

# Spinozistic Immortality

Uit: • George Stuart Fullerton, *On Spinozistic Immortality*. Philadelphia [e.a.]: University of Pennsylvania Press [e.a.], 1899 - V + 154 pagina's [ [archive.org](https://archive.org) en er is een [PDF](#) van scans te vinden].

§ 27. *Spinozistic Immortality*.—In discussing, under the heading, "The Religious Element in Spinoza," the nature of the Spinozistic Immortality, I do not wish it to be supposed that it is assumed that a belief in immortality is a necessary part of every religious view of the nature of things. The Stoic found it possible to be religious without such a belief. It seems arbitrary to refuse to apply that adjective to one who found in nature a kindred mind, approved and accepted the plan and purpose he believed to be revealed there, and adjusted himself to it cheerfully in spite of the fact that it seemed no part of that plan to guarantee to him an endless continuance in existence. Yet the belief in immortality has occupied so important a place in the religious thought of the world, it has so colored men's views of life and of the system of things, that it is scarcely out of place to discuss the subject in this connection. In Spinoza's time, as in an earlier and in a later time, it was a part of the current religious belief I wish here to examine whether what Spinoza has to tell us of the immortality of the soul appears to justify the place which the doctrine holds in his system, and to justify also the emotions with which his words seem to inspire many of his readers. We have seen that when he uses the word God he does not really mean God as that word is commonly understood.<sup>1</sup>

Can the same thing be said of his doctrine of immortality? There have been many interpretations of the propositions in which Spinoza sets forth this doctrine. Yet they are not, I think, difficult to understand when read in the light of his theory of essences and existences and the relations conceived to exist between them. All individual things are in bondage to natural [144] law, passive and perishable. Man is but a link in the endless chain of finite causes and effects; he is a mere bubble on the stream of existence. He is threatened on every side, his lifecompanion is fear, and he moves toward certain destruction. To find a refuge from the vicissitudes that render this life a burden, is his earnest desire. This end he can attain by putting off the mortality of the things of this world, and putting on the eternity of the essence. Thus alone can he enjoy security, and taste a changeless and eternal joy. He who has attained to this state "is little disturbed in mind, but, conscious by a certain eternal necessity of himself, of God, and of things, he never ceases to be, but is always possessed of true satisfaction of soul."

In all this there is much that one feels to be inspiring. To those who are familiar with the story of Spinoza's life, the sentences in which he describes this state of peace and joy are deeply touching. And yet we have seen that the eternity of the essence, closely scrutinized, turns out to be a something little worthy of the name of eternity, and, indeed, a something for which a man with his eyes open would hardly care to exchange even a brief existence in time. If we insist upon regarding the conception of eternity proper to Spinozism as strictly timeless—the eternity of the pure universal—we must recognize the Spinozistic immortality to be an immortality only in name; and we must condemn as wholly unjustifiable every passage in the "Ethics" which confuses a timeless eternity with a genuine temporal immortality, thus importing into Spinozism, through a mere misunderstanding, expectations and emotions which have no proper place in the system.

But it seems hardly reasonable to insist that the only conception of eternity proper to Spinozism is a strictly timeless one. I have said above that this philosophy must perforce be granted as a right a certain amount of inconsistency. A realistic view of universals cannot exist, unless universals be made

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<sup>1</sup> I speak, of course, of his doctrine; not of what the word may have inconsistently meant to him outside of that.

at the same time abstract and concrete. And a universal that is semi-concrete has *ipso facto* a certain right to a semi-temporal being. Hence, when Spinoza gives his eternity an inconsistently temporal content, he appears to me to keep within the limits of inconsistency to which he may reasonably lay a claim; and, in acting as he does, he is following good realistic precedent. We should not say, therefore, that the Spinozistic immortality does not to some extent resemble what is ordinarily understood by the word immortality; nor should we deny to the emotions and expectations which betray themselves in Spinoza's words a right to a place in the "Ethics" merely on the ground that the immortality which he preaches is the eternity of the essence. It is the eternity of the essence in an impure and highly diluted state; it means to Spinoza the continuance in time of the existence of the individual.

But it may be further objected that, even if we grant Spinoza an immortality not really timeless, yet the temporal immortality of the "Ethics" cannot be taken as implying a continuance of the existence of the individual in the usual and natural sense of those words; and that, accordingly, the emotions and expectations we are discussing must still be regarded as arising out of a misapprehension. It is not the whole mind, but the reason alone, that is immortal; the memory and imagination must perish with the body: "The mind does not express the actual existence of its body, nor conceive the modifications of the body as actual, except while the body endures; hence it does not conceive any body as actually existing, except while its body endures. Therefore, it cannot imagine anything, or remember things past, except while the body endures."<sup>2</sup> The part of the mind which puts on immortality may be greater or less—in some cases it may be a large part—but its past must drop away from it; it must become, as it were, impersonal.

