THE THEORY OF THE GOOD IN PART 4 OF THE ETHICS

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1. The Good and Human Striving

In the work that Spinoza calls The Ethics, ethics in the narrower sense is treated in Parts 3 to 5. It has its foundations in the previous parts, the ontology of the first part and the epistemology of the second part. The concept of the good, the heart of an ethics, is treated in the middle of the parts dedicated to ethics in the narrower sense, in Part 4. The first definition of this part is that of what is meant by “good”. The introduction of this term in a prominent passage signals the term’s central significance for the fourth part. This part is about human bondage, so that the theory of the good developed in it is a moment of the description of human non-freedom. The fifth part, then, which treats human freedom, no longer mentions the good, apparently because the good is not a concept that characterizes a thing itself, but a concept that we form for our own orientation, due to a comparison of things with each other (cf. 4praef). It is an ens rationis without ontological validity. Freedom, though, is an ontological determination, by which the nature of a thing is itself described (cf. 1d7); human freedom must therefore be in harmony with what is, and must not be the result of merely subjective modes of thinking (modi cogitandi), among which Spinoza numbers the concept of the good.

But even the third part contains no theory of the good, insofar as there the good is simply identified with that for which one strives. This identification is the result of the theory of striving (conatus) as the essential feature of an individual thing formulated in this part (3p7). The anti-teleological concept of human striving precludes any orientation of man’s striving toward some good that preceded his striving. The striving of an individuum is, according to its nature, directed at itself, namely at the preservation of one’s own being (“in suo esse perseverare”, 3p6). What one strives for is thus fundamentally in service

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of one’s own self-preservation, and is by virtue of this a good for the one who strives, in the sense of something useful for his own self-preservation. The one who strives considers the desired good only because he desires it (3p9s). Yet striving for self-preservation alone is not sufficient for the real preservation of the one who strives, a fact that Spinoza demonstrates at length in Part 3. The object of desire is hence only what the desirer believes to be good (“aliquid bonum esse judicare”, 3p9s). As only believed to be good, it is not truly a good, for that which an individuum desires as a good often does not lead to his preservation, but in many cases, to his ruin. It is only good from the perspective of the one who desires, who disposes of a consciousness that accompanies the desire. That consciousness approves of what the desirer in fact does, but does not know about the conditions that truly lead to the self-preservation of the individual. If the object of desire does not lead to self-preservation then it is only apparently a good, and not truly a good. Only in the fourth part does Spinoza explain in detail what the true good is, in explicit contrast to what is merely believed to be a good.

Therefore the definition of the good in this part (4d1) diverges from the identification of the good with the object of desire put forth in the third part. Only thus can a theory of the good be developed that contains more than giving an additional name to what everyone does anyway. The definition reads: “By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us.” (4d1) According to this, the theory of the good stands under the condition of a certain knowledge that we ourselves have (certo scimus). The good is not that of which we have an opinion, but something about which we know. It is not something that is apparently useful, but that is truly useful to us. Accordingly, that is not good which we desire for the sake of our self-preservation, but that which proves sufficient to its achievement, that which contributes to the real preservation of our being. Only what we know with certainty to be something good, is also something irrefutably good (cf. 4p27).

If the object of desire leads to a destruction or even only a lessening of one’s own being, it is in truth bad, although it is desired; even if it is good from the perspective of the desiring subject. The theory of the true good developed in the fourth part therefore departs from the perspective of the desirer. It is developed rather from a different perspective, that of the theoretician who knows the conditions under which what everyone desires is also achieved. Thus it is possible to compare