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SPINOZA ON TRUTH¹

Edwin Curley

I.

In *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?*,² Ian Hacking observes that

Many scholars have stated, with intense conviction, that Spinoza held a [coherence] theory of truth. Others have urged, with comparable passion, that he held a correspondence theory.

And Hacking goes on to suggest that this dispute arises because neither coherence nor correspondence is a clear enough notion to permit us to decide which Spinoza would have preferred to use in the analysis of truth. Similarly Thomas Mark's book, *Spinoza's Theory of Truth*,³ starts out from the same division among the commentators, argues that neither conception of truth is adequate to describe Spinoza's

¹ I originally wrote the paper which follows for a conference on Spinoza held at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York in 1978. It was to have been published with the proceedings of that conference. Those proceedings never appeared and it is clear that they never will. Deciding how much to revise the paper for publication now (= April 1993) presented an interesting problem. I do not accept now all the assumptions I made then, but it seemed to me that there was a good reason not simply to rewrite the paper in accordance with my present views.

The paper's project is to trace the development of Spinoza's theory of truth from his earliest works to his most mature works. In 1978 I believed (as I think most other Spinoza scholars did) that the *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being* was Spinoza's earliest work, followed by the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. In 1982 I became aware of Filippo Mignini's theory that the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* was in fact earlier than the *Short Treatise*. [See Filippo Mignini, 'Per la datazione e l'interpretazione del *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*', *La Cultura* 18 (1980) pp.223-273, and his edition of the *Short Treatise, Korte Verhandeling van God, de Mensch, en deszelvs Welstand* (L'Aquila: L.U. Japadre, 1986). I discussed Mignini's theory in my edition of Spinoza's *Collected Works*, vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).] Although I am not sure that I would accept all of Mignini's arguments for that theory, I do find the difficulties I encountered in writing this paper on the more traditional assumption to be persuasive evidence for Mignini's theory. On the usual assumption about order, we find Spinoza first adopting a correspondence theory, then rejecting it, and finally returning to it. On Mignini's theory, the development of his ideas would proceed more smoothly. Because my paper, as originally written, illustrates the difficulty of proceeding on the usual assumption, I have felt that I should not rewrite it, but let it stand as an argument in favour of Mignini's theory.

Some of the material in the paper (e.g., fn. 12 and the paragraph it is attached to) comes from a revision done in the early 1980s, at a time when I still thought the proceedings of the conference would be published. Any material added subsequently will be in brackets and dated.

² Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) p.131. Where I have supplied the term 'coherence' in brackets in the first sentence, Hacking's text has 'correspondence'. Clearly there is something amiss with the proofreading, probably in the first sentence, possibly in the second.

³ Thomas Mark, *Spinoza's Theory of Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). The ontological theory of truth holds that in addition to being a property of ideas and statements,

position, and presses on us a third alternative, which he calls ‘the ontological conception of truth’.

In *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*⁴ I enlisted in the ranks of those who ascribe to Spinoza a correspondence theory — not passionately, or with intense conviction, but as I now think, altogether too casually. What I should like to do here is to reconsider the question. For it seems to me that none of the recent discussions of it, including my own, are very satisfactory. Perhaps this is partly for the reasons that Hacking and Mark suggest, but surely one respect in which the controversy is unsatisfactory is methodological: it has fed on an unbalanced diet of texts, drawn primarily from the *Ethics*, with a little help from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, but without much attention to the *Short Treatise* or the correspondence or to the possibility that Spinoza’s position may be significantly different in different works. My aim is to remedy this by focussing attention on some of the texts I think have been neglected, beginning with the *Short Treatise* and continuing through the earlier works, up to the *Ethics*, which I regard as having been substantially completed by 1665. My hope in undertaking this developmental approach is that it will tell us more about the latent processes of thought which lay behind the geometrical method than we would learn by rummaging among the works of Spinoza’s medieval predecessors. But I will not claim that the story I tell shows that Spinoza had a clearcut allegiance to any of these theories of truth as they are now understood.

II.

First, then, the *Short Treatise*. Spinoza takes up the topic of truth and falsity in chapter 15 of Part II, beginning with definitions of truth and falsity:

Truth, then, is an affirmation (or denial) concerning a thing, which agrees with the thing itself.

Falsity is an affirmation (or denial) about a thing which does not agree with the thing itself.⁵

Taken by itself this text certainly sounds as though it expresses a correspondence theory of truth and it has the advantage over the similar sounding statement in the *Ethics* (IA6) in that it gives us explicit definitions rather than an axiom.

