

## **MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO** over Spinoza in *The Tragic Sense Of Life*

Now we know what another man, the man Benedict Spinoza, that Portuguese Jew who was born and lived in Holland in the middle of the seventeenth century, wrote about the nature of things. The sixth proposition of Part III. of his "Ethic" states: "unaquoeque res, quatenus in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur" - that is, Everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being. Everything in so far as it is in itself - that is to say, in so far as it is substance, for according to him substance is "id quod in se est et per se concipitur" - that which is in itself and is conceived by itself. And in the following proposition, the seventh, of the same part, he adds: "conatus, quo unaquoeque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nihil est proeter ipsius rei actuaalem essentiam" - that is, the endeavour wherewith everything endeavours to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself. This means that your essence, reader, mine, that of the man Spinoza, that of the man Butler, of the man Kant, and of every man who is a man, is nothing but the endeavour, the effort, which he makes to continue to be a man, not to die. And the other proposition which follows these two, the eighth, says: "conatus, quo unaquoeque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nullum tempus finitum, sed indefinitum involvit" - that is, The endeavour whereby each individual thing endeavours to persist involves no finite time but indefinite time. That is to say that you, I, and Spinoza wish never to die and that this longing of ours never to die is our actual essence. Nevertheless, this poor Portuguese Jew, exiled in the mists of Holland, could never attain to believing in his own personal immortality, and all his philosophy was but a consolation which he contrived for his lack of faith. Just as other men have a pain in hand or foot, heart-ache or head-ache, so he had God-ache. Unhappy man! And unhappy fellow-men!

[...]

Take the man Spinoza, that Portuguese Jew exiled in Holland; read his "Ethic" as a despairing elegiac poem, which in fact it is, and tell me if you do not hear, beneath the disemburdened and seemingly serene propositions "more geometrico", the lugubrious echo of the prophetic psalms. It is not the philosophy of resignation but of despair. And when he wrote that the free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and that his wisdom consists in meditating not on death but on life - homo liber de nulla re minus quam de morte cogitat et eius sapientia non mortis, sed vitæ meditatio est ("Ethic", Part IV., Prop. LXVII.) - when he wrote that, he

felt, as we all feel, that we are slaves, and he did in fact think about death, and he wrote it in a vain endeavour to free himself from this thought. Nor in writing Proposition XLII. of Part V., that "happiness is not the reward of virtue but virtue itself," did he feel, one may be sure, what he wrote. For this is usually the reason why men philosophize - in order to convince themselves, even though they fail in the attempt. And this desire of convincing oneself - that is to say, this desire of doing violence to one's own human nature - is the real starting-point of not a few philosophies. Whence do I come and whence comes the world in which and by which I live? Whither do I go and whither goes everything that environs me? What does it all mean? Such are the questions that man asks as soon as he frees himself from the brutalizing necessity of labouring for his material sustenance. And if we look closely, we shall see that beneath these questions lies the wish to know not so much the "why" as the "wherefore," not the cause but the end. Cicero's definition of philosophy is well known - "the knowledge of things divine and human and of the causes in which these things are contained," "*rerum divinarum et humanarum, causarumque quibus hæ res continentur*"; but in reality these causes are, for us, ends. And what is the Supreme Cause, God, but the Supreme End? The "why" interests us only in view of the "wherefore." We wish to know whence we came only in order the better to be able to ascertain whither we are going. This Ciceronian definition, which is the Stoic definition, is also found in that formidable intellectualist, Clement of Alexandria, who was canonized by the Catholic Church, and he expounds it in the fifth chapter of the first of his "*Stromata*". But this same Christian philosopher - Christian? - in the twenty-second chapter of his fourth "*Stroma*" tells us that for the gnostic - that is to say, the intellectual - knowledge, "*gnosis*", ought to suffice, and he adds: "I will dare aver that it is not because he wishes to be saved that he, who devotes himself to knowledge for the sake of the divine science itself, chooses knowledge. For the exertion of the intellect by exercise is prolonged to a perpetual exertion. And the perpetual exertion of the intellect is the essence of an intelligent being, which results from an uninterrupted process of admixture, and remains eternal contemplation, a living substance. Could we, then, suppose anyone proposing to the gnostic whether he would choose the knowledge of God or everlasting salvation, and if these, which are entirely identical, were separable, he would without the least hesitation choose the knowledge of God?" May He, may God Himself, whom we long to enjoy and possess eternally, deliver us from this Clementine gnosticism or intellectualism!

