



THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF SPINOZA

*The Unity of His Thought*

BY

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*To*  
FREDERICK J. E. WOODBRIDGE

## PREFACE

**T**HE history of thought encounters in interpretation dangers peculiar to it among historical disciplines; one need not be a philosopher to recognize that the retelling of a man's philosophy must express still another philosophy, and must run the danger thus, despite what philosophic truths it may contain, of historical falsifications. There is no avoiding the danger, unless it is preferable, as some scholastics were convinced, that the study of the history of philosophy be directed to the discovery, not of what a man said, but of the Truth; perhaps great philosophers and seekers after truth have been led by their divergent systems and terminologies to express in varying forms insights into a truth which is, for all that, at bottom one. In any case, questions of interpretation present the alternative: they may be answered in terms either of history or philosophy.

Where interpretations are many and extremely diverse, as they are in the case of the philosophy of Spinoza, it is a needless presumption to insist on the exclusive authenticity of any one reading. The meaning and the illumination of a doctrine frequently can be conveyed by translations of it into terms which, though mutually exclusive or even contradictory, are intelligent developments of its thought. To insist on the total error of an interpretation is more usually a development from a theory of meaning than a conclusion consequent to research; historical criticism of doctrines is a hazardous enterprise, feasible when it is limited to specific points, and then care must be taken that it be well-documented; but if it chooses to be general, its justification should be philosophic. In the latter sense the minute study of one philosopher, of Aristotle, Spinoza, Aquinas, or any one of a half dozen others, is the best introduction, not only to the history of philosophy, but to philosophy itself. The presence of such convictions as these in the exposition which

follows marks the indebtedness which, even more than the formal inscription of it to him, dedicates this book to Dean Woodbridge: the writing of the book was undertaken as a result of discussions and conversations with him, and the sense and spirit of the project are his, though he would differ still with many of the ideas and emphases. But consistent with the philosophic purposes which were clear in discussion, even when there were differences in doctrine, this presentation of the philosophy of Spinoza is directed chiefly to express the issues involved in the spinozistic system: where a decision is necessary for one interpretation rather than another, the question is of course historical, and historical evidence is presented as fully as possible: but the major motivation is in following the implications of the philosophy of Spinoza, which for its philosophic aptness — and because so little of it is present in contemporary discussions — deserves to be explored again.

I am greatly indebted to Mr. Irwin L. Langbein for his patient assistance in reading proofs and verifying references.

