

LOVE FOR KNOWLEDGE

I would like, in this short period of time, to give to you a picture of a wonderful cathedral which, in my understanding, it is reflected the becoming of the world.

The book in which this building is portrayed is the Ethics from Baruch Spinoza.

Let me spend a couple of minutes on the author and the book, to place them in space and time.

Baruch Spinoza was born on 24 November 1632 in Amsterdam in a Jewish community and due to his radical ideas he was harshly censured on 27 July 1656. This led to the impossibility for him to publish this work under his name, so the Ethics was published anonymously after his death. He lived a very humble life, carving lenses as a job, living in a small house and devoting himself to knowledge, understood as a means to foster what is human in us. He died on 21 February 1677.

This book is written in an unorthodox way, its contents are “more geometrico demonstrati”, demonstrated in geometrical order.

It is composed of five parts, each of which begins with axioms, which are self-evident truths, and definitions. They are followed by other statements which can be inferred from these, which are called propositions or theorems, in which their truth lies in what they are based on, because an idea based on a true idea is also true. From these then it is possible to infer other statements and propositions for the same reason.

So it is like a cathedral, which is built on foundations and columns, the more stable they are, the greater it can soar.

So let me try to show you the gesture of this building.

Definitions 1-5, part 1:

1. By which is self-caused (*causa sui*) I mean that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing.

Everything which exists, exists because it is caused by something else, example of objects. So its existence depends on the presence of its cause. So its existence is not necessary. Whether something which causes itself depends only on itself in its existence

2. A thing is said to be finite in its own kind when it can be limited by another thing of the same nature. For example, a body is said to be finite because we can always conceive another

body greater than it. So, too, a thought is limited by another thought. But a body is not limited by a thought, nor a thought by a body.

Let's take an example to understand this: the chair is said to be finite because we can conceive a room in which it is contained. So the room is said to be finite because we can conceive a house in which it is contained. The house land, the land in the Earth and so on.

3. By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed.

What Is this "substance"? To make it more clear: is this chalk the substance? The concept of the chalk is conceived through the concept of mineral, color, its function, the way in which it is produced and so on. For "mineral" is the same, because it is conceived through matter, opposed to organic. And the same for matter and organic and so on. At the end of this path we find God and only Him can be the substance, "that which lies under".

4. By attribute I mean that which the intellect perceives of the substance as constituting its essence.

These are the extension, matter, and thought, in which are also included emotions, feelings, memories, imaginations and conceptions. Extension has to be conceived not as the "specific measure" of a body, rather more as the fact that that body can be measured.

For thought? (Is it the very quality of our inner life?)

5. By mode I mean the affections of the substance, that is, that which is in something else and is conceived through (this) something else.

Mode is every single phenomenon which occurs in the world. This chair, this book, this house, ecc... These, as we have shown before, have to be conceived through something else. Example of the chalk.

Corollary 2, proposition 44, part 2: It is in the nature of reason to perceive things in the light of (a certain kind of) eternity.

Everything which exists and acts is determined to exist and to act in a certain way by the very necessity of the divine nature. The reason knows things truly, that is, how they are in themselves. Given that their “being” is such because of God, understanding things truly means to understand the very fact that they are so due to the very necessity of God’s eternal nature. Therefore understand things under the light of the eternity of God.

Proposition 25, part 5: the highest conatus (effort, strive) of the mind and its highest virtue is to understand things by the third kind of knowledge. (Sub specie aeternitatis)

The essence or the strive of the mind, which for Spinoza are the same, is cognizing. The more it cognizes, the more active it is and therefore passes to a greater degree of perfection.

The third kind of knowledge consists in understanding things in how they are in themselves. As we have said before, a finite thing is what is and is conceived through something else, i.e its cause. And the cause of everything is the necessity of God. So the greatest object of cognition is God, which is known through the third kind of knowledge.

Proposition 32: We take pleasure in whatever we understand by the third kind of knowledge, and this is accompanied by the idea of God as cause.

Insofar the mind has adequate ideas of things it is active and its power is enhanced.

When this happens the mind passes to a greater degree of perfection and due to this it is filled with pleasure.

Through the third kind of knowledge we know things in their necessity, which is God Himself. So the perfection of the mind is made greater and this is accompanied by the idea of God. So this pleasure is caused by God.

Corollary: From the third kind of knowledge there necessarily arises the intellectual love of God. For from this kind of knowledge there arises pleasure accompanied by the idea of God as cause, that is, the love of God not insofar as we imagine Him as present but insofar as we understand God to be eternal. And this is what I call the intellectual love of God. (Amor Dei intellectualis)

We arrived at this conclusion by following some of the steps of the Ethics. Do you Remember how we started? “God: definitions”.

How can God be defined? Can we, as limited beings as we are, set limits to God? So how can we understand (intendere= in-tendere; to intend) the Infinite Being, which God is? Through the third kind of knowledge. So the first definition of the Ethics is the necessary consequence of the Amor Dei Intellectualis (Intellectual Love of God). So the whole Ethics is the fruit of this kind of knowledge. So we can say that the Ethics is the cause of itself, and in this quality an image of God or of Nature is given, and also its “more geometrico” reflects the “more geometrico” of reality.

Francesco Mai
Dornach 19/06/2025