[...]

First of all let us recall once again - and it will not be for the last time - that saying of Spinoza that every being endeavours to persist in itself, and that this endeavour is its actual essence, and implies indefinite time, and that the soul, in fine, sometimes with a clear and distinct idea, sometimes confusedly, tends to persist in its being with indefinite duration, and is aware of its persistency ("Ethic", Part III., Props. VI.-X.). It is impossible for us, in effect, to conceive of ourselves as not existing, and no effort is capable of enabling consciousness to realize absolute unconsciousness, its own annihilation. Try, reader, to imagine to yourself, when you are wide awake, the condition of your soul when you are in a deep sleep; try to fill your consciousness with the representation of no-consciousness, and you will see the impossibility of it. The effort to comprehend it causes the most tormenting dizziness. We cannot conceive ourselves as not existing. The visible universe, the universe that is created by the instinct of self-preservation, becomes all too narrow for me. It is like a cramped cell, against the bars of which my soul beats its wings in vain. Its lack of air stifles me. More, more, and always more! I want to be myself, and yet without ceasing to be myself to be others as well, to merge myself into the totality of things visible and invisible, to extend myself into the illimitable of space and to prolong myself into the infinite of time. Not to be all and for ever is as if not to be - at least, let me be my whole self, and be so for ever and ever. And to be the whole of myself is to be everybody else. Either all or nothing!

[...]

Spinoza, the most logical and consistent of atheists - I mean of those who deny the persistence of individual consciousness through indefinite future time - and at the same time the most pious, Spinoza devoted the fifth and last part of his "Ethic" to elucidating the path that leads to liberty and to determining the concept of happiness. The concept! Concept, not feeling! For Spinoza, who was a terrible intellectualist, happiness ("beatitudo") is a concept, and the love of God an intellectual love. After establishing in proposition xxi. of the fifth part that "the mind can imagine nothing, neither can it remember anything that is past, save during the continuance of the body" - which is equivalent to denying the immortality of the soul, since a soul which, disjoined from the body in which it lived, does not remember its past, is neither immortal nor is it a soul - he goes on to affirm in proposition xxiii. that "the human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but there remains of it

something which is "eternal", and this eternity of the mind is a certain mode of thinking. But do not let yourselves be deceived; there is no such eternity of the individual mind. Everything is "sub æternitatis specie" - that is to say, pure illusion. Nothing could be more dreary, nothing more desolating, nothing more anti-vital than this happiness, this "beatitudo", of Spinoza, that consists in the intellectual love of the mind towards God, which is nothing else but the very love with which God loves Himself (prop, xxxvi.). Our happiness - that is to say, our liberty - consists in the constant and eternal love of God towards men. So affirms the corollary to this thirty-sixth proposition. And all this in order to arrive at the conclusion, which is the final and crowning proposition of the whole "Ethic", that happiness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself. The everlasting refrain! Or, to put it plainly, we proceed from God and to God we return, which, translated into concrete language, the language of life and feeling, means that my personal consciousness sprang from nothingness, from my unconsciousness, and to nothingness it will return. And this most dreary and desolating voice of Spinoza is the very voice of reason. And the liberty of which he tells us is a terrible liberty. And against Spinoza and his doctrine of happiness there is only one irresistible argument, the argument "ad hominem". Was he happy, Benedict Spinoza, while, to allay his inner unhappiness, he was discoursing of happiness? Was he free? In the corollary to proposition xli. of this same final and most tragic part of that tremendous tragedy of his "Ethic", the poor desperate Jew of Amsterdam discourses of the common persuasion of the vulgar of the truth of eternal life. Let us hear what he says: "It would appear that they esteem piety and religion - and, indeed, all that is referred to fortitude or strength of mind - as burdens which they expect to lay down after death, when they hope to receive a reward for their servitude, not for their piety and religion in this life. Nor is it even this hope alone that leads them; the fear of frightful punishments with which they are menaced after death also influences them to live - in so far as their impotence and poverty of spirit permits - in conformity with the prescription of the Divine law. And were not this hope and this fear infused into the minds of men - but, on the contrary, did they believe that the soul perished with the body, and that, beyond the grave, there was no other life prepared for the wretched who had borne the burden "of piety" in this - they would return to their natural inclinations, preferring to accommodate everything to their own liking, and would follow fortune rather than reason. But all this appears no less absurd than it would be to suppose that a man, because he did not believe that he could nourish his body eternally

