

Benedict de Spinoza

Ethics

(Trans. R.H.M. Elwes, 1883)

Selections from PART V

ON THE POWER OF THE UNDERSTANDING, OR OF HUMAN FREEDOM.

PREFACE.

AT length I pass to the remaining portion of my *Ethics*, which is concerned with the way leading to freedom. I shall therefore treat therein of the power of the reason, showing how far the reason can control the emotions, and what is the nature of Mental Freedom or Blessedness; we shall then be able to see, how much more powerful the wise man is than the ignorant. It is no part of my design to point out the method and means whereby the understanding may be perfected, nor to show the skill whereby the body may be so tended, as to be capable of the due performance of its functions. The latter question lies in the province of Medicine, the former in the province of Logic. Here, therefore, I repeat, I shall treat only of the power of the mind, or of reason; and I shall mainly show the extent and nature of its dominion over the emotions, for their control and moderation. That we do not possess absolute dominion over them, I have already shown. ...

PROPOSITION I. *Even as thoughts and the ideas of things are arranged and associated in the mind, so are the modifications of body or the images of things precisely in the same way arranged and associated in the body.*

Proof.—The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things, and vice versa the order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas. Wherefore, even as the order and connection of ideas in the mind takes place according to the order and association of modifications of the body, so vice versa the order and connection of modifications of the body takes place in accordance with the manner, in which thoughts and the ideas of things are arranged and associated in the mind. Q.E.D.

PROP. II. *If we remove a disturbance of the spirit, or emotion, from the thought of an external cause, and unite it to other thoughts then will the love or hatred towards that external cause, and also the vacillations of spirit which arise from these emotions, be destroyed.*

PROP. III. *An emotion, which is a passion, ceases to be a passion, as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea thereof.*

Proof.—An emotion, which is a passion, is a confused idea. If, therefore, we form a clear and distinct idea of a given emotion, that idea will only be distinguished from the emotion, in so far as it is referred to the mind only, by reason; therefore, the emotion will cease to be a passion. Q.E.D.

Corollary.—An emotion therefore becomes more under our control, and the mind is less passive in respect to it, in proportion as it is more known to us.

PROP. IV. *There is no modification of the body, whereof we cannot form some clear and distinct conception. ...*

Note.—Seeing that there is nothing which is not followed by an effect, and that we clearly and distinctly understand whatever follows from an idea, which in us is adequate, it follows that everyone has the power of clearly and distinctly understanding himself and his emotions, if not absolutely, at any rate in part, and consequently of bringing it about, that he should become less subject to them. To attain this result, therefore, we must chiefly direct our efforts to acquiring, as far as possible, a clear and distinct knowledge

of every emotion, in order that the mind may thus, through emotion, be determined to think of those things which it clearly and distinctly perceives, and wherein it fully acquiesces: and thus that the emotion itself may be separated from the thought of an external cause, and may be associated with true thoughts; whence it will come to pass, not only that love, hatred, &c. will be destroyed, but also that the appetites or desires, which are wont to arise from such emotion, will become incapable of being excessive. For it must be especially remarked, that the appetite through which a man is said to be active, and that through which he is said to be passive is one and the same. For instance, we have shown that human nature is so constituted, that everyone desires his fellow-men to live after his own fashion; in a man, who is not guided by reason, this appetite is a passion which is called ambition, and does not greatly differ from pride; whereas in a man, who lives by the dictates of reason, it is an activity or virtue which is called piety. In like manner all appetites or desires are only passions, in so far as they spring from inadequate ideas; the same results are accredited to virtue, when they are aroused or generated by adequate ideas. For all desires, whereby we are determined to any given action, may arise as much from adequate as from inadequate ideas. Than this remedy for the emotions (to return to the point from which I started), which consists in a true knowledge thereof, nothing more excellent, being within our power, can be devised. For the mind has no other power save that of thinking and of forming adequate ideas, as we have shown above.

PROP. VI. *The mind has greater power over the emotions and is less subject thereto, in so far as it understands all things as necessary.*

Proof.—The mind understands all things to be necessary and to be determined to existence and operation by an infinite chain of causes; therefore, it thus far brings it about, that it is less subject to the emotions arising therefrom, and feels less emotion towards the things themselves. *Q.E.D.*

Note.—The more this knowledge, that things are necessary, is applied to particular things, which we conceive more distinctly and vividly, the greater is the power of the mind over the emotions, as experience also testifies. For we see, that the pain arising from the loss of any good is mitigated, as soon as the man who has lost it perceives, that it could not by any means have been preserved. So also we see that no one pities an infant, because it cannot speak, walk, or reason, or lastly, because it passes so many years, as it were, in unconsciousness. Whereas, if most people were born full-grown and only one here and there as an infant, everyone would pity the infants; because infancy would not then be looked on as a state natural and necessary, but as a fault or delinquency in Nature; and we may note several other instances of the same sort.

