

ETHICS AND THE SPINOZA REVIVAL.

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CONFUSION reigns in the modern world so far as ethical problems are concerned. "The young", we are told, have repudiated ethical standards and principles, and decline to be bound by "the superstitions" of their parents. Everything is challenged, doubted, put to the test of—no one knows what!

In these circumstances it is perhaps not without significance that an international society should have been founded at The Hague for the distinct purpose of advancing the study and appreciation of Spinoza's teachings. The moving spirits in this society believe that Spinoza has a message for our own day, and that we, as well as the younger generation, might well hark back to him. The society proposes to publish an annual of original studies, as well as series of books to be known as *Bibliotheca Spinozana*. Membership is open to lay students and lovers of philosophy and high, serious thinking.

The foregoing facts suggest a re-examination of Spinoza's essential ideas and views. The task is worthy of scholars and educated men of leisure. The present writer has no intention or ambition to attempt any searching study of Spinoza, but he may venture to offer certain summaries of the ethical discussions of the great philosopher and logician, with some reflections, commentaries and comparisons. May my slight effort stimulate more competent writers to do more adequate and better work in the same fertile field!

To begin with, Spinoza was a philosophical realist who saw "life steadily and whole", in Matthew Arnold's phrase. He appreciated the need of studying human nature in conduct and behavior, and he warned us neither to groan nor to exult over manifestations of human nature, but just simply to try to comprehend

them. Such comprehension, in his judgment, was essential to any real effort at correction of human faults and blunders. No philosopher or ethicist dwelt more on "the guidance of reason", the life of reason, the dictates of reason than did Spinoza, yet the modern intellectualists cannot claim him as their authority or cite him with any effect. He never overestimated the *actual* influence of reason in the governance of the world.

Men, as a rule, says Spinoza, are governed in everything by desire or lust; they are varied—for those are rare who live according to the rules prescribed by reason—and, moreover, they are generally envious and more prone to revenge than pity; they are ignorant, short-sighted and necessarily liable to emotions; they are drawn in different directions and are often contrary one to the other; they are liable to emotions which far surpass human power or virtue; they are guided by opinion rather than by reason, and even the knowledge by them of good and evil often excites disturbances in the mind and yields to all manner of sin and wickedness. (*Ethics*, part four.)

If, then, men are thus inconstant, weak, the prey of passions and emotions, how can the wise and chastened few cause them to seek to live according to reason?

In answering this question Spinoza repeatedly admonishes us to cultivate patience and charity toward poor, frail, errant humanity. Those, he says, who cavil at men and prefer to reprobate vice instead of inculcating virtue, are a nuisance to themselves and to others, and they do not help solidify the minds of men, but rather to unloosen them. Here is a striking and edifying passage:

"Let satirists laugh to their hearts' content at human affairs; let theologians revile them, and let the melancholy praise as much as they can the rude and barbarous life: let them despise men and admire the brutes; despite all this men will find that they can prepare with mutual aid far more easily what they need, and avoid far more the perils which beset them on all sides by united forces."

It is true, alas, that "he who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow, or, as Ovid put it "Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor (The better I see and approve, the worse I follow)." But to recognize these facts is not to despair of man, not to curse God and die, not to talk idle nonsense with the Bernard Shaws and Anatole Frances about the creation of man having been perpetrated as a sort of grim joke. "It is, says Spinoza, "necessary to know ourselves, to know both the power and want of power of our na-

ture, so that we may determine what reason can do in the moderating of our desires and what it cannot."

This passage should be pondered by the cynics, pessimists and superficial moralists.

What is, or should be, our social ideal, our goal? Spinoza's answer is clear and firm.