with wholesome food, would saturate himself with deadly poisons; or than if because believing that his soul was not eternal and immortal, he should therefore prefer to be without a soul ("amens") and to live without reason; all of which is so absurd as to be scarcely worth refuting ("quæ adeo absurda sunt, ut vix recenseri mereantur")." When a thing is said to be not worth refuting you may be sure that either it is flagrantly stupid - in which case all comment is superfluous - or it is something formidable, the very crux of the problem. And this it is in this case. Yes! poor Portuguese Jew exiled in Holland, yes! that he who is convinced without a vestige of doubt, without the faintest hope of any saving uncertainty, that his soul is not immortal, should prefer to be without a soul ("amens"), or irrational, or idiot, that he should prefer not to have been born, is a supposition that has nothing, absolutely nothing, absurd in it. Was he happy, the poor Jewish intellectualist definer of intellectual love and of happiness? For that and no other is the problem. "What does it profit thee to know the definition of compunction if thou dost not feel it?" says à Kempis. And what profits it to discuss or to define happiness if you cannot thereby achieve happiness? Not inapposite in this connection is that terrible story that Diderot tells of a eunuch who desired to take lessons in esthetics from a native of Marseilles in order that he might be better qualified to select the slaves destined for the harem of the Sultan, his master. At the end of the first lesson, a physiological lesson, brutally and carnally physiological, the eunuch exclaimed bitterly, "It is evident that I shall never know esthetics!" Even so, and just as eunuchs will never know esthetics as applied to the selection of beautiful women, so neither will pure rationalists ever know ethics, nor will they ever succeed in defining happiness, for happiness is a thing that is lived and felt, not a thing that is reasoned about or defined. And you have another rationalist, one not sad or submissive, like Spinoza, but rebellious, and though concealing a despair not less bitter, making a hypocritical pretence of light-heartedness, you have Nietzsche, who discovered "mathematically" (!!!) that counterfeit of the immortality of the soul which is called "eternal recurrence," and which is in fact the most stupendous tragi-comedy or comi-tragedy.

[...]

What we desire is not merely spiritual felicity, not merely vision, but delight, bodily happiness. The other happiness, the rationalist "beatitude", the happiness of being submerged in understanding, can only - I will not say satisfy or deceive, for I do not believe

that it ever satisfied or deceived even a Spinoza. At the conclusion of his "Ethic", in propositions xxxv. and xxxvi. of the fifth part, Spinoza, affirms that God loves Himself with an infinite intellectual love; that the intellectual love of the mind towards God is the selfsame love with which God loves Himself, not in so far as He is infinite, but in so far as He can be manifested through the essence of the human mind, considered under the form of eternity - that is to say, that the intellectual love of the mind towards God is part of the infinite love with which God loves Himself. And after these tragic, these desolating propositions, we are told in the last proposition of the whole book, that which closes and crowns this tremendous tragedy of the "Ethic", that happiness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself, and that our repression of our desires is not the cause of our enjoyment of virtue, but rather because we find enjoyment in virtue we are able to repress our desires. Intellectual love! intellectual love! what is this intellectual love? Something of the nature of a red flavour, or a bitter sound, or an aromatic colour, or rather something of the same sort as a love-stricken triangle or an enraged ellipse - a pure metaphor, but a tragic metaphor. And a metaphor corresponding tragically with that saying that the heart also has its reasons. Reasons of the heart! loves of the head! intellectual delight! delicious intellection! - tragedy, tragedy, tragedy!

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