PROP. X. *So long as we are not assailed by emotions contrary to our nature, we have the power of arranging and associating the modifications of our body according to the intellectual order. ...*

Note.—By this power of rightly arranging and associating the bodily modifications we can guard ourselves from being easily affected by evil emotions. ... The best we can do, therefore, so long as we do not possess a perfect knowledge of our emotions, is to frame a system of right conduct, or fixed practical precepts, to commit it to memory, and to apply it forthwith to the particular circumstances which now and again meet us in life, so that our imagination may become fully imbued therewith, and that it may be always ready to our hand. For instance, we have laid down among the rules of life, that hatred should be overcome with love or high-mindedness, and not requited with hatred in return. Now, that this precept of reason may be always ready to our hand in time of need, we should often think over and reflect upon the wrongs generally committed by men, and in what manner and way they may be best warded off by high-mindedness: we shall thus associate the idea of wrong with the idea of this precept, which accordingly will always be ready for use when a wrong is done to us. ... We should, in the same way, reflect on courage as a means of overcoming fear; the ordinary dangers of life should frequently be brought to mind and imagined, together with the means whereby through readiness of resource and strength of mind we can avoid and overcome them. But we must note, that in arranging our thoughts and conceptions we should always bear in mind that which is good in every individual thing, in order that we may always be determined to action by an emotion of pleasure. For instance, if a man sees that he is too keen in the pursuit of honour, let him think over its right use, the end for which it should be pursued, and the means whereby he may attain it. Let him not think of its misuse, and its emptiness, and the fickleness of mankind, and the like, whereof no man thinks except through a morbidness of disposition; with thoughts

like these do the most ambitious most torment themselves, when they despair of gaining the distinctions they hanker after, and in thus giving vent to their anger would fain appear wise. Wherefore it is certain that those, who cry out the loudest against the misuse of honour and the vanity of the world, are those who most greedily covet it. This is not peculiar to the ambitious, but is common to all who are ill-used by fortune, and who are infirm in spirit. For a poor man also, who is miserly, will talk incessantly of the misuse of wealth and of the vices of the rich; whereby he merely torments himself, and shows the world that he is intolerant, not only of his own poverty, but also of other people's riches. So, again, those who have been ill received by a woman they love think of nothing but the inconstancy, treachery, and other stock faults of the fair sex; all of which they consign to oblivion, directly they are again taken into favour by their sweetheart. Thus he who would govern his emotions and appetite solely by the love of freedom strives, as far as he can, to gain a knowledge of the virtues and their causes, and to fill his spirit with the joy which arises from the true knowledge of them: he will in no wise desire to dwell on men's faults, or to carp at his fellows, or to revel in a false show of freedom. Whosoever will diligently observe and practice these precepts (which indeed are not difficult) will verily, in a short space of time, be able, for the most part, to direct his actions according to the commandments of reason.

PROP. XIV. *The mind can bring it about, that all bodily modifications or images of things may be referred to the idea of God.*

PROP. XV. *He who clearly and distinctly understands himself and his emotions loves God, and so much the more in proportion as he understands himself and his emotions.*

PROP. XVI. *This love towards God must hold the chief place in the mind.*

PROP. XVII. *God is without passions, neither is he affected by any emotion of pleasure or pain.*

Proof.—All ideas, in so far as they are referred to God, are true, that is adequate; and therefore (by the general Def. of the Emotions) God is without passions. Again, God cannot pass either to a greater or to a lesser perfection; therefore (by Def. of the Emotions, ii. iii.) he is not affected by any emotion of pleasure or pain. *Q.E.D.*

Corollary.—Strictly speaking, God does not love or hate anyone. For God is not affected by any emotion of pleasure or pain, consequently he does not love or hate anyone.

PROP. XVIII. *No one can hate God.*

Proof.—The idea of God which is in us is adequate and perfect; wherefore, in so far as we contemplate God, we are active; consequently there can be no pain accompanied by the idea of God, in other words, no one can hate God. *Q.E.D.*

Corollary.—Love towards God cannot be turned into hate.