It may well be asked whether such an immortality can justly be called the immortality of the individual; whether a given [146] mind can be said to continue to exist, when what continues to exist has lost all conscious connection with what existed before. And it appears more than doubtful whether such an immortality could be an object of desire and a source of consolation to the mind oppressed with a sense of the transitory nature of this mortal life, provided that mind clearly realized just what such an immortality implies.

One is sometimes almost tempted to believe that there is in human nature a permanent tendency to give to philosophical and religious truths a place of their own, and to treat them as different from other truths—to treat them, in fact, as though they were not quite true, and were not to be taken quite seriously. Of this tendency we have a good illustration in the current doctrine, advanced quite frankly by a number of thinkers of prominence, that one is justified in repudiating any philosophy which is not satisfying to one's emotional nature, and that the desire to believe may be taken as a guarantee of the right to do so. In other fields no one thinks of seriously advocating this doctrine. I may, indeed, be induced to invest in the stocks of a given company simply because its president is the cousin of my personal friend; but unless I can deduce from this fact some sort of objective evidence bearing upon the financial standing of the company itself, a moment of cool reflection brings me to a consciousness of the fact that I am acting irrationally. I may very earnestly desire to have a railroad pay a dividend, but I must be simple indeed if I suppose that my emotional state is to be taken as an indication of what will later make its appearance upon the stage as objective reality. The Protagorean subjectivism receives such shocks in the world of verifiable fact, that it is soon set aside; indeed, it is felt to be so dangerous and misleading, that one who has had some experience of the weaknesses of human nature strives to be on his guard against the seductive promptings of his own feelings, and endeavors to lay aside all considerations which he regards as incompatible with the

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<sup>2</sup> Ethics, V, 21

formation of[147] a strictly objective judgment. But in Philosophy this is not the case. As, in politics, the complexity of the problem, so here the lack of a common foundation and of a generally accepted method, as well as the difficulty of reflective thought, make possible permanent differences of opinion, and there is no fixed day upon which the entrance of some brute fact, grossly palpable and undeniable, will bring about an involuntary harmony. Neither the philosophy of Kant nor that of Comte is expected to pay a dividend; and if either be repudiated, it will not be repudiated on compulsion. One would imagine that this consideration furnished an added reason for being on one's guard against error. One should be doubly circumspect in entering a long lane where one can expect to meet no guide posts that one may not overlook. But it is, perhaps, unreasonable to expect too much of human nature. It is clear that all men do not reason in this way. Many rather assume that their desire to follow a particular path, the satisfaction with which their feet tread its smooth and even stretches, are sufficient evidence that they are where they should be. There is nothing to prevent them from dreaming on in peace; they are not liable to any rude awakening.

It is, perhaps, worthy of note in passing, that those who take this position are not consistently Protagorean in their subjectivism, in that they attribute to the truth that they voluntarily accept as such, I will not say an objective validity, for it has not quite that, but at least a greater semblance of objective validity than they are willing to attribute to truths similarly chosen by their neighbors. Protagoras was more just, for he granted every man a right to a truth of his own. However, it seems futile to lodge a complaint of injustice against one who has laid it down as a principle that the measure of things shall be his own subjective satisfaction. Any objection, however plausible, can be quietly set aside as among the things to be classed as unsatisfactory.

But I must not be led too far afield by my illustration. It has been adduced to show that men are apt to treat matters philosophical and religious in a way that would be regarded as contrary to common sense did the subject of discussion lie in another field. The same thing can be seen in the treatment that has sometimes been accorded the doctrine of immortality. Men appear to look forward with complacency to a sort of existence in a future life, which it would greatly distress them to expect to experience in the last half of the life that is. No better instance of this truth can be desired than is furnished by Spinoza himself, as I shall now try to show.

There is a passage in the Fourth Part of the "Ethics" which is well worth quoting in this connection. It reads as follows: "Here it should be remarked that I regard the body as dying, when its parts are so disposed that they come to have a different proportion of motion and rest with respect to each other. For I do not venture to deny that the human body, while retaining the circulation of the blood, and other things which cause a body to be regarded as possessed of life, may nevertheless suffer a change into another nature wholly different from its own. Nothing compels me to maintain that the body does not die unless it become a corpse; while experience itself appears to teach the opposite. For sometimes it happens that a man suffers such changes, that I could not easily declare him to be the same man; as was the case with a certain Spanish poet, of whom I have heard the following story: he was attacked by an illness, from which, indeed, he recovered, but he remained, nevertheless, so oblivious of his past life, that he did not believe the comedies and tragedies, which he had composed, to be his own; and he might really have been regarded as a grown-up infant, if he had, in addition, forgotten his mother-tongue."<sup>3</sup>