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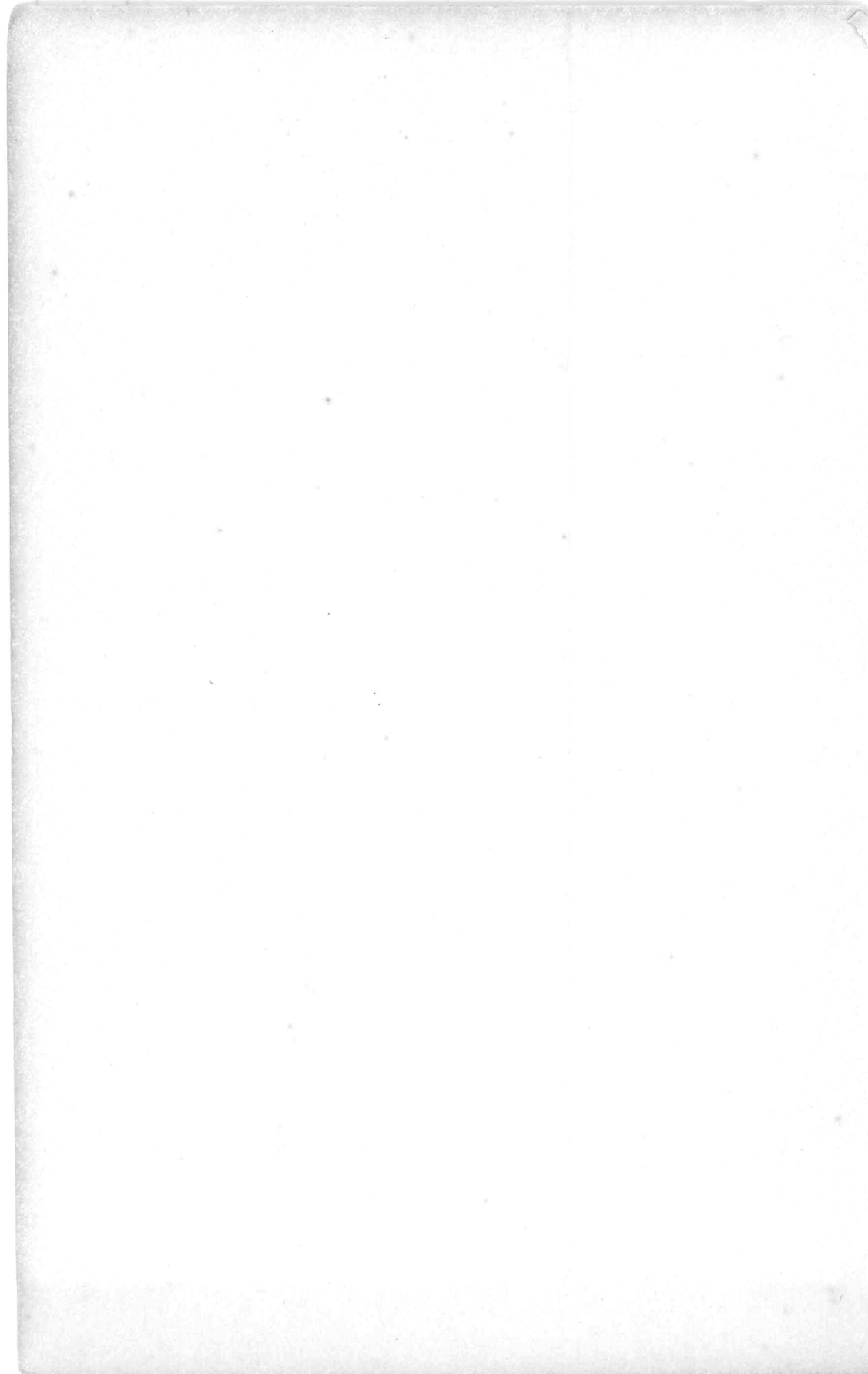
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*PART ONE*

THE BEGINNINGS OF SPINOZA'S  
THOUGHT





# THE PHILOSOPHY OF SPINOZA

## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE two and a half centuries which have passed since the death of Spinoza have been prolific in criticism of his work. Much that has been written about him, to be sure, seems to have sprung from no more profound motivation than a wish to praise or defame, but even of serious commentary few philosophers besides Aristotle can boast a larger critical library. Other details, moreover, of Spinoza's philosophic fortune suggest the comparison of Aristotle: even if one were permitted to forget that he has been rediscovered after a comparative oblivion, one would be led by the fervor with which he is acclaimed to expect a scholasticism in modern philosophy of which he is the Philosopher. Usually when he is not passed by or execrated in philosophic writings, he is looked to for a model of logical precision and acumen, and his pervasive awareness of the implications of concepts has apotheosized him among metaphysicians. Under such circumstances there is the danger that any further work seem a trifling or a presumptuous addition—either the swelling of the scholasticism with another glossary and commentary, or the undertaking of the magical enterprise of detailing precisely what has been in these works for several centuries. Fortunately the alternative is not exhaustive, and fortunately, so far as it holds, one may guide oneself by erring a little on the side of presumption. But the situation is determined somewhat by circumstances other than only these: the passing of centuries has altered the materials of the problem; it has added questions, and at very least it has changed the approach and so has changed the problem too. An age which boasts, as the present age does, of its scientific, pragmatic, and positivistic attitudes may well have lost, in forming itself, the sense of a philosophy which saw the

possibility of those postures and avoided them. The intellectualist predilections which are evinced through the whole deductive length of Spinoza's system molds it as no subsequent philosophy could be molded. It would be difficult to ignore the consistent unity of purpose which emerges in any analysis of it, and that unity seems to lay bare in turn a metaphysical unity evolved and expounded in a fortified deductive logic. The suspicion suggests itself, even at the outset, that the very fact of unity recurs, not as an accident of presentation, but as the solution of ethical, methodological and metaphysical problems. If, therefore, Spinoza is to be read for the body of doctrine which the history of philosophy has attached to his name, it may not be without use to philosophy and to the history of philosophy to inquire into the meaning of this persistent striving.