Note.—It may be objected that, as we understand God as the cause of all things, we by that very fact regard God as the cause of pain. But I make answer, that, in so far as we understand the causes of pain, it to that extent ceases to be a passion, that is, it ceases to be pain; therefore, in so far as we understand God to be the cause of pain, we to that extent feel pleasure.

PROP. XIX. *He, who loves God, cannot endeavour that God should love him in return.*

Proof.—For, if a man should so endeavour, he would desire that God, whom he loves, should not be God, and consequently he would desire to feel pain; which is absurd.

PROP. XX. *This love towards God cannot be stained by the emotion of envy or jealousy: contrariwise, it is the more fostered, in proportion as we conceive a greater number of men to be joined to God by the same bond of love. ...*

We may thus readily conceive the power which clear and distinct knowledge, and especially that third kind of knowledge, founded on the actual knowledge of God, possesses over the emotions: if it does not absolutely destroy them, in so far as they are passions; at any rate, it causes them to occupy a very small part of the mind. Further, it begets a love towards a thing immutable and eternal, whereof we may really enter into possession; neither can it be defiled with those faults which are inherent in ordinary love; but it

may grow from strength to strength, and may engross the greater part of the mind, and deeply penetrate it. And now I have finished with all that concerns this present life: for, as I said in the beginning of this note, I have briefly described all the remedies against the emotions. ... It is now, therefore, time to pass on to those matters, which appertain to the duration of the mind, without relation to the body.

PROP. XXI. *The mind can only imagine anything, or remember what is past, while the body endures.*

PROP. XXII. *Nevertheless in God there is necessarily an idea, which expresses the essence of this or that human body under the form of eternity.*

Proof.—God is the cause, not only of the existence of this or that human body, but also of its essence. This essence, therefore, must necessarily be conceived through the very essence of God, and be thus conceived by a certain eternal necessity; and this conception, must necessarily exist in God. *Q.E.D.*

PROP. XXIII. *The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but there remains of it something which is eternal.*

Proof.—There is necessarily in God a concept or idea, which expresses the essence of the human body, which, therefore, is necessarily something appertaining to the essence of the human mind. But we have not assigned to the human mind any duration, definable by time, except in so far as it expresses the actual existence of the body, which is explained through duration, and may be defined by time—that is, we do not assign to it duration, except while the body endures. Yet, as there is something, notwithstanding, which is conceived by a certain eternal necessity through the very essence of God; this something, which appertains to the essence of the mind, will necessarily be eternal. *Q.E.D.*

Note.—This idea, which expresses the essence of the body under the form of eternity, is, as we have said, a certain mode of thinking, which belongs to the essence of the mind, and is necessarily eternal. Yet it is not possible that we should remember that we existed before our body, for our body can bear no trace of such existence, neither can eternity be defined in terms of time, or have any relation to time. But, notwithstanding, we feel and know that we are eternal. For the mind feels those things that it conceives by understanding, no less than those things that it remembers. For the eyes of the mind, whereby it sees and observes things, are none other than proofs. Thus, although we do not remember that we existed before the body, yet we feel that our mind, in so far as it involves the essence of the body, under the form of eternity, is eternal, and that thus its existence cannot be defined in terms of time, or explained through duration. Thus our mind can only be said to endure, and its existence can only be defined by a fixed time, in so far as it involves the actual existence of the body. Thus far only has it the power of determining the existence of things by time, and conceiving them under the category of duration.

PROP. XXIV. *The more we understand particular things, the more do we understand God.*

PROP. XXV. *The highest endeavour of the mind, and the highest virtue is to understand things by the third kind of knowledge.*

Proof.—The third kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things; and, in proportion as we understand things more in this way, we better understand God; therefore the highest virtue of the mind, that is the power, or nature, or highest endeavour of the mind, is to understand things by the third kind of knowledge. *Q.E.D.*

PROP. XXVI. *In proportion as the mind is more capable of understanding things by the third kind of knowledge, it desires more to understand things by that kind.*

PROP. XXVII. *From this third kind of knowledge arises the highest possible mental acquiescence [Curley: satisfaction of mind].*

Proof.—The highest virtue of the mind is to know God, or to understand things by the third kind of knowledge, and this virtue is greater in proportion as the mind knows things more by the said kind of knowledge: consequently, he who knows things by this kind of knowledge passes to the summit of human perfection, and is therefore affected by the highest pleasure, such pleasure being accompanied by the idea

of himself and his own virtue; thus, from this kind of knowledge arises the highest possible acquiescence [Curley: satisfaction]. *Q.E.D.*

