

8. On Spinoza's Ethics; and on the Infinite¹(i) On Spinoza's EthicsAiii33₄[February 1676 (?)]²

384 M. Tschirnhaus has given me an account of many things from M. de Spinoza's book. There is a shopkeeper in Amsterdam (named Gilles Gerrit, I think), who has conversed with Spinoza. Spinoza's book will be about God, mind, blessedness, or the idea of the perfect man, therapy for the mind, and medicine for the body. He claims to demonstrate things about God; that He alone is free. He thinks freedom consists in this, that an action or determination results not from an extrinsic impulse, but solely from the nature of the agent. In this sense he is right to say that God alone is free. Mind, according to him, is in a way a part of God; he thinks there is some sensation in all things in proportion to their degree of existing. He defines God as an absolutely infinite being, likewise as a being that contains all perfections, i.e. affirmations, or realities, or things

385 that can be conceived. Likewise God alone is substance, or, a being subsisting through itself, or, that which can be conceived through itself, and all creatures are nothing but modes. Man is free to the extent that he is not determined by anything external. But since this is not the case in any of his acts, man is in no way free—even if he participates in freedom more than bodies do. [He thinks] mind is the very idea of the body. He also thinks that the union of the body arises from a kind of pressure. The

¹ LH IV, 8, leaf 20; the annotations concerning Spinoza's ethics (Aiii33₄) are on the front of this scrap of paper, and the observation concerning the infinite (Aiii63) on the back. Although much of what Leibniz relates is not directly relevant to the continuum problem, it seemed preferable to give his notes in full rather than as a patchwork of excerpts, especially because of the importance usually attached to Spinoza as a formative influence on Leibniz's thought in this period.

² Through the mediation of Tschirnhaus, Leibniz had long been seeking to get Spinoza's permission to look at the Ethics, which had existed in manuscript form for some time. Spinoza, perhaps not entirely sure of Leibniz's trustworthiness, gave permission some time in the Winter of 1675-6 for him to be apprised of some of its contents only. The Akademie editors ascribe the annotations made here to around February 1676. The further abstracts communicated to him through Tschirnhaus by Schuller along with Spinoza's Letter on the Infinite (Aiii19 below), and his notes on them, appear to date from around April.

vulgar begin philosophy with created things, Descartes began with the mind, he begins with God. Extension does not entail divisibility, and in this Descartes was mistaken. Descartes was likewise mistaken in believing he could see clearly and distinctly that the mind acts on the body, and that the mind is acted upon by the body. He thinks that when we die we forget almost everything, and retain only those things that we have through a knowledge that he calls intuitive, and which few people are aware of. For sensual knowledge is one thing, imaginative knowledge another, and intuitive another again. He believes in a kind of Pythagorean transmigration, at least that minds go from body to body. He says Christ was the greatest philosopher. He thinks that there are infinitely many other affirmative attributes besides thought and extension, but that there is thought in all of them, as there is here in extension; but that we cannot conceive what they are like, each one being infinite in its own kind, as, here, is space.

(+ I usually say that there are three degrees of infinity.³ The lowest is, for the sake of example, like that of the asymptote of a hyperbola;⁴ and this I usually just call the infinite. It is greater than any assignable, as can also be said of all the other degrees. The second is that which is greatest in its own kind, as for example the greatest of all extended things is the whole of space, the greatest of all successives is eternity. The third degree of infinity, and this is the highest degree, is everything, and this kind of infinite is in God, since he is all one; for in him are contained the requisites for existing of all the others. I make these comments in passing. +)

³ Leibniz elaborates on this tripartite distinction among infinities in his notes on Spinoza's Letter on the Infinite: see the "Annotated Excerpts from Spinoza" (Aiii19) below.

⁴ See Leibniz's explanation of this at Aiii19: 282, where he correctly states that the area comprised between the hyperbola and its asymptote is given by the sum of the (diverging) infinite series $1/1 + 1/2 + 1/3 + 1/4 + \dots$, which he equates to "1/0".

(ii) A Noteworthy Observation Concerning the Infinite

Aiii63

[February 1676 (?)]⁵

481 Here is a noteworthy observation concerning the infinite. Since there is one infinity greater than another, will there be something more eternal than something else? For instance, a thing can exist before any time imaginable, and yet [not]⁶ from eternity, because its time [in existence] will not be absolutely infinite, but infinite only in relation to us. Therefore there was a time when it did not exist, but that time is infinitely remote from now. This is just as an infinitely small line is in relation to a point.

⁵ This was presumably written around the same time as the notes on Spinoza on the same sheet.

⁶ The addition of this 'not' seems necessary in order to make sense of the example.