. The whole antithesis of good and bad loses its meaning; everything is good, or rather everything is an expression of divine perfection. God is above good and evil. A thing is good or bad purely in relation to ourselves; what suits us we term good, what thwarts us we call bad. We isolate ourselves from the totality of things, and setting up our little selves as standards, judge the universe. In short, the moral attitude is an expression of our conceit and our provincialism. As we rise to "the intellectual love of God" and see things *sub specie aeternitatis*, we correspondingly abandon our miserable moral distinctions, and view all modes as part of the divine perfection. But, the reader might ask, what about sickness, what about earthquakes, what about the ferocious tiger and the malarial mosquito—are not these evil in themselves? Not at all, Spinoza would answer. Take sickness, for example: it seems bad because I see only its immediate effects, in relation to myself now; but if I had a universal vision extending throughout all time, if I saw my sickness as a link in a chain of events stretching infinitely behind me, and infinitely ahead of me, and infinitely around me, I would perceive it as fitting into a general pattern. As for the tigers and mosquitoes which eat us, that is bad from our point of view, but quite all right from theirs; we are food for one another, and, in so far forth, exhibit the universal interdependence of things. We eat lambs and fowl, and yet do not think ourselves ferocious for that; yet imagine the picture of human character in a history that might be written by these animals.

Spinoza considers other examples. This man is blind; surely, that is an imperfection? Now, Spinoza emphatically denies this. This man is *without* eyes; but that is not the same as saying that he is *deprived* of eyes. Negation must not be confused with privation. A stone has no eyes, yet we do not say it is deprived of eyes, nor do we bewail its fate. Privation means denying of a

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thing something which pertains to its nature; but if a man is blind, then it is his nature not to have eyes, and he is not deprived of anything, any more than the sightless stone or tree. It was in the infinite decree of God and according to the nature of things that this man should not have eyes, therefore the blind man is adequately fulfilling his nature in being blind. But you may say, suppose this man was born with good eyesight and then lost it by sickness or accident? Then, Spinoza answers, it was his nature to have eyesight for a certain number of years, and after that not to have it. The accident or the sickness happened necessarily from the nature of things, and therefore the blindness ensued as an expression of the man's nature.

In short, a thing's nature is what it actually is; if a thing is without something, then it is not in its nature to possess it. A square is not a circle, but that is no ground for complaint by the square; a square cannot be anything but a square. But, the reader might protest, other people have eyes, whereas this man has not. Precisely, answers Spinoza; why should this man be like other people? Why expect Peter to be like Paul? Each man possesses his own individual nature which is different and unique; each has his own peculiar way of manifesting the divine character. Let us take an example of our own. My friend has one leg only, and I call him a cripple. I have two legs; some other being in another planet may have three legs; am I therefore deprived of a third leg? I have no wings; angels presumably have; am I therefore to be condoled with as lacking wings? I have no automobile, and I say to myself that I am deprived of one, so I procure myself a Ford. But a Buick is better than a Ford, and I have no Buick, so I get myself one. But when is this process going to stop? There is a better car still, the Cadillac, then there is the Rolls-Royce, then perhaps aeroplanes, and so on *ad infinitum*. This idea that I am deprived of a good thing because I do not have it launches me into a feverish career of acquisitiveness, in which there is no genuine satisfaction, because there is no point of rest. And it is true that a good deal of present-day unhappiness arises from just this conception of privation with its consequent overweening ambition.

Let us get back to our blind man. The opponent might put forth the following argument: it is in the nature of man *in general* to have two eyes, and any individual who lacks two eyes is thwarted in his nature. Spinoza's answer is that man in general is a fiction; what we have is Peter, Paul, John, and so on. The root of the whole trouble arises, according to Spinoza, in the false Platonic doctrine of universals, which holds that there are general essences apart from individuals. Spinoza maintains that there is no such thing as a universal; each individual is distinct and different, and

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the word "man" is merely a word. We construct from our own minds a universal pattern of man to which we expect every individual to conform. In fact, Peter, Paul, and John should express or rather can express only their individual natures: Peter as sightless, Paul as one-eyed, John as possessed of two eyes. A Platonic universal is a confused idea; instead of considering each individual in himself, we lump them together for the sake of convenience, and construct an average man; thereupon we judge the individual by reference to this average man. But the latter is nobody and nothing; the only reality is the mode and the Universal Substance which is God.

