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Spinoza's methodology

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INTRODUCTION

§ 1. THE TOPIC OF THIS BOOK

In this book we will deal with Spinoza. There is very much written about him and his philosophy. Still this book covers a field that is insufficiently dealt with, viz. Spinoza's methodology. This is very strange for it is in this field that Spinoza's philosophy has its great merits. We can explain this fact, if we consider very briefly the history of the study of Spinoza. After his death and even during his life-time, Spinoza was considered to be a great heretic not worth while studying in another way than by refuting him. Then at the end of the 18th century Spinoza was rediscovered by the great German philosophers (Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Hegel etc.). From this time on the study of Spinoza made real progress. But still in the beginning the students of Spinoza were full of prejudices. On the one hand there were those who maintained that his philosophy was dangerous and heretical, especially from a Christian point of view. On the other hand there were those who tried to back their own philosophical thoughts with the authority of this newly discovered master of philosophy in the 17th century. It was not until the end of the 19th century that the real historical study of Spinoza started with the great works of Fischer, Freudenthal, Pollock, van Vloten et al. This study was directed largely to the content of Spinoza's philosophy. A second issue closely connected with the first was Spinoza's place in the midst of the history of philosophy. The scholars soon discovered that Spinoza's philosophy was by no means as original and new as his contemporaries and Spinoza himself had thought. Many scholars found the real roots of Spinoza's thought in

Descartes, e.g.: K. Fischer, Lewis Robinson, F. J. Thonnard et al.¹ This view, however, was confronted with many counter arguments.²

Other scholars believed that Spinoza's thought, esp. his God-conception, was rooted in Jewish thinking, e.g.: Brakel Buys, Joël, Leon Roth, Dunin Borkowski et al.³ Freudenthal has pointed out that many Spinozistic thoughts can be found in Scholasticism.⁴ These historic works received their final expression in the magnificent study of the great Harvard scholar H. A. Wolfson, *The philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge Massachusetts, 1934; reprinted New York, 1958, 2nd ed. 1960). He found a root for every thesis of Spinoza, esp. in Aristotle, Maimonides (and the other mediaeval Jewish philosophers) and Descartes. From this study the question finally arose whether there was any original thought in Spinoza at all.⁵ According to Wolfson the originality of Spinoza consists mainly in the acceptance of the consequences of the unity of God and nature, that is already implicitly found elsewhere.

In this book we will not deal with the questions of the historical roots of Spinoza's thoughts, although we may touch those questions sometimes. We will restrict ourselves to an *exposé* of Spinoza's methodology in the various fields of his study. Spinoza was primarily a methodologist, who sought for the exact methodology in every subject (doctrine of God, theology, doctrine of the exegesis of the Holy Scripture, anthropology, ethics, doctrine of state etc.). Hence all his theses were well founded in a clear and adequate method. Here his great originality lies.

Of course some points of Spinoza's methodology did not escape general attention e.g. Spinoza's geometrical method applied in his *Ethics*. There has always been a great controversy, however, as to whether this geometrical method was essential for the content of Spinoza's thought. This thesis was affirmed by Joseph Ratner, G. H. R. Parkinson, Leon Brunschvicg, Richard Mc.Keon et al. The opposite position was defended by e.g. Karl Jaspers, H. A. Wolfson et al.⁶ Also

¹ K. Fischer, *Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, II, 1898, p. 274 seq. Lewis Robinson, *Kommentar zu Spinoza's Ethik*, Leipzig, 1928, esp. p. 29ff. F. J. Thonnard, *Précis d'histoire de la philosophie*, Paris, 1946, p. 508.

² E.g.: F. Pollock, *Spinoza, his life and philosophy*, London, 1912.

³ W. G. van Brakel Buys, *Het Godsbegrip bij Spinoza*, Utrecht, 1934 (Diss.) p. 21ff; K. Joël, *Zur Genesis der Lehre Spinozas*, 1871; L. Roth, *Spinoza, Descartes and Maimonides*, Oxford, 1924; St. Dunin Borkowski, *Spinoza*, I, 1933, p. 153ff.

⁴ J. Freudenthal, *Spinoza, Sein Leben und seine Lehre*. I. Band, 1904. *ibid.*, *Spinoza und die Scholastik (Philosophische Aufsätze Ed. Zeller gewidmet*, Leipzig, 1887, p. 83ff).

⁵ H. A. Wolfson, *The philosophy of Spinoza*, New York, 1960, II, p. 331ff.

⁶ J. Ratner, *Spinoza on God*, New York, 1930; G. H. R. Parkinson, *Spinoza's theory of knowledge*, Oxford, 1954, p. 34; L. Brunschvicg, *Sommes-nous Spinozistes? (Chronicon Spinozanum v, Den Haag,*

Spinoza's methodology in his *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* is sufficiently dealt with.

In this book we will deal with the question of Spinoza's methodology more extensively. We will not restrict ourselves to just the *Ethics* (Spinoza's main work), but we will also include Spinoza's other works in our investigation. We will deal with Spinoza's doctrine of God, both theologically and philosophically, with his anthropology, ethics and political philosophy. However, we will deal with these subjects only from a methodological point of view. We will ask only how these doctrines are rooted in Spinoza's methodology and what Spinoza himself said of his methodology. We will not restrict ourselves to those pages in Spinoza's work in which he deals explicitly with methodological questions, but we will investigate Spinoza when he is at work and we will ask whether he is consistent or not. We will then compare Spinoza's methodology in the different fields in order to ask whether Spinoza had the same method for all questions.

We will deal more extensively with Spinoza's conception of God. This is consistent from a methodological point of view, because, according to Spinoza, we know all things in God. We will show that Spinoza's conception of God is rooted in his method and that Spinoza has given a rational basis for the impersonal mystical conception of God. For practical reasons we will restrict ourselves in the discussions with other students of Spinoza. The discussions, together with references to historical influences on Spinoza are given in the additional notes indicated by the letters of the alphabet.

§ 2. THE SOURCES OF OUR INVESTIGATION. THEIR EVALUATION

Our main source for Spinoza's philosophy is of course his *Ethics*. For his methodology his *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* (*Treatise on the improvement of the Understanding*) is very important too. For a better insight into some of Spinoza's thoughts his letters are very helpful and for Spinoza's doctrine of the state his *Tractatus Politicus* (*Political Treatise*) gives us trustworthy information. There is no controversy among the scholars about the importance of those three works with the only restriction that Spinoza's *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* is a work of

1927, p. 53-64); R. Mc.Keon, *The philosophy of Spinoza*, New York etc., 1928; K. Jaspers, *Die grossen Philosophen*, München 1957, I, p. 752ff.; H. A. Wolfson, *op. cit.*