We might, of course, define a correspondence theory very narrowly, so that someone couldn’t be said to have a correspondence theory of truth unless he were

³ *continued...*

truth is also a property of actions and physical objects. Cf. pp.85-89. According to Mark this conception of truth ‘need not be a rival of the correspondence theory; it can take the form of a more general theory which includes the correspondence theory as a special case’.

⁴ Edwin Curley, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), see particularly pp.56, 122-126.

⁵ Spinoza, *Opera* (ed.) C. Gebhardt (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1925) 1/78/20 (i.e. volume I, page 78, circa line 20). Henceforth all references to Spinoza’s works will be given in parentheses to the volume, page and line numbers of the Gebhardt edition. Translations are my own.

operating with a very explicit metaphysic of propositions and facts, and accounted for truth in terms of some well-defined relation between these entities, or unless he formulated his theory of truth in a philosophic context in which alternative theories were well-developed and well-known. But the more usual view is that Aristotle expressed the heart of the correspondence theory when he wrote that:

To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true [*Metaphysics* 1077b26],

as did Aquinas, when he adopted Isaac Israeli's formula:

Truth is the adequation of thing and understanding,⁶

or Descartes, when he wrote that:

One can certainly explain, to those who don't understand the language, what the word truth means by telling them that in its proper signification it denotes the conformity of thought with the object . . .⁷

If these can all properly be counted as various ways of expressing the same central conception, then it looks as though there are as good grounds for ascribing a correspondence theory of truth to Spinoza as there are for ascribing it to any historical figure.

A word of caution, however, is necessary. Consider the following three quotations, this time from 20th Century writers. The first is an attack on pragmatic theories of truth:

(1)When you ask what it is which makes each idea right or wrong, you cannot exclude its agreement or its discord with fact other than my will . . . In selecting my means I am forced to consider their relation to the facts, and if my idea works, it is because of this relation, which is not made by my idea. And it is in this relation that we have to seek the distinctive nature of truth.

The second passage lays down a condition any adequate theory of truth must satisfy:

(2)The truth or falsehood of a belief always depends on something which lies outside the belief itself. If I believe that Charles I died on the scaffold, I believe truly, not because of any intrinsic quality of my belief . . . but because of an historical event which happened two and a half centuries ago . . . truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs . . . dependent on the relations of the beliefs to other things . . .

⁶ Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Truth*, qu. I, art. 1.

⁷ Letter to Mersenne, 16 October, 1639. Of course, some interpreters of Descartes want to ascribe a coherence theory of truth to *him* also. E.g., H. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970). I have argued against this interpretation in *Descartes Against the Sceptics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

The third runs:

- (3) A judgment e.g., is true, if the thoughts whose union is the judgement 'correspond' to the facts whose union is the 'real' situation which is to be expressed. My judgment is true if *my* ideas, as asserted by me in my judgment, correspond to the facts.

One of these passages comes from that paradigmatic correspondence theorist, Bertrand Russell. But the other two come from paradigmatic coherence theorists, F.H. Bradley and H.H. Joachim. And while differences of literary style, technical vocabulary and punctuation may help you to decide which was which, you should find it difficult to decide on grounds of the philosophic content alone of these passages, taken in isolation from the contexts in which they occur.⁸ We should not, then, get too excited if Spinoza sometimes says things which *sound* very like standard formulations of the correspondence theory. There is grist here for Hacking's mill. Differences in what Spinoza goes on to say may put him very far from Russell, Moore and the younger Wittgenstein.

Well, what does Spinoza go on to say in this passage from the *Short Treatise*? His next step is to draw one apparent consequence of his definitions of truth and falsity:

Either there is no distinction between the false and the true idea, or there is no real distinction between them, but only a distinction of reason, because affirming or denying this or that are only modes of thinking, and have no other distinction between them than that the one agrees with the thing and the other does not. [I/78/25]

This seems to mean that on Spinoza's definitions the only difference between a true idea of an object and a false idea of that object will be in their relation to the thing they make an affirmation or denial about, and that this entails that there will be no *intrinsic* difference between, say, my true idea that the tower is round (when in fact it is round) and my false idea that it is round (when in fact it is square). If this is what Spinoza means, then it seems right (though perhaps it commits Spinoza to denying one form of the idealist doctrine that all relations are internal). But Spinoza does not commit himself to this consequence. He continues in a hypothetical vein:

And if that should be so, one could rightly ask what advantage one man has with his truth, and what harm the other has through his falsity? And how will the one know that his conception or idea agrees more with the thing than the other's does? Finally, how is it that the one errs and the other does not? [I/78/30]

⁸ (1) comes from Bradley's *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914) p.77; (2) from Russell's *Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) p.121; (3) from Joachim's *The Nature of Truth* (New York: Greenwood, 1969) p.19.