In such a scheme there is no place for the conception of an ideal, and for striving to achieve ideals. The ideal is already realized, since God is one with the world; everything expresses perfectly its own limited nature. A criminal is perfect of his own kind. An ideal, as usually conceived of, is something from the outside, controlling the actual. But activity is from within out, like the blossoming of a flower, like the artist's self-expression; it is self-determining, whereas a conscious moral end is something that constrains man.

Supposing we agree with Spinoza's dictum that negation is not privation, we might still ask him, why negation at all? Why does not a thing possess all possible qualities? Why should it be without this or that property? The answer is that, to be is to be determinate, finite, limited. A thing (in the created world) is what it is by virtue of what it excludes. Affirmation, among modes, is correlative with negation. Thus it is in the very character of ourselves as concrete existences that we should be without certain qualities. If we were everything, then we should be nothing. (This, however, does not apply to God.)

Yet there are certain difficulties which Spinoza has to consider. Are we to place on the same level, the intelligent man with the fool, the pious with the ungodly, the honest man with the thief? Do the wicked serve God as much as do the good, since they do what they can in accordance with the decree of God? Surely there is a difference. Spinoza answers this point as follows: In the first place, God is not a tyrant who gets angry with the wicked for their acts, nor even is He a judge apportioning blame or praise. From that point of view, He does not differentiate between the pious and the ungodly. But though all individuals express their respective natures adequately, that does not put them on the same level. Some natures have more of substance, express more of God, or rather express God in a deeper, more integrated manner than others. All modes are created and operate in accordance with the decree of God, but each mode exhibits the Divine Substance in a different manner. There are degrees of perfection. To quote: "It

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is, indeed, true that the ungodly express the will of God according to their measure, but they are not therefore in any way to be compared to the pious. For the more perfection anything has, the more does it participate also in Deity, and the more does it express the perfection of God. Therefore, since the pious have incalculably more perfection than the ungodly, their virtue cannot be compared with that of the ungodly because the ungodly lack the love of God which springs from the knowledge of Him" (Letter XIX). And elsewhere: "For although a mouse is as dependent on God as an angel is, and sadness as much as joy, yet a mouse cannot therefore be a kind of angel, or sadness a kind of joy" (Letter XXIII).

How should one be able to speak even of degrees of perfection, if categories of value are abolished? In fact, degrees of perfection are degrees of reality; a thing is less or more perfect only in the sense that it has a lesser or greater depth of reality, in the sense that it expresses God's nature less or more adequately. One man is better than another in the sense that there is more stuff to him. And of course there is no return to the "ought," to aspiration, or to trying to pass from one degree of perfection to a higher one. If I am determined by God to have so much perfection and no more, then I should accept my nature and not aspire to change it. A correspondent asked Spinoza: Supposing it accorded better with the nature of someone that he should hang himself, would there be any reasons why he should not hang himself? In a remarkable passage, Spinoza answers that if someone sees that he can live better on the gallows than at his own table, he would act most foolishly if he did not go and hang himself. "And he who saw clearly that he would in fact enjoy a more perfect or better life or essence by pursuing crimes rather than by following virtue, would also be a fool if he did not pursue them. For in relation to such a perverted human nature crimes would be virtuous" (Letter XXIII). However, Spinoza insists that the situation entailed in the question is an impossible one; it cannot accord with the nature of anyone that he should destroy or pervert himself, because that is a contradiction.

At the same time, though the wicked cannot be blamed for their condition, it does not follow that they will be as happy as the godly. God awards neither rewards nor punishments; nevertheless virtue provides its own intrinsic reward, and evil its own punishment. The same principle of universal necessity which makes it nonsense to judge human acts also requires that consequences inevitably follow the act. "He who goes mad from the bite of a dog is, indeed, to be excused, and yet is rightly suffocated; he who is unable to control his desires, although he must be excused for

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his weakness, is nevertheless unable to enjoy peace of mind" (Letter LXXVIII).

