

Spinoza on Ethics and Understanding by Peter Winch, ed. by Michael Campbell and Sarah Tropper

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In his introductory essay to this volume David Cockburn writes:

Peter Winch is, one might think, a very different kind of philosopher from Spinoza. While one might expect the ethical slant of Spinoza's thinking to be attractive to him, there is, even here, a radical difference. For, as Spinoza sees things, while it may be true that geometry cannot show a man where he should stand, philosophy can, through a demonstration by strict geometrical method of the truth about the world, show a man what he should attach importance to.¹ This is 'metaphysics' in just the (or a) sense of which Winch was, I take it, deeply suspicious. (p. xxvii)

This seems an adequate characterization. But for all that, Winch had a long-standing fascination

with Spinoza's philosophy. Could this be due to the way Spinoza combines what one is tempted to call "impossible" metaphysics with a serious engagement with the question how a human being should think about life? For Winch, anyway, the core of Spinoza's thought lies in the way issues in epistemology, metaphysics and ethics are assimilated with one another; otherwise, ethics tended to be fairly peripheral in early modern philosophy.

This volume offers a transcript of lectures given at the University of Swansea in 1982 and recorded by David Cockburn, supplemented with Winch's preparatory notes for this course and a second course given in 1989 (on the location of this course, see below). The editors have rearranged the material by theme. As the unity of our entire experience is one major theme of the lectures, it makes

¹ Cp. Winch, "Moral Integrity", in his book *Ethics and Action*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1972, p. 191.

for a curious effect to have recurring side references to commuting on the 125 train between London and Swansea on the one hand, and (more indirectly) to President Bush, Mount Vernon, the *New York Times* and an earthquake at Champaign on the other hand.

The lectures are preceded by an introduction by the editors and the essay “Spinoza and the Human Body” by David Cockburn.

The lectures start out with a discussion of Spinoza’s *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, which centres on epistemological questions. The main bulk of the lectures is devoted to Spinoza’s *Ethics*, with chapters dealing with substance and attribute; with negation, limitation and modes; with mind and body: with the emotions, good and evil; and with the life of reason. The world, or substance, is not an external court of appeal for settling the truth of my ideas, rather its existence is a condition for my judgments making sense. Substance is independent of anything external to it. (The parallel with Wittgenstein’s thoughts in the *Tractatus* about the substance of the world as being one main condition for the possibility of formulating sentences about something is evident. Interestingly, Winch is sparing of pointing out connections between Spinoza and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* in spite of their evident affinity of spirit.)

The lectures do not try to follow Spinoza’s (alleged) proofs, but rather they elucidate his overall vision concerning a few selected topics:

First of all, the all-encompassing unity of the world (*sive* God *sive* substance) where the very intelligibility of having a thought depends, as Winch puts it, on being part of a network of connections. The main task of improving our knowledge then consists in gradually developing a better appreciation of the internal connections which make up this unity. This view can be set against Descartes’ basic setup: Descartes tries to step outside everything and to doubt everything, the self, the existence of an external world, and of (an external) God. On Spinoza’s view this entire enterprise is empty because the words used to express it could not have any meaning, they could not express an “idea” of anything: “I think, therefore I am” can only have sense if I already exist as a thinking being within the scope of the world.

The ideal of knowledge would then be a stable *a priori* view of the world as it really is in terms of internal connections. This, however, makes all empirical knowledge and research a mere transitional stage, at most; and a Kuhnian view of several paradigms for research is ruled out. Winch points this out, yet he himself uses examples of interweaving empirical background, which is not quite the same as knowledge of the internal fabric of the world.

Much of the lectures explains the logical vocabulary of terms like “idea”, which is closer to a judgment than a concept, but which is internally connected to “truth”, so that here cannot really be a “false idea”. (This seems to be a fairly general part of

Pre-Fregean logic as when Kant explains that a “negative judgment” cannot be true, but only serves to “ward off error”; or when Frege in his paper “Negation” discusses theories of negation where a “false thought” amounts to a “thought that has no being”.) The basic opposition is not between truth and falsity but rather between vacillating obscure opinions and steady knowledge. Progress consists in darkness giving gradually way to more light.