Excellent reasons could be found, consequently, for adding one more to the large collection of books on Spinoza. After so much criticism it can not be a question merely of approaching a work critically; the work must be seen through the confusions and clarifications of two hundred and fifty years. If it seem profitable to study the unity of Spinoza's thought, it is not merely because there are signs of unity in his work, but further because his critics have found such an amazing diversity there. It is difficult to separate the two, since the history of thought is history and, although it be a question of the philosophy of Spinoza, the reflections of Freudenthal, of Gebhardt, and of Brunschvicg have entered the question as definitely as any of Spinoza's own ideas. This is a difficulty which leads in some cases to unhappy consequences. There are few doctrines that have not been drawn by some critic from the body of Spinoza's philosophy; and for a large part, the criticism of his works has played a game of horror and admiration with each of the assorted themes it has found. Accusations go the whole length from atheism to pantheism and god-intoxicated mysticism. Naturalism and idealism in turn, materialism and spiritualism, nominalism and realism have been drawn with astonishing legerdemain from the demonstrations of the *Ethics*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It would scarcely be desirable to range the whole body of Spinozana according to the epithets employed in them. Apart from the fact that this has been done,

Consequently, if there is a carefully conceived unity in Spinoza's thought, it has been very little apparent in the works of his critics. They have not lacked occasions that permitted them to admire, but their admiration has been aroused for the most part by acute and subtle analyses or by some particular doctrine. There has been universal praise for Spinoza's examination of the passions; bits from the study of the understanding can be used illustratively, disconnected from their metaphysical setting; the ethics may be looked upon as a rare piece of reasoned ordering of intimate experience; the physics can be passed over unexamined, since it is antiquated and, so, unessential. Only rarely have they been stated as the inseparable parts of one system. Spinoza stated them so, but it is perhaps natural that after him there should be more interest in parts of his philosophy or in its development than in the dialectical interdependence of his doctrines. Yet it seems unfortunate that so systematized a philosophy should be read in so fragmentary a fashion and that the system of this thought should

though not literally nor exhaustively (Ernest Altkirch, *Maledictus und Benedictus*, Felix Meiner, Leipzig, 1924), its philosophic importance would be dubious. But lest the statement of the range of disagreement concerning Spinoza seem exaggerated and rhetorical, some examples of each can be adduced with no difficulty. Atheism and pantheism are perhaps the most wide-spread and most frequently repeated of the titles. It will suffice therefore to refer, for atheism, to P. Lami's *Athéisme Renversée* (Paris, 1696), or to P. Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (article *Spinoza*: "Il a été un athée de système et d'une méthode toute nouvelle . . .") or his *Pensées diverses sur les Comètes de l'Année 1680* ("C'étoit le plus grand Athée, qui ait jamais été . . .") (see Freudenthal, *Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's* (Leipzig, 1889), pp. 28 and 34, for the Bayle quotations); for pantheism to R. Avenarius, *Ueber die beiden ersten Phasen des spinozischen Pantheismus* (Leipzig, 1868). This list of either might be increased indefinitely.

Novalis is not only responsible for the phrase "God-intoxicated" but will serve too as example of both idealistic and realistic tendencies in interpretation. (*Fragmente vermischten Inhalts* ed. J. Minor; Jena, 1907. "27. Die wahre Philosophie ist durchaus realistischer Idealismus—oder Spinozismus (p. 182) . . . 355. Spinoza ist ein Gott trunkener Mensch. 356 Der Spinozismus ist eine Uebersättigung mit Gottheit." (p. 292) For naturalism see Nourrison, *Spinoza et le Naturalisme Contemporain* (Paris, 1886), p. v, "Or, critiquer ces enseignements de Spinoza, c'est critiquer ces théories mêmes, qui ne sont que des variétés du Spinozisme, et que l'on appellerait bien en leur appliquant une dénomination commune, le naturalisme contemporain. Car toutes elles concluent à n'admettre d'autre réalité que la nature, c'est-à-dire d'autre réalité que l'Univers des corps."