There is something extraordinary in the manner in which Spinoza defends his position. Traditionally, the idea of God has been used to bolster up our moral nature; God has been represented as a guarantee that ideals and moral effort are valid. The voice of conscience has been regarded as authoritative, because it is the voice of God. With Spinoza, the function of the idea of God is just the reverse. Its effect is to destroy the significance of ethics; far from serving as a support of conscience, God is described as being above good and evil. The more divine we become, the more we remove ourselves from ethical conceptions. Spinoza asserts that the statement in the third chapter of Genesis is correct: the fall of man came about through the knowledge of good and evil. The contrast with the Kantian philosophy is evident. For Kant, God is a postulate of the moral consciousness, whereas for Spinoza, the idea of God negates the distinction of good and bad. What we have here is really two forms of the religious sense: the former is a religion of which the central core is ethical, practical, an incitement to duty; the latter is a religion essentially mystical in character, for which the highest manifestation of life is contemplation of God and union with Him.

Spinoza's relentless logic carries him to certain curious, even tragic paradoxes. His self-confessed aim in launching into philosophy is to discover man's highest good, the ideal of life; yet the result of his philosophy is to teach him that the conception of an ideal, of values, is a confused and inadequate idea. So strong is the moral motive in him that to his great metaphysical opus he gives the name 'Ethics'; yet the conclusion of his book on Ethics is that, logically speaking, there is no ethical standpoint. However, Spinoza does not maintain that we human beings, situated as we are in time and circumstance, should abandon the moral attitude of aspiration after ideals. It is true that from the standpoint of God there is neither good nor evil, but we are not the Deity. We are modes—limited, circumscribed in our nature, and through the fact of our limitation condemned to inadequate ideas. We are human, all too human, therefore provincial in outlook; consequently, we are obliged to govern our lives by conceptions which are confused; we set up ideals, we conceive of a possible pattern of life which we pursue. Not only do we do so, but we are constrained to do so; limitation is in our nature, and we cannot help expressing our nature and therefore proceeding according to the inadequate ideas of the moral sense. A striking conclusion indeed. The doctrine of necessity gives birth to two children which fight one another: it implies that since man is not free, praise and blame have no

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objective significance, and it also implies that since man is not free, he is constrained to act according to his limited nature, and so use the confused ideas of praise and blame. But there is a further side to this paradox. Spinoza accepts the limitations of human nature, and sets about discovering the good which man should pursue; this, in fact, is the quest of the Ethics. And the result of the quest is to discover in the fifth book that there is, in the ultimate sense, no valid significance to the life which consists in the pursuit of a good, and that men should accept reality, which is God. In other words, we have a double process of reasoning; and in each case the premise leads to a conclusion which is inconsistent (if not logically, at least practically) with it. The idea of necessity entails a form of life which denies necessity; and this form of life, in its turn, leads in the end to an assertion of the doctrine of necessity, and to an attitude in conformity with this doctrine. May not this succession of paradoxes mean that the theory itself is wrong, or inadequate? This gives us the clue for a consideration of the grounds of the Spinozistic attack on the moral consciousness.

We are here confronted with the conflict between the rationalistic and the ethical viewpoints. The former demands necessity, the latter requires possibility; the former asserts what is, the latter what ought to be; and if we follow out the implications of necessity, the category of the "ought" is seen to be invalid. Granting that there is a conflict between the two, what right has Spinoza to assume the rational standpoint and then test and criticize the ethical standpoint by reference to it? Why assume that the rational standpoint is prior and ultimate? That a person can take the opposite position is shown in the philosophy of Kant. For Kant, the categories of the intellect are limited in their application to the phenomenal world; they are relative to the subject, they do not reveal the nature of the object. On the other hand, the moral categories are metaphysically absolute. Perhaps, neither the position of Kant, nor that of Spinoza, is justified; it is more probable that the rational and moral categories are co-ordinate; the type of argument which proves—with Spinoza—that the moral categories are subjective, can easily be applied to show—as with Kant—that the categories of the intellect are subjective. But this invalidates neither the rational nor the ethical standpoint; all human attitudes are characterized by limitation; they are an approach to the real from a certain selected focus; they involve an aspect of subjectivity. That is why philosophy is necessary, in the sense that philosophy is the attempt to overcome the provincialism of the various special attitudes. But it overcomes this by synthesizing, not by abandoning them; each one is a perspective of the universe, and to that extent each one is a type of insight. What philosophy does is to

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correct them by a process of inter-comparison. Thus, while it takes over from science the conception of necessity, of law, of an order of nature, it also takes over from ethics the conception of a moral order and the distinction of good and bad.