He begins by pointing out that, "since reason postulates nothing against nature, it postulates, therefore, that each man should love himself and seek what is useful to him"—that is, what is truly useful to him—and "that each man should endeavor to preserve his being as far as it in him lies, and should desire all that leads him to a greater state of perfection." He then proceeds to argue that "there is nothing more useful to man than man." While envy, jealousy, antipathy, suspicion divide men, the fact remains that they cannot lead solitary lives, cannot dispense with social organization, and cannot renounce fellowship and co-operation without sacrificing much that they value and cherish. It is obvious that man is a social animal, and the question is to what extent his good coincides with the common good. Spinoza says:

"Nothing can be desired by men more excellent for their self-preservation than that all with all should so agree that they compose the minds of all into one mind, and the bodies of all into one body, and all endeavor at the same time as much as possible to preserve their being, and all seek at the same time what is useful to them all as a body. From which it follows that men who are governed by reason—that is, men who under the guidance of reason seek what is useful to them—desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind, and therefore they are just, faithful and honorable."

Here what we call altruism is frankly based on rational egoism. Spinoza insists that no virtue can be conceived as prior to the virtue of preserving oneself, and that the more one endeavors and succeeds in preserving one's own essence—the desire of living well, acting well, being blessed that essence—the more virtue he has. But an enlightened egoism imperceptibly and naturally shades into and assumes the character of altruism. Hatred and malice are *not* conducive to the preservation of one's essence, to the state of contentment and blessedness. Peace, friendship, co-operation *are* conducive to such states, and man's reason has no difficulty in finding out that truth. Hence it is idle to say that men

must continue to fight one another, to commit racial suicide, as it were, or to poison and destroy their better selves, their essence.

If men desire to live in concord and be of help to each other—and if they are reasonable they *must* desire this, for the sake of their individual security and happiness—that they must give up their natural rights, render themselves reciprocally secure, and determine to do nothing that will be injurious to another, continues Spinoza, and thus society, or the state, as an organized entity is brought into existence under a sort of tacit social contract. The individual does not sacrifice himself in becoming a citizen; his reason tells him that, on the contrary, he gains very decided advantages from the status of citizen or member of an organized community. True, he may at times be tempted to injure some one, to commit a wrong, but he must realize in his sober moment that restraint, discipline and prevention of anti-social conduct are legitimate and necessary.

Advocates of non-resistance to evil and aggression will find no support in Spinoza's teaching. And, although from a superficial point of view, such advocates may be said to cherish a deeper faith in human reason and human nature than that exhibited by their opponents, the truth is that the gospel of non-resistance is repugnant to sound psychology or a real understanding of human conduct. Spinoza, assuredly, will not be charged with contempt for reason and intellect. Yet the modern intellectualists may learn from him that undue trust in reason and enlightened self-interest is as unscientific, unphilosophical as it is contrary to the common sense of the average man.

In psychology, indeed, Spinoza was extraordinarily "modern." He did not share the error that so many of our half-baked reformers fall into when they assert or imply that evil and injustice can be eradicated by one-sided education, by logical demonstrations. Again and again he argues that *an emotion cannot be checked by a mere idea, an argument, a demonstration addressed to the intellect.* Here are far-reaching and pregnant propositions:

"An emotion can neither be hindered nor removed save by a contrary emotion and one stronger in checking emotion."

"An emotion whose cause we imagine to be with us at the present is stronger than if we did not imagine it to be present."

"The knowledge of good or evil is nothing else than the emotion of pleasure or pain in so far as we are conscious of it."

"A true knowledge of good and evil cannot restrain any emo-

tion in so far as the knowledge is true, but only in so far as it is considered as an emotion."

"The desire which arises from the knowledge of good and evil, in so far as this knowledge has reference to the future, can more easily be checked or destroyed than the desire of things which are pleasing in the present."

The "intellectualists" who fail to reckon with the emotions, passions and appetites of man, and the Utopian reformers who expect to revolutionize industry and politics by appeals to Reason, or to Enlightened Self-Interest, should anxiously consider the bearing of the foregoing proposition (Spinoza's *Ethics*, Part 4) on the problems they are seeking to evolve and on the assumptions that underlie the alleged solutions favored by them. The reformer should first of all study psychology. It is idle to expect the impossible of mankind. It is idle to suppose that a world governed by passion and emotion can be profoundly modified by speculations or abstract, fanciful theories concerning future social arrangements.

Two conclusions may be drawn from Spinoza's chain of propositions. One he, in fact, draws himself—namely, that society is held together by the law, or fact, that "every one refrains from inflicting evil through fear of greater evil", and that the State or organized society must make its commands respected and obeyed "by threats", rather than by reason.