Spinoza responds to the second of these three questions, first, by announcing a doctrine familiar to readers of the *Treatise on the Intellect*:

The things that are clearest of all make known both themselves and also falsity . . . For because they are clearest of all, there can never be any other clarity through which they could be explained. So it follows that truth manifests both itself and falsity . . . but falsity is never manifested or indicated through itself. [I/79/5]

And he goes on to draw the consequence that someone who has the truth cannot doubt that he has it.

Though familiar, this response is nonetheless puzzling. *Prima facie* it can only provide an answer to the question posed if we identify possession of a true idea with possession of an idea which is clearest of all (*aller klaarste*). And there does not seem to be any reason to do that, so long as we define truth as Spinoza did in chapter 15.

We might try to alleviate the puzzle by harking back to earlier chapters of the *Short Treatise* and recalling that Spinoza's project at this point is to discover the effects of 'true belief', which is, in fact, the *Short Treatise's* analogue of *ratio*, and is defined at one point as

a strong proof, based on reasons, by which I am convinced that the thing truly is, outside my intellect, such as I am convinced in my intellect that it is. [I/29/25]

If Spinoza were to mean only that true belief *in this sense* manifests itself, then we should not be so surprised at his confidence that someone who has the truth knows that he has it. We would not be dealing with just any true idea. No doubt this expedient removes the paradox only at the expense of having Spinoza switch definitions in mid-stream. But I observe that Spinoza appears to be guilty of a similar equivocation in the *Ethics* (IIP43D), where he treats IIP34 as if it established, not merely that adequacy entails truth, but also that truth entails adequacy.

We might note in passing that the very form of the question Spinoza raises — how will the one know that his idea agrees *more* with the thing than the other's does? — suggests that agreement, and hence, truth, will be a matter of degree, a doctrine which certainly brings to mind the subsequent teachings of the coherence theorists.

And this seems congruent with Spinoza's explanation of error here. Pursuing the question, 'Why the one [who has a true idea] is more aware of his truth than the other?', Spinoza replies that this happens

Because the idea of affirmation (or denial) in the first agrees completely with the nature of the thing, and consequently has more essence . . . note that the intellect . . . is a pure passion, i.e. that our soul is changed in such a way that it acquires other modes of thinking it did not have before. Now if someone, because the whole object has acted in him, acquires such forms or modes of thinking, it is clear that he acquires a completely different sensation of the form or quality of

the object than another who has not had so many causes, and so is moved to affirm or deny by a different, and slighter action (since he becomes aware of it in himself by a few, or lesser, affections). [I/79/25-30]

Now it looks as though *some* of what is said here is to be dismissed as expressing a doctrine Spinoza abandoned. Certainly it is hard to imagine the Spinoza of the *Ethics* saying that the intellect is a pure passion.⁹ On the other hand, it also looks as though we have here the germ of Spinoza's later conception of an adequate idea.¹⁰ That is to say, we have implicitly an anticipation of the claim made in the *Ethics*, that falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate ideas involve (*E* IIP35). At least one difference (if not the only difference) between the man who has a true idea and the man who has a false idea is that the one has a complete idea of the thing and the other has only a partial idea of it. The completeness envisaged here does not appear to imply that the man with a true idea is aware of all of the relations of the object to other objects. Rather, the completeness of his idea is a function of the extent to which the object acts on him via sensation. The possession of a true idea does not require knowledge of the whole of reality.

One result of this is that Spinoza is not so much concerned with the question 'Whether we, being finite, ever have a true idea?' as he is with the question 'Whether we ever have false ideas?'.¹¹ This comes out clearly in the subsequent chapter of the *Short Treatise* (II, 16), when he explores some further consequences of the doctrine that understanding is a pure passion:

We have said that understanding is a pure passion, i.e., a perception in the soul of the essence and existence of things. So it is never we who affirm or deny something of the thing; it is the thing itself which affirms or denies something of itself in us. [I/83/15]

Spinoza conjectures that Cartesians will reject this, because they confuse mental affirmations or denials with linguistic utterances, in which we can say anything we please. But once that confusion is cleared up, he must still deal with a further objection:

If it is not we, but only the thing, which affirms or denies [something] of itself in us, then nothing can be affirmed or denied except what agrees with the thing. So there is no falsity. For we have said that falsity is affirming (or denying) something of a thing which does not agree with the thing, i.e. that the thing does not affirm or deny that of itself. [I/83/35]

⁹ Cf. *E* IID3Exp. Wolf, in his edition of the *Short Treatise* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963) p.221, says we should not take this expression too literally, and perhaps he is right, though I find it difficult to be certain.

