

An Attempt to Understand Spinoza's Doctrine of the Eternity of the Human Mind¹⁾

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§1 Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the human mind has been considered to be a highly controversial one in his *Ethics* by many interpreters of Spinoza's philosophy. The difficulty with the doctrine lies in the fact that it seems inconsistent with another doctrine in his philosophy, namely what is called Mind-Body Parallelism.

In Proposition 23 of Part Five of the *Ethics* Spinoza says: "The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the human body, but there remains of it something that is eternal."²⁾ Taken literally, Spinoza seems to assert that there is an eternal part in the human mind.

On the other hand, according to the Mind-Body Parallelism implied by the well known Proposition 7 of Part Two, the human mind must be destroyed at the same time as the correlative human body is destroyed. This seems to imply that there is no eternal part in the human mind so long as there is no eternal part in the correlative human body.

A Cambridge philosopher C. D. Broad once said in his *Five Types of Ethical Theory*: "That Spinoza was right in thinking that these experiences [= certain religious and mystical experiences] are of the utmost importance and that philosophy must deal seriously with them I have no doubt; but I am equally sure that his theory of them is not consistent with the rest of his system." (Broad [1959], p. 16).

Also, Jonathan Bennett, one of the representative Spinoza scholars of our time, says about the part where the doctrine in question is developed, in his *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*: "After three centuries of failure to profit from it [= the second half of Part Five of the *Ethics*], the time has come to admit that this part of the *Ethics* has nothing to teach us and is pretty certainly worthless." (Bennett [1980], p. 372).

§2 I admit that Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the human mind means something incon-

1) This paper is a slightly modified and amplified English version of part of Matuda [2007] which is written in Japanese.

2) In this paper, the citations from the *Ethics* follow the translation by Edwin Curley in Curley [1985].

sistent with his Mind-Body Parallelism, as long as it is literally understood. However, in this short paper I would like to assert that there is another interpretation of that doctrine which is consistent with the Mind-Body Parallelism.

I will begin to explain this new interpretation with a parable. The parable consists in imagining that the hero of *Hamlet* should begin to think about the author of the drama in which he exists.

Let's imagine that Hamlet, prince of Denmark, should be awakened, as it were, after, for example, he said to Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery", and say to himself, "All my words are in truth composed by a British dramatist named William Shakespeare in 1601". Of course, this is an uncommon, even grotesque imagination, because a person belonging to a story is imagined to avert his interest from that story whose part he is and begin to think about the author of the whole story. And what is more striking is that, if he began to think about the author, Hamlet should be conscious that the above-mentioned line "All my words are in truth composed by a British dramatist named William Shakespeare in 1601" is itself composed by the very dramatist William Shakespeare. Therefore Hamlet in this situation should consider all his words with no exception as emitted not from himself but from Shakespeare.

Now, what part of the history should this Awakened Hamlet feel himself belonging to? Should he feel himself belonging to the Middle Ages as the story is supposed to be? By no means, because the Awakened Hamlet should be no more thinking about any person or any event around him belonging to the Middle Ages, but about Shakespeare writing the drama *Hamlet* in 1601. Therefore he should feel himself belonging to the year of his being invented by Shakespeare, that is to say, the year 1601.

§3 With the doctrine of the eternity of the human mind, Spinoza intends to explain the "excellence and utility" (Scholium to Proposition 47 of Part Two) of the third kind of knowledge. The third kind of knowledge is, in Spinoza's definition, knowledge which "proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (Second Scholium to Proposition 40 of Part Two). In comparison with the parable of the Awakened Hamlet, I would like to see what the "excellence and utility" of the third kind of knowledge consists in.

Ordinarily, the human mind thinks about singular persons and events around itself without thinking about the true cause of the world whose part it is, just as the Not-Yet-Awakened Hamlet thinks about singular persons and events around himself without thinking about the

author of the drama whose part he is. But when the human mind knows itself and other singular things through the third kind of knowledge, it thinks about the true cause of them, just as the Awakened Hamlet should think about the author of the drama. In other words, when the human mind has the third kind of knowledge about itself and other singular things, it thinks that these singular things are what God as the unique *causa sui* produces by producing himself. At this moment, the human mind averts its interest from the vague association of things, namely the object of the *first* kind of knowledge, and from the lawful connexion of things, namely the object of the *second* kind of knowledge. Instead, the human mind becomes conscious of the causal relationship between singular things and their true efficient cause, that is, God as the unique *causa sui*. And the human mind must be also conscious that the knowledge "These singular things are what God produces by producing himself", too, is produced by that God. Then, what will the human mind feel is the subject which has the knowledge "These singular things are what God produces by producing himself"? Certainly the human mind will feel that the knowledge proceeds from that God although it comes only by way of its intellect. Furthermore the human mind will feel itself not existing in 2007, nor in any passage of time, but belonging to the species of time in which God as the unique *causa sui* produces himself and everything in the world, that is to say, the species of eternity. In fact Spinoza says: "We feel and know by experience that we are eternal" (Scholium to Proposition 23 of Part Five).

