THE THIRD KIND OF KNOWLEDGE
AS ALTERNATIVE SALVATION

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My aim in this paper is to put together the elements for a new interpretation of Spinoza's mature notion of "knowledge of the third kind" as it stands in the Ethics. I do not insist that Spinoza held this view explicitly (although I think it probable) but that his texts suggest this reading as a plausible reconstruction. And since my reconstruction depends in large measure on the way I interpret other issues in Spinoza's system, I shall have to mention them, too, in brief.

As a by-product, I hope the paper will also illustrate the "Marrano of reason" dimension in Spinoza and how it can provide a context for understanding systematic problems as well. So prior to the reconstruction, let me briefly introduce this context.

I. Marranos and Alternative Salvation

Salvation does not lie in Jesus, but in the Law of Moses: this, as the files of the Inquisition insistently tell us, was the invariable claim of Judaizing Marranos, the common secret which made them an esoteric fraternity holding in its possession no less than the greatest prize their culture treasures. Only they, a persecuted minority, possess the key to salvation; they alone can attain what others, the ruling Christian establishment, have always distorted and misrepresented and therefore inevitably missed.

As Georg Simmel suggests, the sharing of such a hidden and exclusive possession can foster a secret group's identity and reinforce the individual's devotion to it even where other sociological indicators may show dispersion, discord, or poor communication. Marranos, however, did not only share a metaphysical secret but also a common "impure blood." This is what made them a "nation" (as indeed they were called) rather than merely a secret sect. But at least the Judaizers among this "nation" had also the traits of a secret religious fraternity, neither Christian nor actually Jewish, and bound by a road to salvation which rivals that of the ruling tradition around them.

Spinoza, too, retained an analogous Marrano feature, translated into rational and secular terms. He, too, believed he held the key to true salvation which only a select group can attain, and which rivals that of the established tradition. But whereas Judaizing Marranos replaced Christ by Moses within historical religion, Spinoza rejected all historical religion and cult as superstitious. Salvation lies neither in Christ nor in the Law of Moses, but in the laws of reason leading to the "third kind of knowledge." Reason thereby yields the same elevated results which religion and mysticism have claimed to attain but have always distorted because of their irrational ways. Spinoza thus
offers a *religion* of reason over and above ordinary rationality, the one which expresses itself in science and in practical ethics. Rationality has two forms, discursive and intuitive, fragmentary and synoptic, emotionally dull and emotionally explosive; and through the higher form of rationality - which, as we shall see, *presupposes the former and cannot be attained by a direct leap* - reason alone can lead in Spinoza to an immanent, this-worldly form of salvation, in which eternity penetrates temporal life, finitude is redeemed, the passions are turned into free, positive emotions and vigor, which transform one's whole life to the point of a "new birth" and the individual realizes his or her unity with God (= the deified universe) through knowledge and intellectual love.

The vehicle of this kind of salvation, the "third kind of knowledge," is not only one of the most difficult and controversial issues in Spinoza, but the *Ethics* is notoriously parsimonious in speaking of it. Worse, part of what the *Ethics* does say on the third kind of knowledge is confusing, if not downright wrong from Spinoza's own mature standpoint. I refer particularly to a famous example, carried over from Spinoza's earliest and less mature works (the essay *On the Emendation of the Intellect* (TdIE) and the *Short Treatise* (KV)), where Spinoza explains intuitive knowledge by the manner in which a mathematician may grasp the nature of proportion in a single flash (E IIIP4OS2, reiterating TdIE and KV). If all there is to the third kind of knowledge is an ordinary mathematical intuition which, as Spinoza adds, "no one" (nemo) would fail to achieve, then we should not ponder much about it and may let the issue die of sheer banality. No one would dream of using this commonplace as a lever for mental emancipation - let alone salvation.\(^2\)

The third kind of knowledge, however, is clearly a matter for the happy few. It is the road Spinoza offers to secular salvation - a rival road, rational and unmediated by any historical creed, to the same exalted goal which, as Spinoza believes, traditional religion and mysticism have sought in vain to achieve through irrational faith and acts. That Spinoza's philosophical effort was ultimately aimed at this goal is made unmistakably clear from the first known lines he wrote to the concluding phrase of the *Ethics*.

Spinoza starts to philosophize (in the TdIE) by setting up an ethical goal, the "highest good" to which all human endeavor should be subordinated. He seeks a radically new kind of life, in which his existence will attach to what is permanent and eternal. The same perspective later dominates Spinoza's mature thought; it also explains why he chose to entitle his major work the *Ethics*, even though the book deals mainly with metaphysics, the theory of knowledge and the psychology of the emotions. These branches of knowledge, along with the physical sciences, are to serve an ethical goal, first on the lower level of *ratio* (discursive rationality) and then, for the select few, leading to salvation through the third kind of knowledge.

Some modern readers may find this pervasive goal annoying or its elaboration incoherent; but as a recent example has proven again,\(^3\) one can dismiss this dimension of Spinoza's thought only at the risk of losing much of his philosophical meaning. Spinoza without the third kind of knowledge would