¹⁰ I say 'later' because the Dutch term (*evenmatig*) which translates *adaequatus* in contemporary Dutch translations of Spinoza's Latin works does not seem to occur in the *Short Treatise*. Nor is there any other term which seems to require translation into English by the term *adequate*.

¹¹ Cf. Mark's criticism (relying on different texts) of the coherence theorists' interpretation of Spinoza, *op. cit.*, pp.46-50.

It is interesting to note that in presenting this objection Spinoza reaffirms the formula that earlier sounded so much like an expression of the correspondence theory, but goes on to gloss it in a way which presupposes his doctrine that a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, expressed in two different ways (*E* IIP75). The object, which in this context seems to be a physical object of sense perception, can be considered as affirming or denying something of itself, and our thought about it is true if our thought affirms of the thing what the thing affirms of itself.

By the way, I still think, as I did when I wrote *Spinoza's Metaphysics*,¹² that this does not, for Spinoza, entail that ordinary physical objects, like stones, are 'thinking things' with any degree of consciousness. And I still think (partly because of the passage under discussion here) that the general line of interpretation of the relation between thought and extension that I suggested then has something in it. But I cannot argue that here.

Now I suppose that what the thing 'affirms' of itself necessarily agrees with itself (cf. *KV* II, 20, I/97) and that this is what Spinoza has in mind when he writes in the *Ethics* that 'all ideas, insofar as they are referred to God, are true' (IIP32). But this kind of agreement does not seem to be what Spinoza has in mind here when he considers the objection that his theory denies the existence of falsity. The point of the objection seems to be that the only way I can have a thought about an object is to be acted on by that object, and that if the object does cause my thought, there must be an agreement between my thought and the object, conceived as affirming something about itself. In any case, I do not find Spinoza's answer very clear:

If we attend properly to what we have already said about truth and falsity, we shall see this objection satisfactorily answered. For we have said that the object is the cause of our affirmation or denial about it, whether [that affirmation] is true or false, and that falsity arises from this: perceiving only something or a part of the object, we imagine that the object affirms or denies this of itself as a whole. [I/84/5; I/581]

Spinoza goes on to say that this is most common in 'weak souls' which

... very easily receive a mode or idea through a very slight action of the object on them ...

¹² Though I now think I have better grounds for this conclusion than I had then. Then I invoked Letter 56 (*Spinoza's Metaphysics*, op. cit., p.126). Now I would appeal primarily to *E* VP39S, which seems to be Spinoza's most explicit statement about consciousness. There Spinoza makes consciousness a function of the aptitude of the body to do many things and its independence of external causes. But I still think that he also associates consciousness with having an idea of one's ideas. Margaret Wilson has challenged this (in a paper in *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza* (ed.) Richard Kennington (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1980) and in *Spinoza's Metaphysics* (p.128) I offered no direct textual evidence for it. Now I would contend that the association is presupposed by the demonstration of *E* IVP8. As yet I have no reply to her other criticisms of that chapter. [I am still in the same position in April 1993.]

but that

. . . apart from this there is no other affirming or denying in them.

My main difficulty with this passage is that it looks as though my imagining that the object affirms something of itself as a whole ought to be an affirmation distinct from anything the object does affirm of itself, whereas Spinoza seems to say that the mind does not contain any affirmation about the object except those that the object affirms of itself in us. But then I encountered essentially the same difficulty years ago, relying primarily on passages from the *Ethics*, and I'm still inclined to think this indicative of a problem in Spinoza's system rather than in my way of understanding it.¹³

Let me now try to sum up the results of our investigation so far. Spinoza does, I think, begin in the *Short Treatise* with a correspondence theory of truth. The version of that theory expounded there may be expressed in a somewhat idiosyncratic way, insofar as Spinoza glosses the agreement of idea and object in terms which presuppose his peculiar metaphysical scheme, but it still bears a recognizable family resemblance to other pre-20th Century versions of the theory. However, Spinoza does seem to be drawn very quickly, by his desire to avoid skepticism, into positions which I would take to be incompatible with the correspondence theory as conceived, say, by Bertrand Russell. Hence, he wants to be able to say (though he does not say explicitly) that there is an intrinsic as well as an extrinsic difference between true and false ideas, that the difference between them is never *merely* a difference in their relation to their object. This I take to be the import of his doctrine that the truth manifests both itself and falsity, and of his burgeoning doctrine of adequate ideas. And this development does, I think, lead him to adopt a doctrine of degrees of truth which is similar to, though not identical with, that of later coherence theorists. But so far, at any rate, that agreement does not spring from any tendency to locate the essence of truth in a relation that ideas have to one another.

III.

