INTRODUCTION: SPINOZA’S ETHICA ORDINE GEOMETRICO DEMONSTRATA

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1. AIM AND SYSTEMATIC INTENTION

Spinoza’s *Ethics* is one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken by a philosopher. It addresses every area of philosophical inquiry, at least in its basic elements: ontology, philosophy of mind, physics, epistemology, the study of emotions, social philosophy, political philosophy, meta-ethics, moral philosophy and, finally, the consideration of ‘final things’ such as freedom, happiness and eternity. The affirmations Spinoza makes are meant to be categorically true. All are meant to be interlinked and presented in a fully transparent proof structure. In this book, practical wisdom and scientific rationality are not set out as two conflicting traditions. Scientific knowledge is presented as the rational foundation for a happy life. Relevant science is distinguished from irrelevant science according to how well it answers the question of what constitutes a happy life. Spinoza himself was quite aware of the boldness of his claims. When Albert Burgh, a former student (who later converted to Catholicism), asked him how he knew that his philosophy was the best one, Spinoza answered: “I do not presume that I have found the best philosophy. I know that I understand the true philosophy.”

The crucial question, however, is: how, exactly, are practical wisdom and science related in the *Ethics*? Five points are important to note in this regard:

1) **Ontological presupposition instead of deontological foundation.** Spinoza’s *Ethics* does not propose a deontological ethics which answers the question ‘What should I do?’ without regard for the human psycho-physical constitution. It explains how a happy and self-determined life can be lived on the basis of the structures and

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1 Ep. 76; G 4: 319f.
laws of nature and human existence. Spinoza’s *Ethics* is a theory of nature and of human existence, within which he develops a theory about what is good for human beings.

2) **Naturalism.** Spinoza defends a naturalism that denies all being which is supposed to transcend nature in any way. So, not only the anthropological resources of moral action but also the goods for which it strives are understood to be natural. The ethics envisaged by Spinoza exclude any kind of *bonum morale*. Instead, it proceeds on the premise that it is always a *bonum naturale* which—more or less reliably—makes us happy and free. It does, however, make a distinction between goods which tend to last and others which tend to lead to merely fleeting happiness.

3) **Universality.** In spite of the rejection of a genuine moral good, Spinoza believes that general statements about what can make us happy and free are possible. The *Ethics* is built upon premises of natural philosophy and anthropology: although people live under different conditions, therefore developing quite different needs and ideas about which things are good, they are nevertheless all subject to the same natural laws. In principle, therefore, the same things are beneficial or detrimental to us all. The fourth part of the *Ethics* consequently makes quite general statements about what is good and bad. Hate, for instance, is always bad (4p45); cheerfulness, on the other hand, always good (4p42).

4) **Epistemological anti-scepticism.** General statements about what is beneficial or detrimental to persons and their self-determination are possible only if people themselves can have knowledge of nature, including human nature. Spinoza’s *Ethics* therefore also rests on the epistemological presupposition that people can gain insights into the ontological and natural constitution of their own species. Consequently, the *Ethics* rejects epistemological relativism and scepticism.

5) **Necessity and Systematicity.** Spinoza assumes that the insights of different philosophical disciplines are necessarily and systematically connected. This does not imply that everything is deducible from the definitions of the *Ethics’* first part. Spinoza does, however, consider the connections between some insights to be so binding that he is confident we will share his ethical and meta-ethical conclusions as soon as we have acquired an understanding of nature, man and man’s capacity for the truth.