

NOTICE TO THE READER
(by the Editors of the *Opera Posthuma*)

This “Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, etc.,” which in its unfinished state we here present to you, dear reader, was written by our author many years ago. He always intended to finish it, but, distracted by his other occupations and taken from us by death, he did not succeed in bringing it to the desired conclusion. But since it contains many excellent and useful things which we are convinced will be of considerable interest to an earnest seeker after truth, we did not wish to deprive you of them. That you may the more readily excuse occasional obscurities and lack of polish that appear in places in the text, we have thought it proper that you, too, should be made aware of these circumstances.

TREATISE ON THE EMENDATION
OF THE INTELLECT
AND ON THE WAY BY WHICH IT IS
BEST DIRECTED TO THE
TRUE KNOWLEDGE OF THINGS

After experience had taught me the hollowness and futility of everything that is ordinarily encountered in daily life, and I realised that all the things which were the source and object of my anxiety held nothing of good or evil in themselves save insofar as the mind was influenced by them, I resolved at length to enquire whether there existed a true good, one which was capable of communicating itself and could alone affect the mind to the exclusion of all else, whether, in fact, there was something whose discovery and acquisition would afford me a continuous and supreme joy to all eternity. 1

I say ‘I resolved at length,’ for at first sight it seemed ill-advised to risk the loss of what was certain in the hope of something at that time uncertain. I could well see the advantages that derive from honour and wealth, and that I would be forced to abandon their quest if I were to devote myself to some new and different objective. And if in fact supreme happiness were to be found in the former, I must inevitably fail to attain it, whereas if it did not lie in these objectives and I devoted myself entirely to them, then once again I would lose that highest happiness. 2

I therefore debated whether it might be possible to arrive at a new guiding principle—or at least the sure hope of its attainment—without changing the manner 3

and normal routine of my life. This I frequently attempted, but in vain. For the things which for the most part offer themselves in life, and which, to judge from their actions, men regard as the highest good, can be reduced to these three headings: riches, honour, and sensual pleasure. With these three the mind is so distracted that it is quite incapable of thinking of any other good. With regard to sensual pleasure, the mind is so utterly obsessed by it that it seems as if it were absorbed in some good, and so is quite prevented from thinking of anything else. But after the enjoyment of this pleasure there ensues a profound depression which, if it does not completely inhibit the mind, leads to its confusion and enervation. The pursuit of honour and wealth, too, engrosses the mind to no small degree, especially when the latter is sought exclusively for its own sake,^a for it is then regarded as the highest good. Even more so is the mind obsessed with honour, for this is always regarded as a good in itself and the ultimate end to which everything is directed. Then again, in both these cases, there is no repentance as in the case of sensual pleasure. The more each of them is possessed, the more our joy is enhanced, and we are therefore more and more induced to increase them both. But if it should come about that our hopes are disappointed, there ensues a profound depression. And finally, honour has this great drawback, that to attain it we must conduct our lives to suit other men, avoiding what the masses avoid and seeking what the masses seek.

So when I saw that all these things stood in the way of my embarking on a new course, and were indeed so opposed to it that I must necessarily choose between the one alternative and the other, I was forced to ask what was to my greater advantage; for, as I have said, I seemed set on losing a certain good for the sake of an uncertain good. But after a little reflection, I first of all realised that if I abandoned the old ways and embarked on a new way of life, I should be abandoning a good that was by its very nature uncertain—as we can clearly gather from what has been said—in favour of one that was uncertain not of its own nature (for I was seeking a permanent good) but only in respect of its attainment. Then persistent meditation enabled me to see that, if only I could be thoroughly resolute, I should be abandoning certain evils for the sake of a certain good. For I saw that my situation was one of great peril and that I was obliged to seek a remedy with all my might, however uncertain it might be, like a sick man suffering from a fatal malady who, foreseeing certain death unless a remedy is forthcoming, is forced to seek it, however uncertain it be, with all his might, for therein lies all his hope. Now all those objectives that are commonly pursued not only contribute nothing to the preservation of our being but even hinder it, being frequently the cause of the destruction of those who gain possession of them, and invariably the cause of the de-

All notes are Spinoza's.

^a This could be explained more fully and clearly by making a distinction between wealth that is sought for its own sake, for the sake of honour, for sensual pleasure, for health, or for the advancement of the sciences and the arts. But this is reserved for its proper place, such a detailed investigation being inappropriate here.

struction of those who are possessed by them.^b For there are numerous examples 8
of men who have suffered persecution unto death because of their wealth, and
also of men who have exposed themselves to so many dangers to acquire riches
that they have finally paid for their folly with their lives. Nor are there less nu-
merous examples of men who, to gain or preserve honour, have suffered a most
wretched fate. Finally, there are innumerable examples of men who have has-
tened their death by reason of excessive sensual pleasure.