So great is the change in the man evidenced by a partial loss of memory, that Spinoza regards what has happened in the body as equivalent to the death of the body, and he is unwilling to call the man

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<sup>3</sup> Ethics, IV, 39, schol.

the same. And yet, in spite of this fact, he finds<sup>[149]</sup> satisfaction in contemplating an immortality in which the body is wholly destroyed and memory and imagination completely lost. Does the mind which attains to the Spinozistic immortality remain the same mind? Evidently Spinoza has two sets of weights and measures. He has thought of the eternity of the mind rather vaguely and loosely, after the somewhat irresponsible manner of the mystic. But when he concerns himself with this present world, he labors under no delusion. He sees that such a break in the continuity of a conscious existence as is implied in the loss of memory is the emergence of a new personality, not a continuance of the old. Such a break he regards as a misfortune. In this I think most men would agree with him.

It will perhaps be objected at this point that it is the part of selfishness to look so eagerly for a continuance of the personal life; that the chrysalis should regard its mission as accomplished in giving birth to a higher existence, whether it can be regarded as sharing in that existence, in any strict sense of those words, or must be looked upon as merely giving place to another. I hardly think it necessary to discuss here the question whether men should be as disinterested as this. I merely repeat that they do not actually reason in this way about those things that concern this present life. When they are hungry, they wish to dine themselves, and the clamors of appetite are not ordinarily stilled by reflection upon the fact that there will be a dining in which they are not personally interested. When they see death approach, they are not commonly consoled by the thought that some one else will be born. There are, undoubtedly, individuals who are capable of sinking their own personal interests in the larger life of the community. But unless men apply the same measure to this life and the next, one may well doubt the sincerity of their altruism. One may suspect that their cheerful acceptance of an impersonal immortality is due to the fact the future life is to them so vague and unreal that they never think of taking it quite seriously. <sup>[150]</sup>

However, it is with Spinoza that I am concerned. It is very evident from his language that he did not find his consolation in such thoughts as those mentioned above. The doctrine of the "Ethics" is that the individual must strive to persevere in its being, and that it satisfies this impulse in an enlightened way by turning as large a portion of itself as possible into an eternal essence. It is everywhere suggested that the individual continues in existence, and the consequences of a destruction of the memory are not fairly faced. "The wise man," writes Spinoza, "in so far as he is considered as such, is little disturbed in mind, but, conscious by a certain eternal necessity of himself, of God, and of things, he never ceases to be, but is always possessed of true satisfaction of soul." There can be but one interpretation of such passages as this. When Spinoza wrote them he did not clearly realize the implications of his own doctrine. That doctrine denies a continuity of personal existence after death; yet the language of the "Ethics" everywhere suggests that such is implied in the eternity of the mind. It is this that gives Part V such an influence upon the emotions of its readers.

Thus we see that, even if, overlooking his statements to the contrary, we hold that the doctrine of immortality which finds its place in Spinoza's system does not teach that the eternity of the mind is really timeless, we must still maintain that it contains little to justify the feelings with which it has been regarded. Spinoza misconceived his own doctrine. The immortality which presented itself to his mind was not very different from that which presents itself to the minds of most men who use the word immortality. His emotions were adjusted to this conception, and the joy which he felt in contemplating the eternity of the mind there found its source and cause. But those elements which give worth and meaning to the conception must be stripped away, if we wish to consider, not what Spinoza, the man, thought and felt, but merely what the Spinozistic doctrine, in itself considered, can authorize one to think and feel. There<sup>[151]</sup> is much in the "Ethics" that belongs rather to Spinoza than to Spinozism.

§ 28. *Conclusion.*—Of course, it is possible here to object, in the spirit of the sympathetic criticism which I have already discussed, that my definition of Spinozism is too precise and too narrow. It may be insisted that Spinoza should be given credit for what he is evidently feeling after, not merely for what he has found and explicitly set forth; and that, consequently, we should include in Spinozism much more than a bald theory of existences and essences and of the journey of the soul from the one sphere of being to the other. One who holds this view may admit that Spinoza has inadequately defined God, love to God, and immortality, and yet feel justified in incorporating into his system the richer conceptions that betray themselves from time to time in his words. Is one to exclude everything save the bloodless phantoms demanded by a logical consistency? Have we not seen that God was really more to Spinoza than a mere name for the sum of things, or an hypostatized and inconsistent abstraction? And as for the Spinozistic immortality; have we not seen that the immortality to which Spinoza looked forward was not the timeless eternity of the essence, and did not imply the annihilation of the personality inseparable from the obliteration of the individual's past? Why then refuse to include all this in our notion of Spinozism?

