

# THE ETHICAL INTENSION OF SPINOZA'S METHODOLOGY

Martin A. Bertman\*

For Spinoza the supreme source of happiness resides in the fulfilment of the capacity to know the truth. This, in fact, is the essence of man. That is, the preservation of ourselves as human beings is linked to the highest fulfilment of ourselves as creatures that know. Self-love and self-striving—*conatus*—needs both a goal and a method for achieving the goal. This paper examines both the method and the goal of human *conatus* in Spinoza. "Conatus, quo unaquaeque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nihil est praeter ipsius rei actualem essentiam—the striving by which each thing tries to persevere in its being is nothing else that, the actual essence of the thing itself."<sup>61</sup>

We will proceed not only by investigating the *Ethics*, Spinoza's masterpiece, but also by discussing his somewhat neglected *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (*Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding*). In fact, the *Emendatione*, unimpeded by the geometric form *ordine geometrico*—of the *Ethics*, presents the ethical intension of Spinoza's methodology in

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\*Mr. Martin A. Bertman is in the Department of Philosophy, The State University College, Potsdam, New York.

<sup>61</sup> *Ethics* (White and Sterling), Part iv, Appendix.

a succinct and direct manner: his view that the maturity and adequacy of human happiness depends upon the improvement and the correct use of the understanding.

In the "Prooemium," the brief introductory section of the *Emendatione*, Spinoza presents us, in a general way, through human experience, the need for searching for supreme happiness and consequently, a method for making the search. The "Prooemium" is auto biographical ; it emphasizes the frustrations and futilities of the common desires and loves of most men ; especially, it stresses the illusion of sensual experience—for it is the unreality or, more precisely, the inability to satisfy, of the experiential, finite world that gives rise to a conscious demand for truth ; and, therefore, he provides provisional rules for living while searching for the truth which is equated with the supreme good—*summum bonum*.

In this we find a marked similarity with Descartes' *A Discourse on Method* in its introductory sections. However, there is an interesting difference between the two. Whereas Descartes claims to seek merely a measure of certainty—"I ever had an exceeding desire to learn to distinguish truth from falsehood, that I might see the way clearly in my actions and walk with

confidence in life,"<sup>62</sup>—Spinoza wishes for nothing less than "knowledge of the union of the mind with the whole of nature."<sup>63</sup>

This knowledge will affirm that "The highest good of the mind is the knowledge of God, and the highest virtue of the mind is to know God."<sup>64</sup> For the attainment of this "intellectual love of God"—*amor Dei intellectualis*—we must direct all pursuits. Health, wealth, pleasure of the senses, the sciences, are merely as valuable as they are helpful to this end. Those things which are not helpful are to be disdained as time consuming hindrances.

So then the "Brooemium" asserts, "All our happiness or unhappiness depends on one thing alone, the quality of the object to which we direct our love."<sup>65</sup> And since the true object of our love should be a "good certain by its very nature," that is what experience teaches, we must find a method to know "an eternal and infinite thing," the object of justifiable love and the source of enduring happiness: God.

With this goal before us, Spinoza is under the obligation of providing a method for the mind's *emendatio*. A method which will provide certain knowledge of the eternal essence of things. Thus, in the *Emendatione*, Spinoza proceeds to examine the various ways we know and the nature and reliability of each of

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<sup>62</sup> Descartes, trans., E. S. Haldane & G. R. T. Ross, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, (New York, Dover, 1931) p. 87.

<sup>63</sup> Spinoza, trans., J. Katz, *On the Improvement of the Understanding* (New York, The Liberal Arts Press, 1958) p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. *Ethics*, Part v, Props. xxv—xxxiii.

<sup>65</sup> *On the Improvement of the Understanding*, p. 5.

these ways of knowing, "rendering the understanding capable of the reasoning that is necessary for the goal of attaining the state of supreme blessedness."<sup>66</sup>

The "proof" of the power and certainty of true ideas or the correct perception by the understanding of Reality<sup>67</sup> depends on the metaphysical awareness of the essence of ideas. We must understand that for Spinoza true ideas have a distinct metaphysical status, providing certainty rather than the uncertain status of what a Kantian milieu would later call empirical psychology. Indeed, Spinoza criticized Descartes for occupying him-self with signs and criteria of true ideas whereas for him ideas are true by their own nature. This does not mean that true ideas do not conform with the things that they represent but rather that the representation with its finite quality does not provide the eternal and essential character of true ideas: ideas are self-evincing, they alone guarantee themselves. It is therefore, by the logical dependencies of ideas and not their psychological or historical sequences that one finds "the knowledge of the union of the mind with the whole of nature."<sup>68</sup>

Spinoza calls the ultimate metaphysical principle God Who may be thought of as the total possibility and expression of the universe, understood as logical necessity. It is Spinoza's constant reference to God, in this logical sense, that emphatically presents

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<sup>66</sup> . Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Martin A. Bertman, "Philosophical Notes on the Usage of Reality" Rendezvous, 1968.

