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Benedict Spinoza.

By **Dr. phil.** Harald Høffding.

The zeal of our age for raising statues and memorials has often brought me to think of the saying about those who whitewash the tombs of the prophets. One cannot keep away the melancholy thought that the recognition of the greatness of the past does not prevent the misjudgment of contemporaries. But it is, on the other hand, natural that a freer and more conciliatory view comes most readily to the fore in regard to what is past, where everything is concluded, the struggle ended, and the position and motives of the combatants illuminated by their place and conditions within the historical development. In Spinoza's case it seems in any event to be so. Even those who cannot sympathize with his standpoint and his doctrine cannot deny him their admiration for his noble and gentle character and must concede his great significance for later science and literature. And when one recalls how much persecution and misjudgment Spinoza had to suffer, how alone he stood in his time, and how alien this age felt itself to his ideas, so that more than 100 years passed before they could break through, then the statue that is now to be raised to him in The Hague by contributions not only from his native land but also from the rest of Europe will stand as a testimony that there has taken place a progress not only in the understanding of what is great and significant but also in a liberal-minded and tolerant way of thinking.

That he stood alone in his time is perhaps somewhat connected with the fact that he was originally a stranger to the modern Western science and literature. His parents were Portuguese Jews, who had left their native land for the sake of their faith and in Holland, the cradle of religious freedom, had sought a new home. In Amsterdam there was at that time a flourishing Jewish congregation with a synagogue and a rabbinical school, at which renowned teachers worked. In this city *Benedict Spinoza* was born on 24 November 1632. On account of the gifts he displayed early, he was destined for

the learned estate, that is to say, to become a rabbi. He also made such rapid progress on this path that already in his sixteenth year he was a respected Talmudist. But soon his sharp understanding and tireless zeal for inquiry began to feel dissatisfied within the confines of tradition and theology. Probably it was at this time that he learned Latin and began to study the classical authors, the natural sciences and the Cartesian philosophy. His teacher in the humanities was the physician van Ende, who kept a kind of school in his house and was known for his free religious views. A legend tells that Spinoza fell in love with his daughter, who helped her father with the teaching, but that she preferred a fellow pupil to him. Yet in the most recent time this account has been rejected, since van Ende's daughter, according to the information that has been found, at the time of which we are speaking was only a little over ten years old.

The doubts that arose in him, and the new thoughts which were beginning to *[2]* take shape, certainly removed him early somewhat from his co-religionists and made his visits to the synagogue less frequent; for it is told that they promised him a not inconsiderable annual pension if he would only visit the synagogue now and then. Indeed, it is even said that more violent means were tried against him. One evening, as he was leaving the synagogue, a man attacked him with a dagger, whose thrust, however, merely slit his clothing. There was suspicion that he would go over to Christianity, and they were loath to yield so gifted an adherent to another confession. Yet it must also be emphasized that the adherents of the Cartesian philosophy at that time were regarded with suspicion even within the Christian church. The Second Synod of Dort had recently declared them excluded from ecclesiastical offices. The little Jewish congregation, which had to watch still more strictly over its members, when neither good nor evil means bore fruit, finally resorted to the expedient of expelling the apostate from its midst. This took place in July 1656. The formula of the ban was found some years ago in the archive of the Jewish congregation in Amsterdam; it is composed in the style of the Old Testament and makes partial use of its words. "Cursed," — it says among other things — "be he by day, cursed be he by night, cursed when he lies down, cursed when he rises from his bed! Cursed be his going out, cursed his coming in!" "Know that no one may have anything to do with him either orally or in writing, no one may show him any favor, no one dwell under his roof, no one come near him within less than four cubits, no one read anything he has written!"

In his twenty-fourth year Spinoza was thus cast out into the world, violently severed from family and kinsmen, and without a dwelling anywhere else. It now

stood him in good stead that the Talmud required everyone who trained to become a rabbi to learn a trade. He had learned the art of grinding optical glasses and had attained great skill in it. By this he now procured his frugal livelihood. But he was not yet allowed to live in peace. At the instigation of the Jewish and the Christian clergy the authorities of Amsterdam banished him in the year 1660 from the city "to uphold order and subordination." He lived in the following years in Rhynsburg, a small village near Leiden, where an Arminian sect, the so-called Collegiants, had found a refuge. Later he moved to Voorburg near The Hague, and finally (1669), at the urging of his friends, to The Hague itself.