The second conclusion is that, while threats and fear are tolerably effective in checking anti-social impulses and emotions, and in thus promoting order and harmony, exclusive trust in threats and fear would be unwise and unphilosophical. For, as Spinoza recognizes, "the harmony or peace that is born of fear is not trustworthy." The things that give birth to enduring harmony and peace, he says, "are those which have reference to justice, equity and honorable dealing." It follows, therefore, that society and its individual members ought to strive in every fruitful way to make justice, equity and honorable dealing something more than ideas, intellectual conceptions. Men and women must be so trained, guided, educated and inspired that greed, narrow selfishness, cruelty, envy and injustice will arouse strong emotions in them and prompt them to fight for righteousness and justice. They must somehow be educated emotionally and morally, as well as intellectually. They must be gently led to fall in love with everything that is good, lovely and of fair repute.

How are these necessary results to be brought about? The

question is a difficult one, but it must be faced and answered. The intellectualists have shirked this task, and are still shirking it. The conventional and superficial moralists have much to say about the duty of the schools, churches, the press, the theater and other great institutions to inculcate mercy, simplicity, love and other virtues, but it is well known that they have not found the means of successfully doing so. Sermons and didacting lessons leave most of us cold. Children are repelled rather than attracted by the type and sort of text-books or addresses on civics and morals which are inflicted upon them in the schools by dull boards and routine-ridden superintendents and principals.

Precept needs the re-enforcement of example, of conduct seen, read of, admired day by day. Parents, neighbors, teachers, social leaders must practice the virtues they would inculcate. The whole social atmosphere must reflect and illustrate the doctrine professed in books and in sermons. "Lives" of noble men and women, of heroes and martyrs, of single-minded reformers, must be placed in the hands of the young at a most impressionable age, and the "lives" should be written by literary artists, not by hacks. Books often produce deep, lasting impressions on young people and shape or color their lives to the very end. But this happens only when the books delight, thrill and fascinate, and when they are given or lent by persons who know how to inspire affection and admiration.

Here is one apt illustration of the point in question. The writer has just heard the following story: A man prominent in political and public life, a "progressive" and independent of courage and insight, was asked by a friend how he came to identify himself with unpopular causes, with radical legislation, with policies feared and condemned by most of his fellow-partisans and professional associates. He answered the inquiry by saying that while his parents and their neighbors had been conservative and "respectable", he had been fortunate, as a boy, to make the acquaintance of an "infidel shoemaker", an old man of mild manners and pleasing appearance. The shoemaker was a philosopher and a scholar. He gave his young friends books that were not known in orthodox circles—Buckle, Spencer, Owen, Godwin, Haeckel, Thoreau, Emerson. The books were devoured and secretly worshipped. The effect they had was never effaced. Their influence made for tolerance, liberalism, sympathy with suffering, a longing for a better, freer and pleasanter world. But the same books from another source might have totally failed to stir and charm the boy. The old "infidel shoemaker", the

modest philosopher, by the magic of personality, translated ideas into warm sentiments and emotions.

It is unfortunate that Spinoza, whose intellect was so powerful, failed to pursue the inquiry into the sound and effective method of re-enforcing mere ideas and opinions with appropriate emotions sufficiently strong to check and counteract the anti-social passions and emotions of man. But all that he has said on the subject is, to repeat, extraordinarily modern, consonant with the "new psychology", the "new education" and the new sociology. We are told by the most philosophical educators that the main task of the schools, colleges and universities is "to socialize the individual", to adapt him more and more to the true, co-operative, harmonious commonwealth. But how do those institutions socialize their charges? Alas, they graduate many snobs, egotists, cynics, pessimists and brutes. The effect avowedly sought is seldom obtained. Education will have to be reformed and reorganized. The home—once a civilizing and socializing influence—must also be reclaimed and adapted to new conditions. Personality, example, leadership, inspiration, emulation are severally factors in character-building which the modern world, thanks to the intellectualists, the economic materialists, the champions of mere "strength" and the other obscurantists, has almost neglected and despised. The Spinoza revival should help to recall us to essential truths of ethics and social psychology.