<sup>68</sup> Ethics, Part i, prop. xv.

God as the ultimate principle of explanation. "From the supreme power of God, or from his infinite nature, infinite things in infinite ways, that is to say all things, have necessarily flowed, or continually flow by the same necessity, in the same way as it follows from the nature of a triangle, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles."<sup>69</sup> Therefore, we have the methodological precept that all things must begin with the idea of God, since we are given to understand that all things are connected and conceived as continuous by and in God.

It is therefore no surprise that in the Ethics the initial and crucial principles concern the nature of God and upon these the entire system depends. God is the living symbol and power of the intelligibility of things. There are no nuggets of unattached or unattachable existence; all things relate to and interact with each other in a logical and necessary unity. The existence of God is further validated by the logical order of ideas derived from the idea of God which finds a confirming reference in the representation of objects. Obviously psychological or historical experience (*experientia vaga*) cannot give us knowledge of the unity of things; the origin of this knowledge, Spinoza asserts, is in impressions modifying the body. This gives us only partial and mutilated knowledge. The principle of unity (which leads us to truth) must therefore be of an internal rather than an external character. Thus a knowledge of eternal essences, a knowledge

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., prop. xvii, Scholium. Spinoza, trans., A. Bople, Ethics (New York, E. P. Dutton, 1950), p. 68.

necessary for the fulfilment of our conatus, must explore the operations of our mind.

It is consequently necessary to demarcate the possible ways of knowing and their distinctive character since not all of the ways we know may be adequate for providing true knowledge. Spinoza (Ethics ii. 40, note 2)<sup>70</sup> lists in a tripartite division the ways we know; in the *Emendatione*, he divides them into four parts. Since, in both works the substance of the listings is equivalent, I will merely quote the *Emendatione*.

We have knowledge (*perceptio*) in the following ways:

1. Through hearsay or some arbitrary sign (*ex audito*).

2. Resulting from uncritical experience, that is, from experience which has not been subject to full reasoning, so that we accept the evidence of random events without testing one experience by the others (*ab experientia vaga*).

3. By inferring the essence of one thing from another, but not adequately, either when we infer a cause from some effect or when it is concluded from some general proposition is accompanied always by some property (*ratio*).

4. By comprehending a thing through its essence or proximate cause (*scientia intuitiva*).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> On the Improvement of the Understanding, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Spinoza, trans., R. H M. Elwes, *The Chief Works*, of Spinoza vol. 2, (New York, Dover, 1955) p. 316.

The first, *ex audito*, is obviously incapable of giving us adequate knowledge of the nature and power of things or of their relationships to one another. Consequently, we may immediately dismiss it, as it certainly will never achieve true ideas except in a random and accidental manner. In the *Ethics* this kind of knowledge is combined with *experientia vaga*. It is there called knowing from *opinio* or *imaginatio*.

It follows then that the second kind of knowledge, *experientia vaga*, is rejected. In *Epistle X to De Vries*, Spinoza says, "Experience does not teach us the essence of things; the utmost which it can effect is to determine our mind so that it thinks of certain essences of things."<sup>72</sup> It is in the same letter to De Vries that he says, "We do not need experience in the case of those things whose existence is not distinguished from their essence."<sup>73</sup> Thus we see the basis for dismissing this kind of knowledge is that we are seeking eternal truth, truth where essence and existence are not distinguishable.

When most men talk about experience they mean something whose nature is accidental and arbitrary. Such a view of experience is due to a certain kind of mental operation, since mind is the only thing that and when it knows imperfectly it is because it can function in that manner. The reason that mind does function in that manner we find in a long discussion in the *Ethics*, Part 2. The explanation given there is that the human body is of a

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, .p 317.

<sup>73</sup> *Ethics*, p. 46.

certain nature which comes into contact with other bodies that modify it and this modification is then translated into mental awareness. "The object of the idea constituting the mind is the body, and nothing can happen in the body which is not perceived by the mind" (Ethics, ii, I2.)<sup>74</sup>

It is further apparent that common experience cannot deal with the eternal essence of things but merely with their properties in time and even here in an inexact manner. Thus the judgments we make here are uncertain and their claim for truth cannot be included in an adequate ordering demanded by a rational epistemology. The knowledge given by common experience suggests the need for a more certain exposition of the truth of things—for a rational science. Spinoza implies that we would know more of the properties of finite things if we returned to experience after having achieved knowledge of the eternal essence through *scientia intuitiva*. Since we would then return to experience armed with a knowledge of the basic structure of reality when we come upon a property of a finite thing we would no longer be uncertain as to whether it belongs to the essence of that thing.

