THE KNOWER AND THE KNOWN

An outline of a central topic in Spinoza's Ethics.

This paper is a presentation and discussion of Spinoza's view on the knower, or the mind, as an agent. The knower is on his view to be regarded as an active or generative complex cognitive experience. Imagination, reason and intuition are the cognitive principles. On account of their intrinsic relation to "the first law of nature", that of selfpreservation, together with the thesis of the mind as constituted by ideas or knowledge, these principles function at the same time as moral principles. Consequently, it makes sense to speak of an individual's moral attitude toward everything he knows. A discussion of imagination, reason and intuition mainly as cognitive principles is followed by some concluding remarks on the cognitive and moral relation between human beings: To know another human being is to know his knowledge. The moral attitude of individuals to each other is a function of their mutual knowledge of knowledge.

The relation of the knower to the known is a well-known and, by most philosophers, well-respected problem. That a substantial and, in some respects, topical contribution to, the discussion of the problem may be found in Spinoza, is less well known, even among commentators on his theory of knowledge. This paper is an attempt to outline his contribution.

Spinoza's view on the knower-known relation is in the main embedded in the metaphysical system of his Ethics. I shall, however, only occasionally pay attention to the system as a whole. The theory of the knower-known relation is, as I shall try to show, largely intelligible without taking its total metaphysical context into account. Moreover, if the theory is to be justifiably regarded as relevant to present interests, it surely has to be thus intelligible.

1. The knower, or the mind, is an agent. The Ethics is sometimes said to be a "doctrine of activism". The active character applies "essentially" to...
every being of the Spinozistic universe, to the infinite beings (God, the attributes of thought and extension, and the infinite modes) in an infinite sense, and to the finite beings (modes of thought and extension, i.e. ideas or thoughts and their physical correlates) in a finite sense. An interpretation of the *Ethics* under this heading is in my view likely to be most successful in view of the many notorious difficulties (logical and others) encountered by a modern reader. At present the doctrine of activism provides a clue for classifying Spinoza’s view on the knower-known relation: The knower is an agent.

The view of the knower as an agent usually conceives the knower as, in a sense transcending mere perceptual activity (or rather passivity), determining the way of knowing things and consequently the relation to what is known. Stock examples are Plato’s theory of ideas, Kant’s view on the categorial functioning of the mind and the theory of the I’s constitution of the world in consciousness or understanding, held by a number of modern phenomenologists (Husserl, Heidegger and others). Spinoza, although his position contains a number of distinctive features, clearly belongs to this group. I shall clarify.

2. *The mind as an agent is a generative, complex cognitive experience.* Certain propositions in part 2 of the *Ethics* form a natural starting point: 2P11, P13, P15, P19 and P26. From these propositions it is clear that the human mind, to Spinoza, is constituted by a complex idea the objects of which are bodily states, that is, modifications of the human body by external objects (or external objects in so far as they modify the body, or, the body in so far as it is modified by external objects). With regard to the present problem this step appears to be just as significant as it is confusing: The usual distinctions in traditional epistemology between a concipient, a conception, and a conceptum apparently do not obtain in Spinoza. Instead, it seems, we are left with the distinction between the two latter only, between a complex idea and its object (of corresponding complexity). There is no ‘I’ (‘mind’, ‘knower’, ‘mental substance’) over and above this complex idea, somehow unconditionally, or otherwise freely “on its own”, governing the formation of new ideas, nor for that matter, passively receiving sense-impressions (‘images’), on the basis of which new ideas are formed. An idea, of whatever kind, is nowhere in the *Ethics* said to “follow from” such an I, or an image, but always and necessarily from