

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

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VOL. XLI (No. 10)

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## CONTENTS:

|                                                                                                               | PAGE |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| <i>Frontispiece.</i> Benedictus de Spinoza.                                                                   |      |
| <i>Spinoza and Immortality.</i> REV. ERNEST G. BRAHAM.....                                                    | 577  |
| <i>Transubstantiation in Ecclesiastical Philosophy.</i> (Concluded)<br>ROBERT P. RICHARDSON.....              | 583  |
| <i>Space and Time in Music.</i> M. WHITCOMB HESS.....                                                         | 596  |
| <i>The Actual History of the Origin of Judaism and Christianity in a Nutshell.</i><br>A. KAMPMEIER.....       | 601  |
| <i>Humane Religion.</i> BOLLING SOMERVILLE.....                                                               | 614  |
| <i>The Birth and Early History of Sakyamuni as Told in the Pali Scriptures.</i><br>HOWARD W. OUTERBRIDGE..... | 619  |
| <i>Universalism.</i> CORNELIUS O'CONNOR.....                                                                  | 628  |
| <i>"Degeneration" in Biographical Criticism.</i> LEWIS PIAGET SHANKS.....                                     | 634  |
| <i>The Insatiable. Philosophy.</i> (Poems) CHARLES SLOAN REID.....                                            | 639  |

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|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
|                                                                                                               | PAGE |
| <i>Frontispiece.</i> Benedictus de Spinoza.                                                                   |      |
| <i>Spinoza and Immortality.</i> REV. ERNEST G. BRAHAM.....                                                    | 577  |
| <i>Transubstantiation in Ecclesiastical Philosophy.</i> (Concluded)<br>ROBERT P. RICHARDSON.....              | 583  |
| <i>Space and Time in Music.</i> M. WHITCOMB HESS.....                                                         | 596  |
| <i>The Actual History of the Origin of Judaism and Christianity in a Nutshell.</i><br>A. KAMPMEIER.....       | 601  |
| <i>Humane Religion.</i> BOLLING SOMERVILLE.....                                                               | 614  |
| <i>The Birth and Early History of Sakyamuni as Told in the Pali Scriptures.</i><br>HOWARD W. OUTERBRIDGE..... | 619  |
| <i>Universalism.</i> CORNELIUS O'CONNOR.....                                                                  | 628  |
| <i>"Degeneration" in Biographical Criticism.</i> LEWIS PIAGET SHANKS.....                                     | 634  |
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BENEDICTUS DE SPINOZA

*Frontispiece to The Open Court*

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## SPINOZA AND IMMORTALITY

BY ERNEST G. BRAHAM

ON first consideration one would not expect Spinoza to have any place for immortality in his teaching seeing that he considers that there is One Spiritual Substance in existence with its temporary differentiations into things and persons. One needs to observe, however, that throughout Spinoza's system there runs two fundamental views which are never quite reconciled. The first emphasizes the unity of the universe at the expense of the parts, the second side is quite individualistic, emphasizing the parts at the expense of the unity. This latter side comes out especially in what he terms the "conatus" which plays a prominent part in his ethical teaching. According to this the differentiations of the universe have a tendency to seek their own preservation as against the efforts of the other parts, and he makes this "conatus" the essence of the individual.

When, however, Spinoza is arguing against Descartes he takes rather the other view based on the unity of Reality. Descartes said that there were two kinds of substance, matter and mind, but he did not regard these as having equal value. As regards matter, there is only one material substance, viz., the whole material universe; what we call a chair or a house or any particular part of the material universe is only a temporary modification of the one material substance for Descartes and as such will come to an end. But Descartes treats spiritual substance quite differently. He does not consider that there is only one Spiritual Substance but that each individual mind is a genuine substance. Admittedly he thinks that each spiritual substance is something that depends for its existence

upon God but each spiritual substance will last forever unless God annihilates it.

Spinoza wages war against the idea of the two kinds of substance in Descartes, material and spiritual and asserts that there is only one Spiritual Substance and that our minds are just temporary modes of that one substance. Instead of saying with Descartes that God had created material substance and a lot of other spiritual substances, Spinoza says God alone is Substance known to us under the form of two attributes (although having infinite attributes) these two attributes being extension and thought, that is material form and mental form. The attributes, however, about which Spinoza speaks are almost at times exalted by him to the level of substance. In any case they cannot be degraded to mere qualities of the one substance. They seem to have a rank not quite so high as Substance and not quite so low as form or quality. Each of the Attributes, extension and thought, is differentiated into modes. On the side of our bodies we are modes of the attribute of extension, on the side of our minds we are modes of the attribute of thought. There is for Spinoza complete correlation between the two modes body and mind. we cannot have body without mind, nor mind without body.

Farther, Spinoza begins to draw a distinction between finite and infinite modes, and the infinite modes turn out to be the eternal differentiations of the attributes. Given a man as he really is he must be regarded as an eternal mode of the attribute of thought on the side of his mind, and an eternal mode of the attribute of extension on the side of his body. This position presents us with the real difficulty of reconciling the fact that man's body which breaks up like any other finite body in death, being necessarily correlated to his spirit, would involve on a strict logical interpretation that man's spirit would break up too.

More difficulties arise in regard to the question of the immortality of the soul in Spinoza's theory of knowledge. In this he distinguishes between three kinds of knowledge (a) the knowledge which comes through the senses (b) rational or scientific knowledge (c) intuitive knowledge.

(a) This type is full of error. The knowledge through the senses depends upon the action of things upon the body and in consequence it frequently tells us more about our own body than of the external things. Again the connection is only an association be-



tween the different parts of this knowledge, there is no real logical connection. Connected with this first type of knowledge there are the passions on the conative side. The essence of knowledge at this stage is that the individual is more acted upon than acting, both as regards knowledge, emotions and conations.