The third kind of knowledge, *ratio*, furnishes us with extremely general, true ideas of things. It serves to check knowledge *ex audito* and *ab experientia vaga*, by testing them for coherence and non-contradiction. However, it can more easily deal with *ex audito* than with *ab experientia vaga* since the latter can

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid , p. 65.



sometimes be outside of the therapeutic range of ratio. Ultimately, ratio fails in the necessary advancement of the understanding, for it is limited in its exact deduction of essences and properties. Its premises are rooted in the imagination rather than in the understanding. Spinoza gives an example of the knowledge ratio provides as "that there is an awareness of the connection of mind and body." In Ethics, ii, 38.1 Spinoza is concerned to establish the universality of the knowledge "certain ideas or notions are common to all men."<sup>75</sup>

Thus there seems to be the implication that men grasp by an encounter with experience some certain truths; that is, some truth can be grasped through the addition of an outer element as well as intrinsically. Nevertheless, an extrinsic understanding upon which it seems ratio has its basis is neither complete nor exact enough for knowledge of God or of "the mind in its relationship to nature."

The truth which has its basis intrinsically not only has a grasp of the nature of individual things in an exact manner, but seems to imply the necessity and therefore the exact awareness of actual existence. For instance, the knowledge of proportionality is not merely having the Euclidean demonstration of it, but of having a knowledge of it somehow at once both reasonable and actual .

Therefore the adequate knowledge of things, *scientia intuitiva*, involves intrinsic truth which enables us to:

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<sup>75</sup> On the Improvement of the Understanding, p. 10.

1. Establish correctly the differences, similarities, and opposition of things,

2. Determine exactly the extent to which things can or cannot be acted upon,

3. Compare the nature and powers of things with those of man. In this way the highest perfection to which man can attain will easily become apparent.<sup>76</sup>

To ask why *sicentia intuitiva* enables us to understand adequately is in a sense superfluous; it is self-evincing. "He who has a true idea, knows at the same time that he has a true idea, nor can he doubt of the truth of the thing" (Ethics, ii, 43).<sup>77</sup> For Spinoza, God, existence *causa sui*, is the exemplar of an adequate idea. It has a supreme necessity to it and thus a 'simplicity'. Spinoza finds Truth is both evident with itself and consistent with itself at all points.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, a basis, a *grundlage* is made possible for an adequate or true method since "those ideas are also adequate which follow in the mind from ideas which are adequate in it" (Ethics, ii. 40).<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, clarifying his position, Spinoza states: "It is the nature of reason to consider things not as contingent but as necessary" (Ethics, ii, 44),<sup>80</sup> and "it is through the imagination alone that we look at things as

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<sup>76</sup> Ethics, p. 69.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York, Meridian Press, 1958) Ch. XV, XVI.

<sup>78</sup> Ethics, p. 66.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

contingent both with reference to the past and the future."<sup>81</sup> If we grant this formaliter character of truth, Spinoza has the obligation of discussing the relation wherein objects depend on ideas or, to be more exact, the adequate mapping of objects by ideas. Spinoza is aware that there is no adequate empirical methodology for discussing "facts"; he has already accepted the position that objects can only be known by our ideas of them. He presents the thesis that it is only through our idea of ideas, *idea ideae* or *cognito reflexia*, that this difficulty is overcome. Thought, when it thinks about itself and its operations, understands that knowing conceives the known adequately.

This may be more easily understood if we have a true estimation of the substantial identity of the attributes: body and mind. "The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body of a certain mode of extension actually existing and nothing else" (*Ethics*, ii, I3).<sup>82</sup> Therefore, we must examine reflexive knowledge under the attribute of body. It would seem that reflexive knowledge, which in Spinoza's thought allows for the possibility of adequate method is directly connected to modifications of the body and, some clear native ideas, which are provided because our bodies are of a certain nature. But the relationship of mind and body is clearly stated—"The mind and body are the

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

same individual considered under one and then, the other attribute" (Ethics, ii, 21, note).<sup>83</sup>

That a true idea has a distinct essence from its ideatum but that it is not entirely different from it is evident in that it adequately re-presents the ideatum. Further, an idea of an idea of an object also includes the object, but more indirectly since its immediate object is the idea of the object. Thus, Peter, the idea of Peter, and the idea of the idea of Peter, are each distinct in its own essence. When the idea of Peter is adequate, certainty is affirmed of the actual object; Peter is known. There is no need to find how we know that we know, *ad infinitum*.