§4 It is true that the Awakened Hamlet is a rough parable, because the ontological status of Shakespeare and that of God are quite different. Shakespeare is a mode and God is a substance in Spinoza's metaphysical terminology. However, this parable is of great use when one tries to grasp the gist of Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the human mind. Spinoza intends to say that the third kind of knowledge causes a dramatic change in the human way of thinking about time.

Ordinarily, time is real as the order of events, for example, the precedence of Hamlet's refusal of Ophelia to her suicide. But as long as Hamlet were awakened about the existence of Shakespeare as the cause of the drama whose part he is, time taken as the order of events would not seem real to him. Instead, Hamlet would consider himself belonging to the time of Shakespeare's writing *Hamlet*. Spinoza means to say that a similar thing will occur when the human mind has the third kind of knowledge in his intellect. The gist of the doctrine of the eternity of the human mind is that precisely at this moment the human intellect begins to be conscious that it belongs to the time of the causation of the unique substance, namely eternity.

The third kind of knowledge not only causes a dramatic change in the human way of thinking about time, but also in the human affective activity. According to Spinoza, “The greatest striving of the Mind, and its greatest virtue is understanding things by the third kind of knowledge” (Proposition 25 of Part Five). Therefore, the human mind takes the highest pleasure when this kind of knowledge occurs in it. Moreover, because that highest pleasure is accompanied by the idea of God as a cause, it has to become an intellectual love of God (“*amor Dei intellectualis*”). Besides, the human mind enjoying an intellectual love of God will feel that love coming from God, just as the Awakened Hamlet should feel his lines coming from Shakespeare. In other words, the human mind enjoying an intellectual love toward God will feel that his own love toward God is no different from the love by which God loves himself. In Spinoza’s words, “the Mind’s intellectual Love of God is part of the infinite Love by which God loves himself” (Proposition 36 of Part Five).

§5 Although Spinoza says in Proposition 23 of Part Five: “The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the human body, but there remains of it something that is eternal.”, I don’t interpret him saying literally that there is an eternal part in the human mind. If he is taken in that way, he must be considered to be incoherent as many scholars, C. D. Broad included, assert. My interpretation is that Spinoza intends to assert that the human mind feels itself belonging to eternity when it knows singular things through the third kind of knowledge. It is “excellence and utility” of that kind of knowledge to enable the human mind to feel itself belonging to eternity. Here, eternity is the species of time in which God produces everything in the world by producing himself.

Indeed, what it means to feel oneself belonging to eternity is not at all easy to understand. Spinoza himself has much trouble in explaining it in geometrical exposition. Pretty certainly it will be hopeless to give exclusive attention to formal details in Spinoza’s argument in order to understand his doctrine of the eternity of the human mind. In the belief that a quite different way of reading is needed, in this short paper I have had recourse to a parable that consists in imagining Hamlet to begin to think about Shakespeare. This way of interpreting Spinoza is surely a kind of experiment. The degree of the success of this experiment depends on how plausible an interpretation it brings for the doctrine in question.

§6 Spinoza’s doctrine of the eternity of the human mind and the intellectual love of God is esoteric enough to perplex most readers of the *Ethics*. Just because Spinoza himself is aware

of this esotericity, he remarks in Proposition 41 of Part Five something to the effect that it is possible to understand his ethical theory developed in Part Four and the first half of Part Five without grasping that doctrine. However, grasping that doctrine is undoubtedly necessary to understand what Spinoza calls “the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature (*cognitio unionis quam mens cum tota Natura habet*)” in Section 13 of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in other words, what he calls “salvation (*salus*)” in the penultimate sentence of the *Ethics*.

The traditional concept of transient God has no part in Spinoza's metaphysics. In a world without transient God, naturally, there is no possibility for the human mind to be saved by transient God. Spinoza is fully aware of how revolutionary his philosophy is because of this lack of traditional God. Therefore, no matter how “difficult” and “rare” it may be, Spinoza must stress at the end of the *Ethics* that it is possible for the human mind to feel its own eternity and love God intellectually. For him, the doctrine of the eternity of the human mind is nothing but an indispensable compensation for what is definitely lost in his metaphysical revolution.

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