Of Spinoza's character and inner life in his youth one knows only what can be inferred from the outward events and from the letters and writings of his later years. His biographers are inclined to infer backwards from the calm and resignation which are expressed in these, and hold that he also in his youth displayed such qualities; yet some hold that one can conceive of them in the mature thinker only as the result of passionate struggles in youth. It is in any event clear that early on he gathered all his striving and endeavor into one longing — that of acquiring a clear and valid knowledge of the nature of man and his relation to the whole of nature. His whole character has an intellectual stamp; investigation and contemplation are for him the highest thing. He himself describes in his treatise on "the Improvement of the Understanding" how the goods that most people seek, honor, riches and sensual enjoyment, had lost their value for him, and it now dawned on him that the true and highest good was "the knowledge of the union of our mind with the whole of nature." He sought in the knowledge of truth more than mere theory; he sought a view of life. And his greatness consists here precisely in the harmony that existed in him between knowledge and character, thought and life.

After the publication of his first writing, an exposition of the Cartesian philosophy with indications of the points where it had to be carried further, he soon became famous. Many sought him out in his dwelling, and he conducted a considerable correspondence. One of his correspondents, Oldenburg, the first President of the Society of Sciences in London; mentions as the attractive thing about him "thorough knowledge combined with gentleness and fine cultivation." In the year 1670 he published a "theological-political treatise," which aimed to show "that freedom of thought can not only be granted without injury to piety and to the peace of the state, but that it cannot even be abolished without these perishing at the same time". He demanded here the right for everyone to interpret the religious doctrines according to

his best insight — and not only to form his own conviction but also to express it. He cites (while seeming to forget how it had gone for himself) his native city, Amsterdam, as an example that such freedom can exist with the nature of an ordered society. "In this flourishing and distinguished city people of all nations and confessions live in the greatest concord. There is no sect, however hated, whose adherents are not (as long as they injure no one, give everyone his due and live honestly) protected by the public power of the state". He is the first who has maintained the principle of toleration in this full extent. The work cited contained moreover historical-critical investigations of the books of the Old Testament, whereby the foundation was laid for the whole of modern Biblical criticism, and rationalistic interpretations of the most important dogmas. The offense this writing aroused deterred Spinoza from publishing more. His chief work, "Ethics," circulated in copies among his friends and appeared only after his death.

In the whole last part of his life he suffered from a consuming chest ailment. He nevertheless continued his studies steadily, and with such zeal that on one occasion for three months he did not leave his house. He lived with the painter van Spyck, in whose family he often spent his hours of rest; he liked to talk especially with his host and his wife about religion and about the sermons they had heard in church. Even the day before his death he was down with them to smoke a pipe of tobacco and talk about the day's sermon. He constantly admonished people to remain in their confession and emphasized the practical-ethical moment in religion.

Spinoza died on 21 February 1677. No one was present with him except his friend the physician Ludvig Meyer. Rumors spread that he was said to have died in despair or even to have committed suicide, just as there were also very evil rumors in circulation about his character and conduct. A Lutheran clergyman, Colerus, who came to live in the same house in which Spinoza had formerly lived, undertook to investigate the matter and published a biography of Spinoza (in Dutch, translated into French: *"La vie de Spinoza, tirée des écrits de ce fameux philosophe et du témoignage de plusieurs personnes dignes de foi, qui l'ont connu particulièrement, par Jean Colerus. A la Haye 1706"* — the best source-work for Spinoza's life) and he was able to contradict all the rumors that prejudice had bred and fanaticism spread abroad. Although Colerus himself condemns Spinoza's doctrines, he emphasizes his pure morals, gentle character and great unselfishness. This last quality Spinoza displayed in particular toward his sisters, to whom he left his share of the inheritance, just as he several times declined offers of financial support from his friends. A professorship at Heidelberg, which was *[3]*

offered him, he declined so as not to be hindered in his quiet studies and from fear of intolerance.