However, let us consider the case where the idea of Peter is inadequate. We may know that it is inadequate. We know it is inadequate by considering the idea of Peter; thus, in other words, the idea of the inadequate idea of Peter may itself be adequate. Reflexive knowledge has the character of self-appraisal.

Spinoza speaks of ideas that appear certain but are false; these ideas are seen to be inadequate by reflexive knowledge. Now we might ask how these certain ideas, the appraising ones that are reflexive, are also not merely apparently certain, *ad infinitum*. It would seem that Spinoza is paradoxically saying that we are aware that even when we have a certain idea it may be uncertain. This is nonsense. What he does seem to be saying is that the nature of reflexive knowledge is to draw implications which show it to have

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<sup>83</sup> On the Improvement of the Understanding, p. 14.

or not to have logical and ontological validity. The establishment of certainty would ultimately seem to be rooted in the ultimate principle of unity, the essence of God. Spinoza says as much in the following: "From the point that an idea must agree in all respects with its formal essence, it is clear that in order that our mind may represent a true example of nature, it must produce its ideas from the idea which represents the origin and source of all nature, so that it may become the source of other ideas."<sup>84</sup> This indeed might be considered an indirect proof for the existence of God, having Him as the necessary condition of adequate knowing. Thereby, God is presented before the mind in an idea which it cannot doubt and still continue to remain an instrument capable of knowledge.

The usual way to reflexive knowledge and the conception of eternal essences, including God, is to reflect upon some true native idea. But, we might ask, as Spinoza puts it, about that "skeptic who remains in doubt about the existence of a first truth and about all the deductions that can be made following the standard set by this first truth."<sup>85</sup> Such a person, the answer is now apparent, can have no criterion for truth at all; if nothing is accepted as a simple certainty there is no basis to hold any intelligible order of conceptions together. The logical laws lose every validity to establish knowledge, since they also are set upon as uncertain, at least in the sense of intrinsic or ontological necessity.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

This ontological necessity is demanded if we accept Spinoza's reasoning about the substantial unity of the attributes. "If is to be noted that ideas have the same character in the realm of thought that their corresponding objects have in reality."<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, it is to be observed that an idea does not have to agree with external perceptions; whether or not empirical experience confirms the self-evidencing truth of ideas should not change the judgement of their adequacy. This may be understood from what has been already shown: "It is by reasoning well that we prove the adequacy of reasoning and continue to prove it."<sup>87</sup> In other words one comes to adequate ideas by what it essentially is and not by what it recalls as external experiences ; its experiencing cannot be dirempted from the powers of the mind in its presentation of experience. The mind never experiences itself ; it experiences an idea of itself. It is aware of its own essence through its power of cogito reflexivia, but to experience itself in the sense of a direct spontaneous awareness of its operations is out of the question. Likewise, Spinoza implies, to experience God directly is not possible though we can experience our understanding of His eternal essence. Therefore "The intellectual love of God" is a grasping of our own essential nature both in the striving, its conatus, and in the eternal essence, its necessary dependence on and expression of the principle and power of all reality, God.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>87</sup> James Collins, A History of Modern European Philosophy (Bruce, Milwaukee, 1954), p. 208.

What Spinoza presents as an ethic is, in the words of James Collins, "To seek the idea of God is to seek to know oneself in the most radical way, as an expression of the divine thought: the human mind not only has but is an idea of God."<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, since Spinoza asserts that "each body, in so far as its existence is subject to certain laws, has to be considered as a part of the whole universe, has to be in accord with the whole of it, and finally has to be connected with the other parts"<sup>89</sup> therefore each human being can find supreme happiness—*summum bonum*—only by a method that presents the rational order of the universe or nature; so we have it—*Deu sive Natura*. "God is the immanent cause of all things."<sup>90</sup> This ontological insight becomes for Spinoza the highest ethical goal, providing supreme blessedness.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Spinoza, *Correspondence*, edited by A. Wolf (London, 1928), Letter xxxii to Henry Oldenburg.

<sup>89</sup> *Ethics*, Part i, prop. xviii.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Martin A. Bertman, "The Ethical Hedonism of M. Schlick," *Studies in Philosophy and History of Philosophy*, vol. v, for the problems besetting an empirical ethics.

<sup>91</sup> Also, Martin A. Bertman, "Camus: From Indifference to Commitment," *Revue de l'Universite d'Ottawa*, accepted for 1970, for an existential ethics.