PROP. XXIX. *Whatsoever the mind understands under the form of eternity, it does not understand by virtue of conceiving the present actual existence of the body, but by virtue of conceiving the essence of the body under the form of eternity.*

Proof.—In so far as the mind conceives the present existence of its body, it to that extent conceives duration which can be determined by time, and to that extent only, has it the power of conceiving things in relation to time. But eternity cannot be explained in terms of duration. Therefore to this extent the mind has not the power of conceiving things under the form of eternity, but it possesses such power, because it is of the nature of reason to conceive things under the form of eternity, and also because it is of the nature of the mind to conceive the essence of the body under the form of eternity, for besides these two there is nothing which belongs to the essence of mind. Therefore this power of conceiving things under the form of eternity only belongs to the mind in virtue of the mind's conceiving the essence of the body under the form of eternity. *Q.E.D.*

Note.—Things are conceived by us as actual in two ways; either as existing in relation to a given time and place, or as contained in God and following from the necessity of the divine nature. Whatsoever we conceive in this second way as true or real, we conceive under the form of eternity, and their ideas involve the eternal and infinite essence of God ...

PROP. XXX. *Our mind, in so far as it knows itself and the body under the form of eternity, has to that extent necessarily a knowledge of God, and knows that it is in God, and is conceived through God.*

Proof.—Eternity is the very essence of God, in so far as this involves necessary existence. Therefore to conceive things under the form of eternity, is to conceive things in so far as they are conceived through the essence of God as real entities, or in so far as they involve existence through the essence of God; wherefore our mind, in so far as it conceives itself and the body under the form of eternity, has to that extent necessarily a knowledge of God, and knows, &c. *Q.E.D.*

PROP. XXXI. *The third kind of knowledge depends on the mind, as its formal cause, in so far as the mind itself is eternal.*

Proof.—The mind does not conceive anything under the form of eternity, except in so far as it conceives its own body under the form of eternity; that is, except in so far as it is eternal; therefore, in so far as it is eternal, it possesses the knowledge of God, which knowledge is necessarily adequate; hence the mind, in so far as it is eternal, is capable of knowing everything which can follow from this given knowledge of God, in other words, of knowing things by the third kind of knowledge, whereof accordingly the mind, in so far as it is eternal, is the adequate or formal cause of such knowledge. *Q.E.D.*

Note.—In proportion, therefore, as a man is more potent in this kind of knowledge, he will be more completely conscious of himself and of God; in other words, he will be more perfect and blessed ...

PROP. XXXII. *Whatsoever we understand by the third kind of knowledge, we take pleasure in, and this pleasure is accompanied by the idea of God as cause.*

Proof.—From this kind of knowledge arises the highest possible mental acquiescence, that is, pleasure, and this acquiescence is accompanied by the idea of the mind itself, and consequently the idea also of God as cause. *Q.E.D.*

Corollary.—From the third kind of knowledge necessarily arises the intellectual love of God. From this kind of knowledge arises pleasure accompanied by the idea of God as cause, that is, the love of God; not in so far as we imagine him as present, but in so far as we understand him to be eternal; this is what I call the intellectual love of God.

PROP. XXXIII. *The intellectual love of God, which arises from the third kind of knowledge, is eternal.*

PROP. XXXV. *God loves himself with an infinite intellectual love.*

PROP. XXXVI. *The intellectual love of the mind towards God is that very love of God whereby God loves himself, not in so far as he is infinite, but in so far as he can be explained through the essence of the human mind regarded under the form of eternity; in other words, the intellectual love of the mind towards God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself. ...*

Proof.—This love of the mind must be referred to the activities of the mind; it is itself, indeed, an activity whereby the mind regards itself accompanied by the idea of God as cause; that is, an activity whereby God, in so far as he can be explained through the human mind, regards himself accompanied by the idea of himself; therefore, this love of the mind is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself. Q.E.D.

Corollary.—Hence it follows that God, in so far as he loves himself, loves man, and, consequently, that the love of God towards men, and the intellectual love of the mind towards God are identical.

Note.—From what has been said we clearly understand, wherein our salvation, or blessedness, or freedom, consists: namely, in the constant and eternal love towards God, or in God's love towards men. This love or blessedness is, in the Bible, called Glory and not undeservedly. For whether this love be referred to God or to the mind, it may rightly be called acquiescence of spirit, which is not really distinguished from glory. In so far as it is referred to God, it is pleasure...

Again, since the essence of our mind consists solely in knowledge, whereof the beginning and the foundation is God, it becomes clear to us, in what manner and way our mind, as to its essence and existence, follows from the divine nature and constantly depends on God. ...