I now turn to the *Treatise on the Intellect*, which I propose to deal with more briefly, not because it is less rich as food for our thought on this topic, nor because it is easier, but because I find this work far too mysterious to say much about it with confidence.

One thing, however, is clear: in §69 Spinoza does say explicitly what was only implicit in the *Short Treatise*, that there is an intrinsic difference between true and false ideas:

As for what constitutes the form of the true, it is certain that a true thought is distinguished from a false one not only by the extrinsic, but chiefly by the intrinsic denomination. For if some architect conceives a building in an orderly fashion,

¹³ Cf. *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, pp.129-137.

then although such a building never existed, and even never will exist, still the thought of it is true, and the thought is the same, whether the building exists or not. On the other hand, if someone says, for example, that Peter exists, and nevertheless, does not know that Peter exists, that thought, in respect to him, is false, or if you prefer, is not true, even though Peter may exist. [I/26/15-25; §69]

So far as I can see there is no way in which this passage can be fitted into an interpretation of Spinoza as a correspondence theorist regarding truth.

The opening sentence offers some reason to think that Spinoza has not completely abandoned the initial position of the *Short Treatise*, insofar as it seems to allow that there will also be an extrinsic difference between true and false ideas, even if it is not so important as the intrinsic difference between them. 'Not only *p*, but chiefly *q*' seems, at least, to entail *p*. So far the compromise position implicit in the *Short Treatise* is available. All and only true ideas have the relational property of agreeing with an object, but fortunately for the epistemologist they all also have an intrinsic property which enables us to distinguish them from false ideas, But the continuation of the passage undermines that compromise. The examples indicate, ever so plainly, that the existence of a corresponding object is neither necessary nor sufficient for the truth of a thought.¹⁴

Why is there this apparent shift? It is not sufficient here, I think, to invoke a concern with skepticism, for the compromise position would be sufficient to deal with skeptical anxieties (or would be, at least, if there were some plausible reason for supposing that there really was an intrinsic difference between true and false ideas). I can only suggest the possibility that reflection on the nature of mathematical truth may have prompted Spinoza to abandon the correspondence theory altogether. Certainly Descartes, in expounding the ontological argument, had wanted to emphasize that mathematics provided him with countless ideas of things which, even if they had never existed outside him, had 'true and immutable natures' which did not depend on his mind.¹⁵ So he would apparently allow that an idea might be true even if it had no corresponding object actually existing at any point of space or time.

One question this raises is: 'What definition of truth would make sense of this possibility?'. And perhaps the Leibnizian-sounding definition of Descartes' Geometrical Exposition is intended as an answer to this question:

When we say that something is contained in the nature or concept of a thing that is the same as if we said that it is true of this thing.¹⁶

¹⁴ So perhaps Elwes was on the right track when he rendered the first line: '... a true idea is distinguished from a false one *not so much* by its extrinsic object as by its intrinsic nature'. Appuhn and Caillois, however, both have something equivalent to the translation offered in the text. Paul Eisenberg, in a translation published in *Philosophy Research Archives* 3, no. 1170 (July 1977), has '... not merely ... but especially ...' which is perhaps the best rendering. 'Not merely *p* but especially *q*' does not so clearly entail *p*.

¹⁵ Fifth Meditation, AT VII, 64.

¹⁶ AT VII, 162. Spinoza, of course, reproduces this definition in *his* geometrical exposition of Descartes (I/150-151), but neither he nor Descartes makes it clear whether *truth* is the definiens or the definiendum.

This might explain why, in the passages immediately following §69, Spinoza is concerned with mathematical objects, why he emphasizes that mathematical truth is independent of the existence of its objects, and why in §72 he says that

falsity consists only in this: that something is affirmed of a thing which is not contained in the concept we have formed of it. [II/27/25]

I hasten to add that there is a good deal in the detail of these passages which I find difficult to understand, in these or any terms.

In any case, it would appear that Spinoza is moving very far now from a conception of truth in terms of correspondence. And in some passages it seems that he may be moving towards a conception of truth in which the notion of membership in a coherent system would play an important part. Consider the thesis that truth manifests both itself and falsity. This thesis does reappear in the *Treatise on the Intellect*, sometimes, I think, without being greatly illuminated (e.g. in §§35 and 36). But there is one passage which I am inclined to read as providing us with a helpful gloss on it:

When the mind attends to a fictitious thing which is false by its very nature, so that it considers it carefully, and understands it, and deduces from it in good order the things to be deduced, it will easily bring its falsity to light.