For nominalism see Pollock (*Spinoza, His Life and Philosophy*; London, 1899), p. 142. "Spinoza's nominalism which we have always to bear in mind, is a sufficient warning against assuming that the 'eternal things' have anything to do with kinds, qualities or classification." Powell (*Spinoza and Religion*; Chicago, 1906), hopes (p. 150, n. 1) "that the traditional habit of referring to Spinoza as a consistent Nominalist will soon be corrected."

have sunk so far from view that when it is raised at all, it is only by way of arguments which make it seem painfully forced and which state it finally in a language of mixed philosophic dialects.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the signs of an attempted consistency are too frequent in the writings of Spinoza to be ignored wholly. Even the externals of his work would indicate a unified conception. Surely it would be an unprecedented piece of carelessness in a philosopher to put off metaphysical, logical, and moral speculations, as Spinoza did when he interrupted work on the *Ethics* and possibly on the *Correction of the Understanding*, to expound political and theological doctrines at variance with his philosophy. There are commentators who would have him do that. And Spinoza was

<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, these confusions of critics have by this time all been made confusions of Spinoza. It is remarkable to observe how the processes of his thought can be accounted for, how antecedents for his doctrines can be found in history, and how the supposed weaknesses exposed in his philosophy can be traced to simple-minded precautions which he did not have the wit to take! Spinoza has found few critics to follow the ideal which he laid in criticism: he could forget his philosophic beliefs and obliterate himself behind Descartes when he expounded him. There are few restatements of Spinoza's philosophy which advance it, as he advanced Descartes's, on its firmest grounds. See, for example John Caird, *Spinoza* (Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1888), p. 3: "His philosophy is not a completely homogeneous product. It may be said to be the composite result of conflicting tendencies, neither of which is followed out to its utmost logical results." This is then illustrated by the fact that in the part of his philosophy which is concerned with substance there is no place for finite things, and the part concerned with individual things has no place for the infinite! Or see Otto Willmann, *Geschichte des Idealismus* (Braunschweig, 1897), 3 Band, p. 284: "*Spinozas Lehre ist plumper Synkretismus, ohne jeden organischen Charakter, jeder Mystik baar und der Religion entfremdet und gegnerisch. Bei ihr ist alles Mache, erzwungen, auf den Schein angelegt, unsolid; allerorts aufgerafften Ansichten wird durch den Schnürleib der geometrischen Methode einige Façon gegeben; unverdaute Reminiscenzen aus durchblättern Büchern dienen als Aufputz, lediglich die Persönlichkeit ist der zusammenhaltende Faden; et ist recht eigentlich ein "Privatsystem," was hier vorleigt.*" Or see C. N. Starcke, *Baruch de Spinoza* (Copenhagen, 1923), p. 12. "*Sein Gott ist ein Jehova in verbesserter und modernisierter Gestalt. Welche Elemente er auch aus anderen Quellen in sich aufnahm, er blieb doch stets seiner Rasse treu. Seine Modi sind aristotelisch, seine Attribute cartesianisch, aber die Substanz ist jüdisch.*"

It is a significant commentary on the vast body of Spinoza criticism that one would be at loss to know where to turn for an adequate treatment of Spinoza's physical doctrines; that the English translations of his letters, both Willis's and Elwes's, omit almost everything concerned with science, even the very important Letter VI on Boyle's treatise on Salt-Petre; (see Willis *Benedict de Spinoza*, London, 1870, p. 235, "The sequel of this letter is on the constitution of Nitre, the nature of its spirit, etc., which could not interest the general reader, and would be passed over by the chemist"; there is no consideration of the fact that it contains also significant statements concerning the relation of reason and experimentation); finally that Couchoud (*Benoît de Spinoza*, Paris, 1924), should think it worth em-