To come back to Spinoza. Though he is critical toward the moral attitude, and demands that it prove itself, he never questions the validity of reason. He simply assumes that the categories of reason are objective; he does say that intuition supersedes the intellect, but all along he is certain about the category of necessity, of law, of the proposition that things completely determine one another. Thus Spinoza, while he is self-conscious about the moral sense, is not self-conscious about the intellectual categories. He grants them. Why? One might answer: because he cannot help it; they are involved in our very nature. But so are the ethical categories, as he himself admits. Then why put the second on a lower level than the first? An ordinary man may make assumptions uncritically, but that is not permissible to a philosopher. Granting the limitations to which all human attitudes are subject, we suggest that ethics is cognitive, a form of insight, that its categories are objective; and therefore that any metaphysical interpretation of the universe is bound to take account of ethical concepts. There is then the naïve, *a priori* argument in favour of ethics being epistemically valid. There is, also, the point that Spinoza's position, even though it be irrefutable, is incredible; it is not one which a person can illustrate in his practical life. One cannot act by it. Bettering one's condition is a law of life; criticism is part of reason and of human nature; if so, the idea of privation must somehow be valid. In the end, the separation between reason and the "ought" breaks down, because reason itself is an activity that pursues an end. Truth is an ideal; it is what one ought to believe. In this sense, cognition is a branch of ethics. One destroys the conception of the "ought" in ethics, only to rediscover it as a practice of reason. Thus, to deny the validity of the "ought" on the basis of rational considerations is ultimately to deny the validity of these considerations themselves.

This is of course a dialectical argument. The argument which has genuine persuasive force is the one expounded still earlier, and is no argument at all; it is an appeal to human nature in its simplicity and naïveté, it is the assertion that, in so far as we are unbiassed, we find the moral consciousness to be an integral aspect of the human mind in the same sense as the intellect. And if we accept ethics, we must accept its implications. We must accept teleology in some form, some sort of a doctrine of Platonic kinds, and the conception of genuine possibility. The denial of possibility is at the root of Spinoza's other negations in this connection. All

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is necessary, therefore "may be" has no genuine meaning. It follows, for Spinoza, that hope and fear are foolish emotions, because they are based on the idea of what might be or might have been. Imagination, in the sense of play of fantasy, is excluded, since there are no possibilities, no fictions, to be contemplated aesthetically; there are only truths to be asserted, affirmed, or denied. There is no teleology; what will be, will be; I shall do what I shall do, whereas purpose implies the possibility of deciding in favour of another alternative. Thus the crucial issue between the rational and the ethical viewpoints is whether genuine possibilities exist; and if the ethical standpoint is valid, then they must exist.

Let us now consider the presuppositions of ethics on the religious side—presuppositions in the sense of the sort of world without which moral action would lose its basis. Now, a great deal of ink has been spilled in order to prove that the idea of God is necessary for the validation of ethical conceptions. Kant is a familiar case in point. If by God we mean an actuality in which values are preserved, a ground by which moral achievement is recognized and made durable, then it may be argued that without such a God moral effort is meaningless. Achievement must endure in order to be worth while, in fact it must be eternal—if not in itself, at least through its consequences. A teacher who knew that his teachings were forgotten by the students as soon as they were learned would be foolish to continue teaching. If the results of human achievement are not preserved, then our efforts are not different from those of the child which builds ditches and walls in the sand by the seashore only to have them washed away by the next wave. Thus eternity is the groundwork of the significance of moral effort.