And if the fictitious thing is true by its nature, then when the mind attends to it, so that it understands it, and begins to deduce from it in good order the things which follow from it, it will proceed successfully, without any interruption — just as we have seen that, from the false fiction just mentioned, the intellect immediately applies itself to show its absurdity . . . [II/23/25ff; §61]

I take this to mean that it is of the nature of truth that if you start from a true idea, you will be able to deduce consequences from it indefinitely without encountering absurdity, whereas this is not possible with a false idea. I suppose that that is a plausible view if you restrict yourself to mathematical truth and that it comes close to what the coherence theorists had in mind. Of course, ‘. . . is a possible member of a coherent system of ideas’ does not sound like an *intrinsic* property of ideas; but if you take the view that a proposition’s logical consequences are ‘contained’ in it, then this property would have its basis in what is internal to the idea.

So far, then, I conclude that the dispute between those who ascribe a correspondence theory to Spinoza and those who ascribe a coherence theory to him does not arise simply from the unclarity of these categories. Each interpretation has support in Spinoza’s texts, depending on which texts you choose.

IV.

At this point chronology dictates that we take up two texts from the period between the *Treatise on the Intellect* and the *Ethics*: one in the *Metaphysical Thoughts* and another in the letter written a few months before the *Metaphysical Thoughts* were

published, but probably not long after that work's composition. I shall treat them as contemporaneous.

The first is interesting because in it Spinoza seems to revert, unequivocally, to a correspondence theory of truth:

To perceive these two, the *true* and the *false*, rightly, we shall begin with the signification of the words, from which it will be plain that these are only extrinsic denominations of things and are not attributed to things except metaphorically. But since ordinary people first invent words, which afterwards are used by the philosophers, it seems desirable for one seeking the original signification of some term to ask that it first denoted among ordinary people — particularly where other causes which would be drawn from the nature of the language are lacking. [CM I, 6; I/246]

So Spinoza is engaged in a bit of conceptual analysis, one with a beguilingly modern methodology: ask first what a term means in ordinary language and then consider how that usage may have been extended by the philosophers.

The first signification of the *true* and *false* seems to have had its origin in stories: a story was called true when it was of a deed which had really happened, and false when it was of a deed which had never happened. Afterwards philosophers used this signification to denote the agreement of an idea with its object and the contrary. So an idea is called true when it shows us the thing as it is in itself, and false when it shows us the thing otherwise than it really is. For ideas are nothing but narratives, or mental histories of nature. [*Ibid.*]

Spinoza goes on to say that the (common medieval) attribution of truth to things other than ideas and stories is a confused and illegitimate metaphorical extension of the philosophical usage. In so doing he rejects — so far as I can see — Professor Mark's ontological theory of truth, the theory that in addition to being a property of ideas and statements, truth is also a property of actions and physical objects.¹⁷

Interesting as this passage may be, however, it is deeply puzzling. Why does Spinoza seem to go back to an account of the nature of truth which he had apparently embraced in the *Short Treatise* and rejected in the *Treatise on the Intellect*? Is he, in the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, merely expounding the views of someone else (Descartes? the scholastics? his own self at an earlier date?), views he did not hold himself, or at least, did not hold when he published the *Metaphysical Thoughts*? Or is the *Treatise on the Intellect*, in this respect, an aberration from which Spinoza recovered?

The correspondence suggests that the doctrine of the *Treatise on the Intellect* is aberrant. Recall the problem set for Spinoza in Letter 8 by his friend, Simon de

¹⁷ It is true, of course, that Spinoza does adopt the Augustinian formula that God is truth (I/63/1-2). But since he also seems to think of that identification as being explained by the argument of *KV* II, 15 (cf. I/79/15), it needs some argument to show that the similarity between Spinoza and the Christian Neoplatonists is more than superficial.

Vries: should we accept Borrelli's view of definitions (that the definition of a subject must consist of a property or construction which is first, essential, best known to us, and true) or that of Clavius (that it does not matter whether a definition is first, or best known, or true, so long as the definition given is not said to agree with a thing unless it has first been shown to agree with that thing (IV/40/9-15)). Spinoza undertakes to go between the horns of the dilemma by drawing a distinction between a definition

which serves to explain a thing whose essence only is sought, as the only thing there is doubt about, and one which is proposed only to be examined. For because the former has a determinate object, it ought to be true. The latter does not require this. [IV/42-43]

These two kinds of definition he subsequently characterizes as those which 'explain a thing just as it is [NS: in itself] outside the intellect' and those which explain it 'as we conceive it, or can conceive it'. As an example of the first, Spinoza cites a description of the Temple of Solomon, which ought to be 'a true description of the temple as it was'. With this is contrasted a description of a temple I have conjured up in my mind, as one I want to build.