I think the answer to this objection ought to be sufficiently evident to one who has followed me thus far. We gain little by confusing the philosophical doctrine embraced by a writer, and those things which are naturally implied in and flow from that doctrine, with other beliefs held by the same person, and which are either disconnected with or even contradictory to the doctrine in question. To treat Spinoza in the manner suggested would result in a grievous injustice to a man of genius, and would reduce a very remarkable work to a much lower place than that which it is entitled to hold. Spinoza's doctrines touching God,[152] the intellectual love of God, and the immortality of the mind, are not disconnected and arbitrarily embraced opinions. His reasonings form an articulated system, resting upon foundations prepared by his predecessors ; and these foundations might well have appeared to a man of his time secure and unshakable. The originality of his genius is unmistakably revealed in the structure which he has reared upon them. The conception of God and the view of immortality which I have held to belong rather to Spinoza than to Spinozism form no part of this structure; they are not contained in Spinoza's premises, and they cannot be deduced from them; they are something extraneous and apart. We cannot say that, had Spinoza been gifted with clearer vision, he would have seen that his own doctrine really led to such views. On the contrary, had he been gifted with clearer vision, he would have seen that these views are incompatible with his doctrine.

It is, therefore, impossible for us to regard the views in question as a part of Spinozism, without refusing to recognize the structure and articulations of that system—without, indeed, wholly misjudging Spinoza. The "Ethics" becomes, in that case, a very ordinary book. Its reasonings lose their meaning; its modes of expression appear arbitrary; it becomes, in fact, rather a collection of loosely connected pious reflections, than an organic whole. How persons who thus read Spinoza find it possible greatly to admire him, I cannot conceive. It is quite true that Spinoza, when understood, is often perceived to reason very loosely. But his errors in reasoning are themselves not wholly unreasonable; they are what one should expect from a man in his position, resting upon realistic conceptions and adjusted to realistic modes of thought. In spite of them he has a system; he reasons and does not talk at random, and if we fail to recognize this, we reduce much of what he says to mere incoherence. For my part, I have acquired such a fondness for the man, that I do not like to see him treated as though he were[153] not a man, but a child; not the author of a serious philosophical work couched in a language meant to be above all things exact and scientific, but a writer of religious rhapsodies which should not be subjected to exact criticism. Such treatment appears to me to do him small honor.

I feel inclined, therefore, to sum up my discussion of the religious element in Spinoza, by stating that there is a religious element in Spinoza, but that there is nothing religious about Spinozism as a system. What I have said above will, I hope, prevent this statement from being misunderstood.

Doubtless it will be felt by some that, notwithstanding my assertion that the word religious would in this discussion be used in a broad sense, its meaning has been narrowed more than it should have been. One may protest that true religious emotion may be felt toward an object which does not include even a faintly anthropomorphic element, toward an object that is not conceived at all after the analogy of the human mind. As we have seen, some men appear to have experienced such emotions in contemplation of a God, not merely veiled in clouds and darkness, but even consisting of such. And if this be possible, why may not some be moved religiously by the contemplation of abstract thought or extension, or of an immortality which is impersonal and timeless? In which case Spinozism would have to be called religious as well as Spinoza.

To this I think I have given a sufficient answer in the first part of this discussion. It is hard to say what may not, under some circumstances, stir human emotions; but it does not seem unreasonable to distinguish, as I have tried to do, between those things that have such an effect on account of what they are in themselves, and those things which have a similar effect on account of the associations which cluster around them. It would be rash to deny that a man may hold a religious attitude toward an Absolute which it seems almost a pleasantry to confound with a Deity; but it seems easy to explain this attitude through well[154] known tendencies in human nature. We observe that men may love gold with no conscious reflection upon those desirable things with which it has been associated and which it may be made to represent; and yet we do not regard ourselves as justified in assuming that there is something in the nature of gold that makes it in itself a fitting object to arouse and fetter human affection. Whatever may be said for the Absolute itself, the conception of the Absolute has a history, a past, and it is a matter of no small difficulty to detach this past from it. A moderate acquaintance with the history of human thought is sufficient to show, both that the shells of things remain in existence long after most of their content has evaporated, and also that emotions and capital letters have a tendency to connect themselves with such shells in an uncritical and indiscriminating way. Sometimes a philosopher goes through the motions of cleaning out and drying a shell with an apparent thoroughness that seems to leave nothing to be desired. He scours it within and without. One imagines it quite ready for its place on the shelf among other dead things of merely historical interest. But a closer scrutiny not infrequently reveals that the work has not really been thoroughly done, and that there are stirrings of life and meaning where we could not logically have expected anything of the sort. All of which amounts to saying much the same thing that I have said above, namely, that a philosopher is a man, not a logical machine, and that he has his place in a certain historical order of things.

These are the reflections which appear to me to justify my denial that Spinozism as a system is properly to be called religious. It is no part of the purpose of this paper either to approve or to condemn it on that account. I have wished merely to understand it, and to set it forth as clearly as doctrines of this nature can be set forth. I close with the hope that I have not entirely failed in my endeavor.