But we are not concerned with defending this position just now, only in showing that it is a relevant position. It may be that the hypothesis of God is necessary to the justification of ethical action; but our study of Spinoza has shown that it is possible to have too much God for the good of ethics; we need so much but no more of God, in order to make the world safe for ethics. For if we define God as Infinite Substance, then He is one with the world (since He includes everything), and it becomes impossible to apply critical judgments to the world. Everything is good, therefore the conception of good is meaningless. The rationality of ethics requires a divorce of the ideal from actuality, in other words, a separation of God from the world. With Spinoza, there is no distinction between standards and objects; the actual is the ideal; yet criticism involves the conception of a standard distinct from the actual situation and brought to bear upon it. There must be something which transcends the actual, and to which the actual is compared,

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in order that valuation may be possible. Morality is criticism, it is also action. Now moral action, too, moves in a world in which there is a distinction between the ideal and the actual; for moral action is the effort to approximate the actual to the ideal. Moral action, in so far as it is significant, requires two things: the distinction between the ideal and actuality, and the possibility of joining the two together.

The idea of God, as we find it in the Christian religion, is analysable into elements, all of them necessary components, yet fighting each other. There is the infinity of God, and there is the moral nature of God; both attributes are indispensable to the nature of God, and yet, apparently, they are inconsistent with one another. Spinoza starts with the conception of God as infinite, and then denies His moral nature; for if God is infinite, then He includes the world with all its attendant evil. Then either God is non-moral, or else moral categories have no objectivity. Spinoza chooses the latter alternative; Aristotle may be said to choose the former. The exclusive emphasis on the infinity of God leads to the type of religion which is mystical. But if a person's nature is practical and active, he is led to favour the moral categories; the world must be such that something needs to be done about it. Bad is bad, and if the world includes evil, God is out of it. God is distinct from the world. God is limited by the world, in short, God is not infinite. The task of the philosophy of religion has been to devise an intellectual framework by which both the infinity and the moral nature of God might be saved.

To sum up, Spinoza uses the weapons both of reason and of mystical religion in order to batter down the ethical categories. It is really a fight between the giant and the pygmy, between Goliath and David. On the one hand, we have the sublimities: the ideas of necessity, eternity, universal law, infinite substance; but the world of ethics is a lowly, somewhat vulgar world; the medium of action is time and space and matter. Action deals with particular, finite situations; action discovers imperfection and battles it with concrete physical weapons; action presupposes an agent who is free, who can be blamed or praised, in other words an agent whose choices are not fully determined. In the world of action there is a measure of contingency, even anarchy. Contingency, temporal change, bad and good, physical agencies, the particular: contrast these with the basic notions of reason and religion—with eternity and essence, with all-encompassing perfection and with the idea of law; surely, there is something very low-brow and plebeian about the moral realm. Yet perhaps this is the contribution of moral insight to philosophy: that it introduces the halt, the maimed, and the blind into the banquet to which all real things are invited.

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There are still two questions which demand an answer, and which will be briefly disposed of in the ensuing paragraph. (a) We have argued against Spinoza, and in favour of the moral sense, taking our stand on the ground of common sense. But there is a deeper insight in man, which must also be respected. Man is engaged in action, and in distinguishing between good and bad, but even while so engaged he has the sense that these distinctions are finite, human, limited, that, from any absolute point of view, they must vanish. The truth of this insight cannot be appreciated, however, unless it be understood properly. Its meaning is that the ethical outlook, being one of the many outlooks, cannot be taken into any synoptic philosophical outlook, as it stands. It is the insight that the ethical viewpoint must be corrected by the other special viewpoints. Now such a correction is necessary not only for the moral standpoint, but for any other of the attitudes of the mind—aesthetic, religious, or scientific. Every special discipline is limited, and it abstracts from reality. So is the ethical outlook an abstraction; its limited aspect is therefore not a reason for its abandonment, but only a reason for its criticism by reference to a wider ground. (b) It is not enough to say, as we have said in this paper, that the moral categories must be allowed a co-ordinate rank with the categories of the intellect. We are faced with the problem that the two entail contradictory consequences. Some further scheme must be devised in which the two are reconciled by having modifications imposed upon them. That is a genuine problem, but its solution is beyond the scope of the present paper.