This passage is usually attended to for what it says about Spinoza's concept of definition. But it is relevant to our present concerns more for what it says about his concept of truth. The requirement that a definition of the first kind be true is clearly treated as equivalent to requiring that it bear a certain relation to external reality, and this fits in well with the account in the *Metaphysical Thoughts*. Moreover, Spinoza seems here to retreat from the position adopted in §69 of the *Treatise of the Intellect* regarding ideal objects. There the thought of a non-existent building was true, whether the building existed or not, so long as it was conceived in an orderly fashion. Here the description of a non-existent building is again subject only to constraints internal to the world of thought — it must at least be of a conceivable object — but it is not conceived *sub ratione veri*, which I take to mean that the concept of truth is not applicable to it. Spinoza's reason for exempting definitions of this second kind from the requirement of truth is that they lack 'a determinate object'. So Spinoza's thoughts about truth and ideal objects appear to have undergone some development from the *Treatise on the Intellect*. And the passage which caused the greatest difficulty for the interpretation of Spinoza as a correspondence theorist is at least partly repudiated.

V.

I pass now to the *Ethics*, which I propose to treat briefly, partly because I don't, at this stage, see any reason to retract what I have already said in my book about the main passages.¹⁸ But I would like to comment on two passages which I did not discuss then, and which I think have generally been neglected in discussion of Spinoza's theory of truth.

¹⁸ [Still true in April 1993.]

The first is a gloss on IA6 which Spinoza provides us with when he deploys that axiom in the demonstration of IP30:

A true idea must agree with its object (by A6), i.e. (as is known through itself) what is contained objectively in the intellect must necessarily exist in nature.

Spinoza uses this axiom (fallaciously, I think)¹⁹ to demonstrate that the intellect, whether finite or infinite, must comprehend God's attributes and affections, but nothing else. What interests us here, however, is his explanation of what the axiom means. And that explanation seems to confirm that Spinoza is thinking of truth in terms of a correspondence between thought and reality.

On the face of things, however, the other passage I want to call attention to contradicts this. I refer to IP8S2, where Spinoza is explaining why men would regard P7 ('That it pertains to the nature of substance to exist') as axiomatic if they attended to the nature of substance. He begins by paraphrasing his definitions of substance and mode:

By substance they would understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e. that the knowledge of which does not require the knowledge of another thing. By modifications they would understand what is in another, and those things whose concept is formed from the concept of the thing in which they are.

So far there is nothing to greatly surprise us.²⁰ But as Spinoza proceeds, we seem to have a reversion to the doctrine which I found most puzzling in the *Treatise on the Intellect*:

That is why we can have true ideas of non-existing modes, since, although they do not actually exist outside the intellect, their essence is nevertheless so comprehended in another that they can be conceived through it. But the truth of substance is not outside the intellect unless it is in the substances themselves, because they are conceived through themselves.

Spinoza then proceeds to explain that it would be absurd for us to claim to have a true idea of substance and at the same time to express doubt as to whether a substance corresponding to our idea existed. But what interests me here is the clear implication that an idea of a mode might be true without such correspondence.²¹ Why does Spinoza think this? I suppose that he thinks the following mathematical possibility has its analogues in nature. We can, in a weak sense of the term, conceive of geometrical figures which we have never experienced, and which, for all

¹⁹ The reference to truth in this premise of the demonstration drops out in the conclusion. So far as I can see, the conclusion should read: 'The intellect, insofar as it has true ideas, must etc.'

²⁰ Though, as I've observed in *Spinoza's Metaphysics* (p.15), I believe the gloss on the definition of substance is significant.

²¹ I observe, in passing, that our text is closely analogous to IIP8 and its Scholium. Since the latter passage no doubt contains the key to Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the mind, we might hope to make headway with that notoriously obscure doctrine if we could understand IP8S2.

we know, never have been or will be instantiated in nature, i.e., we can construct logically consistent definitions of such figures. Our knowledge of the first principles of geometry (axioms, definitions and postulates) enables us to demonstrate various properties of these figures in spite of their non-existence. In so doing we come to conceive them in the stronger sense which Spinoza deploys in his definitions of substance and mode and which he warns us of here, i.e. we come to know certain truths about them. The truth of these truths consists simply in their deducibility from the relevant first principles and definitions. I take it that something like this philosophy of mathematics and mathematical truth is implicit in Descartes and is accepted by Spinoza as early as the *Treatise on the Intellect*, though not without some apparent vacillation in subsequent writings. And I suppose that he thinks that the fundamental laws of physical nature permit us to make similar truth claims about non-actual, but possible, physical objects.