A person’s mind, according to Spinoza, consists in the idea of her body. As Winch construes this, the body here is not exclusively to be understood in a physiological sense, but rather as comprising a person’s life. According to Winch, “a man’s identity is to be understood in terms of a certain coherence in the way that he lives” (Winch unabashedly uses the word “man” for human being). So we might say: a person’s mind is her ability to understand her life. Still, the notion that mind and body are exactly corresponding, or even identical, leads to a number of dead ends in Winch’s discussion. Cockburn’s essay contains a clarifying commentary on the mind-body theme, including a comparison of Spinoza’s thinking with that of Simone Weil.²

Winch remarks on Spinoza’s very wide (and to many readers very counter-intuitive) use of “*causa*” for reason as well as (natural) cause. However, as for him mind and body

are but two attributes of the same and thus basically identical, it seems not only natural but actually necessary to use the same term for the connections in both aspects. And while it seems strange to call anything “its own cause” it is very natural to say that we understand some things, like axioms, not from anything else but on their own. And if both fields are identical, this way of speaking would have to carry over to the other field. (And, of course, for many this generalization will make Spinoza’s approach even more baffling. Kant famously denounced the notion of “its own cause” as obviously incoherent in 1786, yet in his *Opus Postumum* he introduced the “T” as what is its own cause.)

Spinoza’s theory of the emotions has three elements, desire as the moving force, pleasure as the positive side, and pain as the negative side – with pain being equivalent to being passive, and pleasure to being active. Our (limited and relative) notion of good is “what causes pleasure” and our notion of bad is “what causes pain”. This leads to conceptual problems, as the emotion of pain is an activity of sorts (as a mere “passivity” would be a nothing), so that pain must be construed as a transition from greater to lesser perfection (or activity). Winch tries to make the best of this setup, but must confess to not being able to follow Spinoza here. He does, however, stress the notion of vacillation, the phenomenon of

² Winch carries the body-life theme further in his essay “Mind, Body & Ethics in Spinoza”, *Philosophical Investigations* 18 (1995), 216-34.

instability, i.e. of getting one step ahead and then falling two steps behind, and all in a different direction. The main issue here is that most beings (“Warty Bliggens the Toad” included with most humans) see themselves as the centre of the universe, and this eccentric perspective causes them to be in turn surprised, disappointed, pleased, bored, etc. The only way out of this turmoil of cognition as well as emotion consists in gradually coming closer to viewing things not from our own position in time but rather from an objective godlike viewpoint. This can be called the view *sub specie aeternitate*. It seems natural to identify this with the objective view of the world in terms of the essential internal, as opposed to factual and external, relations in the world (*sive* substance *sive* God). Winch points out several difficulties in the way Spinoza introduces this notion of the view from eternity, yet he finds “something genuinely important in what Spinoza is trying to say” (p. 136). However, the remaining two pages of the lectures (as we have them published) only discuss some preliminaries about timeless ideas but do not succeed in spelling out what it is that Winch finds genuinely important.

Winch had earlier introduced examples from Wittgenstein and Weil as comparisons. Wittgenstein used the phrase *sub specie aeternitatis* prominently in his *Tractatus* for viewing the world as a whole, disregarding all contingencies of facts, space and time –and this could be seen as some kind of knowledge, or rather insight (although

it is related to the “mystical feeling”). In his later writings (and Winch quotes only from them), he emphasized the importance of “good feelings” as opposed to good thoughts, and “to look at people’s faces”, which seems to stress compassion over a knowledge of Spinoza’s type. Simone Weil expresses a perhaps similar thought in pointing to the notion of loss and absence, as well as God being situated outside the world (which would involve more of a Cartesian overall view). Both Wittgenstein and Weil, seem in some ways close to what Spinoza tries to say – but neither of them believes in the fundamental intelligibility of the world, as expressed in Spinoza’s main tenet that real understanding must always understand something (and eventually the entire world) through itself – as something that can be understood as being its own cause, *causa sui*. (This notorious notion is a recurring theme of his lectures, yet one which remains fairly hazy.)

It is with a feeling of disappointment that we come to the end of the lectures with these fascinating questions and comparisons having been introduced—and the reader left dangling pretty much in mid-air.

For the most part, Winch stays close to Spinoza, drawing attention to lines of thought he finds hard to understand rather than replacing them with ideas more to his liking. He does not engage with the ongoing debate about Spinoza, but simply carries on a dialogue with Spinoza himself.

Though this text mainly consists of recorded lectures, they read pretty much like a text prepared in writing by Winch himself, the occurrence of repetitions aside. One of the present reviewers had the privilege of hearing part of Winch's lectures on Spinoza at King's College, London, in 1978; Winch spoke more or less freely, in a calm and even cadence which made it easy to take in the argument. This quality comes through in this transcript. (The editors do not mention this course, but another course allegedly given at King's College in 1989. However, various circumstances, some of them mentioned above, seem to indicate that the course was rather given at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign.)

All in all, we believe this volume is capable of raising renewed interest in the study of Spinoza. While much in the lectures may be rather confusing to beginners, and advanced readers will not get as many spelled-out answers as they might have hoped for, readers who have been engaging more closely with Spinoza will find a wealth of suggestions towards making sense of that enigmatic author.

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