(b) In regard to the second type of knowledge,—rational or scientific knowledge,—this is a much clearer type. It is a knowledge that depends on “*notiones communes*” as he calls them. There are certain facts common to all kinds of bodies including our own, such as geometrical and mechanical properties. If we confine ourselves strictly to these we shall not fall into the mistake of confusing what is due to our own body and what is due to the external world. Again at this stage one is not dealing with mere association but with real logical connection between ideas. Probably Spinoza would include more than we should in what is called logical connection because at his period thinkers regarded causation as logical sequence. If B always followed A, then A was thought of as the cause of B. Also under the heading of logical connection he would include what we call laws of nature. The connections then in this second type of knowledge which he calls scientific knowledge are real logical connections and not mere association as in the first type knowledge which comes through the senses. Yet one cannot claim, according to Spinoza, that this second type of knowledge is entirely satisfactory because as he would say it is all about generalities. Corresponding to it there is a rational understanding of our own passions, and for the causes of it a psychological understanding is required, but owing to the abstractness of this knowledge it does not help us to control by our minds. Spinoza’s own view is that one passion can be controlled by another if you can replace passive emotions by active ones, which are those in which we have clear understanding. For instance, sorrow, a passive emotion does not do good either to the sorrowful person or to others. Spinoza would say that we should not merely try to get rid of sorrow, but try to understand the real causes of personal trouble and disaster and the troubles and disasters which overtake others, and base then upon that active emotion a desire to help. So much for the second type of knowledge.

(c) The third type, intuitive knowledge, is supposed to combine the merits of the concreteness of the first with the merits of the second. The second is clear and rational knowledge and so is the third

type, but the latter is not confined to abstractions and generalities. Spinoza being a mystic, it is difficult to know what he really means by *scientia intuitiva*. Probably it is a mystical knowledge or insight which comes only to those who have mystical experiences. He saw the system of the universe as a whole, which ordinary science only sees piecemeal but his view seems essentially to be that the content of the second and third type of knowledge is the same with this distinction of outlook, viz., that in the stage of scientific knowledge one's mind moves from one piece of the world to another, but in intuitive knowledge one passes to the whole immediately. It is the same system, however, which the mystic sees as a whole that the scientist sees fragmentarily as he considers one portion of reality after another. But there is another point in Spinoza's allied to this special mystical knowledge and indeed its most essential element which is that special type of emotion which he called "the intellectual love of God."

From this theory of knowledge the Spinozian view of immortality must be developed. Indeed it certainly cannot be grasped unless his theory of knowledge is first understood. One is quite aware that difficulties arise out of his theory of knowledge especially over the fact of error. According to Spinoza error arises because we have finite bodies, each of us has a special *place* in the world and consequently we see things from a special angle and so we are liable to group things together which are not closely connected in nature and also to separate things which are closely related in nature. This of course works all right so long as we regard ourselves as being finite modes, but in the later stages of knowledge he makes out that we (our bodies and minds) are not finite modes but eternal differentiations of God, that is infinite modes. The way Spinoza tries to reconcile this apparent dualism is ingenious. He says that each man, as he really is, is an infinite differentiation of reality, but most men are mistaken as to the nature of their true selves. What the ordinary man takes for his true self is not an infinite and eternal differentiation, it is a mix up of bits from one infinite mode and bits from other infinite modes. To this man death will mean finding out the mistake. No doubt everyone is more or less mistaken about the true self, but the ordinary man who lives entirely on the level of perceptual knowledge and passive emotion is tremendously mistaken about the nature of his true self. Take the average book-maker for instance. No doubt there is an eternal differentiation of

reality corresponding to him, but as he knows himself it does not uniquely correspond to him. What he calls himself, and what he takes an interest in is a mix up of parts extracted from a great number of eternal modes. When he dies the eternal modes will go on all right, but the peculiar mixture which he calls himself will come to an end, consequently this type of man is mortal. In the case of the wise man, however, such men as Plato or Spinoza himself. Spinoza would say no doubt what the wise men take to be themselves contains *some* confusion. That is to say there is not one eternal single differentiation which corresponds to the wise man. Still he has got over so many delusions by rising to the second and third types of knowledge that what he knows as himself is *mainly* one eternal differentiation though there may be slight elements from the eternal modes mixed with it in the wise man's views of himself. When this kind of man dies the mixture will cease but *the bulk* of what he takes to be himself now is really an eternal mode, therefore in that sense he is immortal.

This seems to be what Spinoza means by immortality. It is clearly only the immortality of the wise.

In closing one may add two brief criticisms.

(a) How in the first place do these mixtures of eternal differentiations arise? If one says that the bookmaker mistakes a mixture for himself and that this mixture will not last the shock of death, surely there must be some reason why this or any of the particular mixture exists here and now. One cannot see why infinite and eternal modes should be mistaken about their own limits. We have here in Spinoza the same sort of difficulty as that of reconciling the infinite with finite modes.

(b) On Spinoza's view there is complete correlation between the thought and the extension sides of any mode. The body of the wise man breaks up in death just in exactly the same way as the body of ordinary man, and yet Spinoza appears to hold that the mind of the wise man persists with very little change whilst the mind of the man on the lower level is such a mixture and confusion that it disappears in death and that as mind it ceases to be.

These are some of the questions arising out of Spinoza's view of immortality, which as we have seen, arises out of his theory of knowledge. Spinoza gives no convincing proof why the wise men alone should be immortal. The proof he gives is inconsistent with his metaphysical basis of the One Substance: and the ordinary

man asks why this Ultimate Reality of which he is a part, which produced him, and to which he contributes in his moral endeavour, should reduce him to a cipher at the end of his earthly course? This question demands a more satisfactory answer than Spinoza offers us.