If this is right, then Spinoza's rejection of the apparent requirements of a correspondence theory in certain passages of the *Ethics* is accompanied by a conception of truth which certainly does have affinities with the idealist notion that the truth of an idea is, in some fundamental way, connected with its membership in a system of ideas. Note that I say only that there is a certain affinity here. In an interesting article Jonathan Cohen has argued that the classical idealist form of the coherence theory of truth embodied a much stronger notion of coherence than has been typical among positivist adherents of the theory.²² The weak notion of coherence characteristic of positivist coherence theories allows a set of propositions to be coherent if its members are mutually consistent and as comprehensive as possible. The strong notion of coherence characteristic of idealist coherence theories requires not merely mutual consistency and comprehensiveness, but mutual entailment. This is most clearly stated by Blanshard, who writes that

Fully coherent knowledge would be knowledge in which every judgment entailed, and was entailed by, the rest of the system.²³

It should be evident that, while Spinoza would have thought that the ideal system of knowledge involved something more than just a set of consistent and comprehensive propositions, he could not have accepted so strong a notion of coherence as Blanshard embraces. The truths constituting an ideal system of knowledge would have to be so ordered that each of them was involved in some entailment relations with other members of the system, either as ground or as consequence. But if every truth entailed every other, it would follow, for Spinoza, that each element of reality depended on every other. And that is a manifestly unacceptable consequence. Spinoza's vision of reality is hierarchic, not democratic, as Blanshard's is. Modes depend on substance (or its attributes). They exist in it and are conceived through it. But the converse relation does not hold. Substance (or its attributes) is in itself and is conceived through itself.

²² L. Jonathan Cohen, 'The Coherence Theory of Truth', *Philosophical Studies* 34 (1978) pp.351-360.

²³ Brand Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought* (New York: Humanities Press, 1939) vol. II, p.264.

[So truths about substance or its attributes should constitute the ultimate premises of the ideal system of knowledge, which are not derived from any other truths, though all other truths are in some way derived from them. If the account of Spinozistic causation and necessity which I offered in chapters 2-3 of *Spinoza's Metaphysics* is correct, not every truth will follow from the truths about substance or its attributes alone; truths about finite things will follow from truths about the attributes only in conjunction with other truths about finite things. (Contrast IPP21-23 with IP28.) But every truth will be linked by entailment relations with every other truth. Added April 1993.]

One final note about the *Ethics*: I spoke cautiously above about Spinoza's 'rejection of the apparent requirements of the correspondence theory'. Since Spinoza is capable of combining *prima facie* statements of the correspondence theory (not only IA6, but also IP30D) with *prima facie* rejections of it (in IP8S2) in the same part of the same work, it looks as though he saw no inconsistency in this conjunction of positions. Why this should be so is a puzzle to which I have no answer.²⁴

What are we to conclude from all of this? The difficulty, it seems to me, is not primarily that the notions of correspondence and coherence are too unclear for us to say which Spinoza would have preferred to use in the analysis of truth, or that it is anachronistic to raise this question. No doubt both notions could be much clearer than they are, and the customary contrast between the two theories is weakened by the disposition of some coherence theorists to grant the partial truth of the correspondence theory. And no doubt there is some anachronism involved in supposing that, when Spinoza says things that sound like expressions of a correspondence theory, he is aware of taking sides in a debate. As Mark has noted, the coherence theory, as we know it is essentially a creature of the 19th Century. Nevertheless, both notions do seem clear enough to allow the following conclusions:

1. That Spinoza does persistently, from his earliest work up to and including the *Ethics*, embrace a version of the correspondence theory.
2. That he also frequently, from his earliest work up to and including the *Ethics*, expresses himself in a way that is very difficult to reconcile with any version of the correspondence theory.
3. That the philosophic problems which apparently lead him away from a correspondence theory apparently also lead him in the direction of a version of the coherence theory, though a version quite different in character from the main contemporary versions of that theory.
4. That Spinoza does not appear to have been aware of these conflicting tendencies in his thought.

ADDENDUM

I wrote this paper partly because it seemed to me that historians of philosophy often did not consider sufficiently seriously the possibility that the figures they studied

²⁴ [Still true in April 1993.]

might have changed their minds over time. In the interim I have worked extensively on Hobbes, who provides another illustration of the phenomenon. Hobbes scholars often write as if there were no importance to be attached to the dates of his works, e.g., as if *Leviathan* (1651) did not differ significantly from *De Cive* (1642). It is ironic that this paper itself is one more example.

I have discussed the relation of Leibniz's theory of truth to those of Descartes and Spinoza in 'Der Ursprung der Leibnizschen Wahrheitstheorie', *Studia Leibnitiana* 20(1988) pp.160-174. I intend to publish an English language version of that paper as soon as I can resolve certain difficulties in it which trouble me.

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