These evils, moreover, seemed to arise from this, that all happiness or unhap- 9
piness depends solely on the quality of the object to which we are bound by love.
For strife will never arise on account of that which is not loved; there will be no
sorrow if it is lost, no envy if it is possessed by another, no fear, no hatred—in a
word, no emotional agitation, all of which, however, occur in the case of the love
of perishable things, such as all those of which we have been speaking. But love 10
towards a thing eternal and infinite feeds the mind with joy alone, unmixed with
any sadness. This is greatly to be desired, and to be sought with all our might. How-
ever, it was not without reason that I used these words, ‘If only I could be earnestly
resolute,’ for although I perceived these things quite clearly in my mind, I could
not on that account put aside all greed, sensual pleasure, and desire for esteem.

This one thing I could see, that as long as my mind was occupied with these 11
thoughts, it turned away from those other objectives and earnestly applied itself
to the quest for a new guiding principle. This was a great comfort to me, for I saw
that those evils were not so persistent as to refuse to yield to remedies. And
although at first these intermissions were rare and of very brief duration, never-
theless, as the true good became more and more discernible to me, these inter-
missions became more frequent and longer, especially when I realised that the
acquisition of money, sensual pleasure, and esteem is a hindrance only as long as
they are sought on their own account, and not as a means to other things. If they
are sought as means, they will then be under some restriction, and far from being
hindrances, they will do much to further the end for which they are sought, as I
shall demonstrate in its proper place.

At this point I shall only state briefly what I understand by the true good, and at 12
the same time what is the supreme good. In order that this may be rightly under-
stood, it must be borne in mind that good and bad are only relative terms, so that
one and the same thing may be said to be good or bad in different respects, just
like the terms perfect and imperfect. Nothing, when regarded in its own nature,
can be called perfect or imperfect, especially when we realise that all things that
come into being do so in accordance with an eternal order and Nature’s fixed laws.

But human weakness fails to comprehend that order in its thought, and mean- 13
while man conceives a human nature much stronger than his own, and sees no
reason why he cannot acquire such a nature. Thus he is urged to seek the means
that will bring him to such a perfection, and all that can be the means of his at-
taining this objective is called a true good, while the supreme good is to arrive at

^b This is to be demonstrated at greater length.

the enjoyment of such a nature, together with other individuals, if possible. What that nature is we shall show in its proper place; namely, the knowledge of the union which the mind has with the whole of Nature.^c

14 This, then, is the end for which I strive, to acquire the nature I have described and to endeavour that many should acquire it along with me. That is to say, my own happiness involves my making an effort to persuade many others to think as I do, so that their understanding and their desire should entirely accord with my understanding and my desire. To bring this about, it is necessary^d (1) to understand as much about Nature as suffices for acquiring such a nature, and (2) to establish such a social order as will enable as many as possible to reach this goal
15 with the greatest possible ease and assurance. Furthermore, (3) attention must be paid to moral philosophy and likewise the theory of the education of children; and since health is of no little importance in attaining this end, (4) the whole science of medicine must be elaborated. And since many difficult tasks are rendered easy by contrivance, and we can thereby gain much time and convenience in our daily lives, (5) the science of mechanics is in no way to be despised.

16 But our first consideration must be to devise a method of emending the intellect and of purifying it, as far as is feasible at the outset, so that it may succeed in understanding things without error and as well as possible. So now it will be evident to everyone that my purpose is to direct all the sciences to one end and goal,^e to wit (as we have said), the achievement of the highest human perfection. Thus everything in the sciences which does nothing to advance us towards our goal must be rejected as pointless—in short, all our activities and likewise our thoughts must be directed to this end.

17 But since we have to continue with our lives while pursuing this end and endeavouring to bring down the intellect into the right path, our first priority must be to lay down certain rules for living, as being good rules. They are as follows:

1. To speak to the understanding of the multitude and to engage in all those activities that do not hinder the attainment of our aim. For we can gain no little advantage from the multitude, provided that we accommodate ourselves as far as possible to their level of understanding. Furthermore, in this way they will give a more favourable hearing to the truth.
2. To enjoy pleasures just so far as suffices to preserve health.
3. Finally, to seek as much money or any other goods as are sufficient for sustaining life and health and for conforming with those social customs that do not conflict with our aim.

18 Having laid down these rules, I shall embark upon the first and most important task, emending the intellect and rendering it apt for the understanding of things

^c This is explained more fully in its proper place.

^d Note that here I am only concerned to enumerate the sciences necessary to our purpose, without regard to their order.

^e In the sciences there is only one end, to which all must be directed.