One has often, perhaps, derived Spinoza's doctrine exclusively from Cartesianism. From a youthful writing found some years ago it appears that he was strongly influenced by the Jewish religious philosophers of the Middle Ages and by Giordano Bruno, the greatest philosopher of the Renaissance, who maintained the infinity and unity of nature. What Spinoza found in Descartes was the clear, mathematical method and a mechanical conception of nature. Proceeding from the idea of the infinite substance, which is at once nature and God, he seeks to show that it is this which moves in everything. The material and the mental world are different forms for the revelation of the infinite unity.

Such thoughts had, in the nature of the case, to lie long uncomprehended; both religious and philosophical prejudices hindered the appropriation of them. Spinoza lay, according to Lessing's words, like a dead dog, scorned and kicked by all parties. Then came his resurrection at the end of the eighteenth century with the freer and fresher movement in poetry, philosophy and science. It would lead too far to develop here what he has been for minds such as Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Novalis, Schelling and Schleiermacher. For Goethe there breathed in Spinoza's writings an "air of peace"; he learned from them to see that there is a great, necessary connection in everything, and admired the deep resignation which is expressed in them. In the writing by Schleiermacher which introduces the religious renewal after the rationalism of the eighteenth century, he pays homage in an enthusiastic eulogy to Spinoza's profound and truly religious spirit. In the lectures that Schelling's disciple Henrik Steffens held at the beginning of this century in Copenhagen, and which had so mighty an influence on the development of our literature, one likewise finds a beautiful and enthusiastic eulogy of Spinoza. "Never can I," says Steffens among other things, "think of this glorious man in his calm solitude, with a light in his soul that no accident could chase away, with an inward peace that no persecutions could disturb, without a ray of his light awakening the most beautiful hope in me." (One should read the whole beginning of the 2nd lecture).

What was attempted at the beginning of the century by the poetic and speculative path — to grasp nature and existence in its wholeness and unity, that is what realistic research is working toward in our day. In the natural science and philosophy of our time there is a strong unity-seeking tendency. Wide horizons open, and connections are made and transitions formed where one earlier halted at a yawning abyss. This

must naturally revive the memory of the solitary Dutch thinker of the seventeenth century. Spinoza is also related to modern realism in that, in spite of his speculative and deductive method, he maintains the strict causal connection and demands a mechanical explanation carried through everywhere. Especially as regards the relation between soul and body, his theory seems to be the one toward which the newest psychological and physiological investigations point.

We can no longer use Spinoza's method in philosophy. What stood for his thought as the first, the secure starting point: the absolute being, is for us precisely that which eternally eludes thought. We must seek by the way of experience — which for Spinoza too was the only one by which we could come to know individual beings — to find the laws and forms of the life of the mind and its connection with the whole of existence. But Spinozism stands as a model by its boldness and consistency; it is an attempt which in this form has its counterpart only in Hegel's system, and this cannot in originality and in the purity of its lines compare with Spinoza's. And besides the fruitful and profound in the fundamental thought there are also in Spinoza, as in every great thinker, subordinate points of much interest and lasting significance. I have already mentioned his historical criticism and his maintaining of the principle of toleration, and shall only mention further his psychological exposition of the passions, their origin, development and interplay. It is in its kind so classical an exposition that Johannes Müller as late as some thirty-odd years ago reprinted it whole and entire in his famous "Handbuch der Physiologie". It has only in our time found counterparts in the expositions of the English psychologists.

But quite apart from the theoretical results Spinoza stands as a great model of the character of the true inquirer, and by the gentleness and calm he preserved in his inner being as well as toward others, although he had suffered from the conflicts of the view of life, he stands especially as a figure from whose contemplation one can, as Steffens said, draw "the most beautiful hope" in a time such as ours, in which views clash no less, even if the clash perhaps takes place under less violent forms.