certainly too economical and careful a craftsman to introduce metaphysical considerations into an ethical work, if the system of things as he conceived it were irrelevant to the conduct of life which he wished to examine. There are commentators for whom even such irrelevance is not enough, since they would have Book I of the *Ethics*, instead of serving a purpose to make moral action intelligible, expound a system in which conduct could not be conceived.<sup>3</sup> The framework in which Spinoza's thought is set, even more than this purpose, indicates a concern with unity. The attempt to reduce an elaborate philosophy to a mathematical form such that all its doctrines can be made to depend on a few postulates, could never have been made if the system were not conceived as autonomous. The apparatus alone of Spinoza's demonstrations argues unmistakably, since propositions are referred to axioms, definitions, and propositions through the whole length of the five books of the *Ethics*, that he supposed his thought to follow through coherently and consistently. The method would be a symptom of the thought even if he were unaware of its implications, and the seventeenth century and Spinoza were too much concerned with method to have escaped the truisms concerning it.

phasizing as the first point of his method (Preface, p. vii) that he will use all the writings of Spinoza, including the non-philosophic treatises. Yet Couchoud so far misinterprets the nature of Spinoza's contribution to science as to account for his attitude by a supposed temperamental unfitness for the technique of science. (See p. 83) "*Malgré son désir, Spinoza demeura, en somme, étranger à l'élaboration de ce que nous appelons la "science moderne." Il n'avait du savant ni la patience, ni la modestie intellectuelle. Il pensait saisir sur le vif, immédiatement, le mécanisme des choses, et, par delà ce mécanisme, il voulait toucher l'intime substance des êtres. La science moderne procède autrement.*" Santayana, on the contrary, insists (Introduction to the Everyman edition of the *Ethics*, pp. xx-xxi) that "the highest part of his philosophy" is not in Spinoza's religion or politics or ethics but in his physics, yet Santayana regards these scientific inquiries only as badly applied arguments brought up in the interest of symmetry. "The details of this scientific speculation, though interesting and masterly, are now somewhat antiquated; for the status of mathematical physics can hardly seem, to a critical philosopher, the same as the status of self-consciousness; and the bold assumption, which Spinoza makes for the sake of system and symmetry, that there is consciousness wherever there is extension, is too sweeping and too paradoxical to recommend itself to a scientific mind." Clearly Spinoza's achievement and intention have been open to misinterpretation, if the attributes can come to this.

<sup>3</sup> See Caird, *Spinoza*, pp. 303-304. "The last word of Spinoza's philosophy seems to be the contradiction of the first. Not only does he often fluctuate between principles radically irreconcilable, but he seems to reassert at the close of his speculations what he had denied at the beginning. . . . At the outset, in one word, we seem to have a pantheistic unity in which nature and man, all the manifold existences of the finite world, are swallowed up; at the close, an infinite

The striving after unity has left signs more properly philosophic than these in Spinoza's works, since his philosophy orders itself nicely toward a single goal. No considerable portion of it is wholly free from one preoccupation. There are numerous statements of that problem since almost every consideration of man or the universe yields at some time to it. The opening pages of the *Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding* are characteristically eloquent: whether there is some Good which is truly good and able to communicate its goodness and by which alone the mind could be affected after it had rejected all other things. That question is reiterated with increasing emphasis. Clear knowledge in any human discipline would contribute to solving it. It is significant, too, that the work which contains the most complete statement of Spinoza's philosophy, the one which treats of God and of the relations of man to man, to Nature, and to God, should have been called an *Ethics*. The unity of his thought is indicated there; the *Ethics* is a work of morals and, in that obvious sense, practical. But to be practical it must state its problem fully. The discussion of physics, metaphysics, and psychology contributes always some bit of information which is essential to a knowledge of the nature of man and of the manner in which he should live and act. The *Ethics* is, though critical interpretations have almost neglected that central aspect to emphasize others, an examination of moral ideals and of human potentialities and circumstances; it is not the occasion only for metaphysical speculations and psychological and physical analyses. But if any knowledge is to be derived from the sciences which may bear on man's powers and his opportunities, that knowledge will help organize ethical philosophy. "Ethics . . . should," Spinoza says, "as everyone knows, be based on metaphysics and physics."<sup>4</sup>

The force binding Spinoza's philosophy in a unified whole, then, is precisely the one which directs the sciences to a moral ideal. Obviously knowledge is indispensable for the examination of ethical problems. It is impossible to self-conscious mind, in which all finite thought and being find their reality and explanation."