PROP. XXXVIII. *In proportion as the mind understands more things by the second and third kind of knowledge, it is less subject to those emotions which are evil, and stands in less fear of death. ...*

Note.—Hence we understand ... that death becomes less hurtful, in proportion as the mind's clear and distinct knowledge is greater, and, consequently, in proportion as the mind loves God more. Again, since from the third kind of knowledge arises the highest possible acquiescence, it follows that the human mind can attain to being of such a nature, that the part thereof which we have shown to perish with the body should be of little importance when compared with the part which endures. ...

PROP. XL. *In proportion as each thing possesses more of perfection, so is it more active, and less passive; and, vice versa, in proportion as it is more active, so is it more perfect. ...*

Note.—Such are the doctrines which I had purposed to set forth concerning the mind, in so far as it is regarded without relation to the body; whence ... it is plain that our mind, in so far as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is determined by another eternal mode of thinking, and this other by a third, and so on to infinity; so that all taken together at once constitute the eternal and infinite intellect of God.

PROP. XLI. *Even if we did not know that our mind is eternal, we should still consider as of primary importance piety and religion, and generally all things which, in Part IV., we showed to be attributable to courage and high-mindedness.*

Proof.—The first and only, foundation of virtue, or the rule of right living is seeking one's own true interest. Now, while we determined what reason prescribes as useful, we took no account of the mind's eternity, which has only become known to us in this Fifth Part. Although we were ignorant at that time that the mind is eternal, we nevertheless stated that the qualities attributable to courage and high-mindedness are of primary importance. Therefore, even if we were still ignorant of this doctrine, we should yet put the aforesaid precepts of reason in the first place. Q.E.D.

Note.—The general belief of the multitude seems to be different. Most people seem to believe that they are free, in so far as they may obey their lusts, and that they cede their rights, in so far as they are bound to live according to the commandments of the divine law. They therefore believe that piety, religion, and, generally, all things attributable to firmness of mind, are burdens, which, after death, they hope to lay aside, and to receive the reward for their bondage, that is, for their piety, and religion; it is not only by this

hope, but also, and chiefly, by the fear of being horribly punished after death, that they are induced to live according to the divine commandments, so far as their feeble and infirm spirit will carry them.

If men had not this hope and this fear, but believed that the mind perishes with the body, and that no hope of prolonged life remains for the wretches who are broken down with the burden of piety, they would return to their own inclinations, controlling everything in accordance with their lusts, and desiring to obey fortune rather than themselves. Such a course appears to me not less absurd than if a man, because he does not believe that he can by wholesome food sustain his body for ever, should wish to cram himself with poisons and deadly fare; or if, because he sees that the mind is not eternal or immortal, he should prefer to be out of his mind altogether, and to live without the use of reason; these ideas are so absurd as to be scarcely worth refuting.

PROP. XLII. *Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; neither do we rejoice therein, because we control our lusts, but, contrariwise, because we rejoice therein, we are able to control our lusts.*

Proof.—Blessedness consists in love towards God, which love springs from the third kind of knowledge; therefore this love must be referred to the mind, in so far as the latter is active; therefore it is virtue itself. This was our first point. Again, in proportion as the mind rejoices more in this divine love or blessedness, so does it the more understand; that is, so much the more power has it over the emotions, and so much the less is it subject to those emotions which are evil; therefore, in proportion as the mind rejoices in this divine love or blessedness, so has it the power of controlling lusts. And, since human power in controlling the emotions consists solely in the understanding, it follows that no one rejoices in blessedness, because he has controlled his lusts, but, contrariwise, his power of controlling his lusts arises from this blessedness itself. *Q.E.D.*

Note.—I have thus completed all I wished to set forth touching the mind's power over the emotions and the mind's freedom. Whence it appears, how potent is the wise man, and how much he surpasses the ignorant man, who is driven only by his lusts. For the ignorant man is not only distracted in various ways by external causes without ever gaining the true acquiescence of his spirit, but moreover lives, as it were unwitting of himself, and of God, and of things, and as soon as he ceases to suffer, ceases also to be. Whereas the wise man, in so far as he is regarded as such, is scarcely at all disturbed in spirit, but, being conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, by a certain eternal necessity, never ceases to be, but always possesses true acquiescence of his spirit. If the way which I have pointed out as leading to this result seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered. Needs must it be hard, since it is so seldom found. How would it be possible, if salvation were ready to our hand, and could without great labour be found, that it should be by almost all men neglected? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.