<sup>4</sup> *Epistola* XXVII (*olim* 38) to Blyenbergh; IV, 160-161.

engage in moral inquiry while the nature of good and evil is wholly unknown and unexamined. Even an elementary experience of things suffices to show that the same object may be good in one set of circumstances and evil in another, that in itself alone it can not be good or evil, perfect or imperfect, and that therefore there is no good or evil in the nature of things. But these are metaphysical considerations. Human abilities are unequal to a continued vision of things as they are in the eternal order and fixed laws of Nature. Life and experience lead man to conceive a human nature more perfect than his own and to seek the means that will lead him to such a perfection. This is the origin of notions of good and perfection; whatever advances man toward that more perfect nature is a true *good*; the *supreme good* is that which enables him, together with other men, to attain to that nature; all science and philosophy should be useful to that end. "What that nature may be," Spinoza says, "I shall show in its proper place, namely, that it is the knowledge of the union which the mind has with the whole of Nature. Therefore this is the end to which I tend, obviously, to acquire such a nature and to endeavor that many acquire it with me; that is, it is part of my happiness to take care that many others understand as I do, and that their understanding and desire agree thoroughly with my understanding and desire, and in order to achieve this it is necessary to understand as much concerning Nature as is needed to acquire such a nature, and moreover it is necessary to form such a society as would bring about that as many as possible attain that nature as easily and securely as possible. Again care must be taken concerning Moral Philosophy as well as concerning the Theory of the Education of Children; and since health is not an unimportant means to this end, the whole science of Medicine must be arranged appropriately, and finally inasmuch as many things which are difficult are rendered easy by art and since we can gain a great deal of time and benefit by it, Mechanics must by no means be despised. But before all else a method must be thought out of healing the understanding and of purifying it as much as is possible at the beginning that it may understand things fruitfully



and without error and as well as possible. From all this anyone will now be able to see that I wish to direct all science to one end and goal, namely, that the highest human perfection, as we said, be attained, and so, all that does not advance us in the sciences to the end and goal, must be rejected as useless, that is, to say it in a word, all our operations and also our thoughts must be directed to this end.”<sup>5</sup> This is reiterated in a foot note: “There is but one end in the sciences to which all must be directed.”

Consequently, if ethics is to pursue an inquiry into the nature of goodness and into the means of attaining that which is good, it is unavoidable that it draw on metaphysics and the sciences. But it must be seen at the very outset of the inquiry—in fact, it should have appeared in what has been said—that there are two ideals involved in ethics, not only the right conduct of living, but also the selection of conduct that will fit to the higher ideal of living and that will lead to perfection. There is the good life which may be led though one have no unusual powers of understanding, and there is the perfection which is the status and the reward of the well-guided intellect. One must live in a well-ordered state and according to the rules that lead to good health and friendship to live well. Such things, however, are external and not in the control of man. To know its highest perfection, man’s nature must be considered apart from his circumstances in relation to the intelligible nature of things; it would be tautology to say that knowledge and metaphysical speculation are needed to attain to this perfection.

At no point, then, can ethics proceed certainly without the aid of science. A knowledge of the nature of the body, of the mind, of human society must complement at each step the progress of the science of ethics. No question, on the other hand, can come up which does not involve ethical problems. When John Bouwmeester writes to ask Spinoza “if some method is given or can be given by which we can arrive unhindered and without weariness at the understanding of the best of things, or are our minds, like our bodies, subject to the vicissitudes of chance and our

<sup>5</sup> *Tract. de Int. Emend.*; II, 8-9.