Subject: Bridges between Japanese and Western ways of thinking: the example of Spinoza

Author: Jean-Michel Kaliszewski, Shung Do Kwan Budo Geneva Scholarship Year: 2018

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Translation in Japanese: Fuyumi Shigehara & Carl Hashimoto

I am still studying Nature and it seems to me that I am making slow progress.

Paul Cézanne (painter, on 21st September 1906, letter to a friend a month before dying)

A man will be imprisoned in a room with a door that's unlocked and opens inward, as long as it does not occur to him to pull rather than push.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

1. How did the topic of my scholarship come to my mind?

In October 2016, Swiss dojos went on a trip to visit Shiseikan and Japan, in agreement with Shiseikan. It was a very intense and rich journey, combining training at Shiseikan, visit to the Akita Prefecture and Misogi in Mitake. Araya Kancho has been our guide on the tour through the Akita Prefecture. We were taken both by the visit of natural sites such as lakes and volcanic areas, cities and Japanese guest houses. At some time we visited the city of Kakunodate, which was home of many samurai. Many of the beautiful samurai mansions had been transformed into museums that we visited with much interest. The weather was cold but we felt moved and enthusiastic.

In one of the samurai mansions there was a small exhibition outside the main building and which attracted my attention. It was about a book of anatomy which was coming from The Netherlands and was brought to Japan in the 17th century. The exhibition explained how this book had been important for the progress of medicine in Japan by teaching the benefits from anatomy for the understanding and healing of the human body. A poster, displayed at the entrance of this exhibition to illustrate this book, showing a painting from the famous Dutch painter Rembrandt and entitled "The Anatomy Lesson". Indeed this painting made the point about the importance of anatomy for the progress of medecine in Renaissance time and the change in mindset concerning the body and a more scientific approach to medicine. And this book gave rise to a movement of ideas in Japan at the end of the 18th century and which have paved the way for the Meiji Restoration: The Dutch studies movement (Rangaku kotohajime).

The 4th photograph below shows the poster of Rembrandt's painting: "The Anatomy Lesson"









Photos: Jean-Michel Kaliszewski

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And this small painting triggered in my mind the thought that indeed there was mutual benefit in intercultural exchanges. We were hugely benefiting from our trip in Japan but here I could see an example of Japan having also benefitted from a cultural exchange with Europe. Interestingly the painting was made by Rembrandt in 1632, the same year Spinoza was born just two streets away from Rembrandt's workshop. And these ideas stayed in the back of my mind when, after the trip, I returned to Geneva.

When the opportunity was presented to me to apply for a scholarship with Shiseikan/Meiji Jingu, this idea about intercultural exchanges came back spontaneously to my mind. I did not know in details the ideas developed by Spinoza but I was attracted by what I knew of him and thought that his philosophy could be of good value for such an intercultural study also aiming at Shinto spirituality and Budo. I also thought that this was the opportunity for expressing my gratitude for the trip in Japan and for the learning we get from Shiseikan either directly or through seminars organized by ISBA.

2. Shinto Spirituality and Martial Art Practice

It is my understanding that Shinto and Budo practice are an essential component of Japanese way of thinking as captured by the expression "Yamatodamashii" (soul of Japan). As Western practitioners of Kashima no Tachi, our experience of Shinto is mainly through martial arts practice, lectures and the Shinto rites which go with them. Therefore our experience leaves out other Shinto aspects such as, e. g. daily rites, important celebrations throughout the year and matsuri. The question is sometimes raised whether Shinto is a religion. However, for the present research I will not address this question and I will rather follow the spirit of the publication for the 35th anniversary of Shiseikan, "The tradition of Japan, Budo: Path of Spiritual Refinement, Meiji Jingu Shiseikan" and I will focus on the spiritual dimension of Shinto which is relevant to our Budo practice. However at last ISBA seminar in Calais in 2018, a person, who I think is practising martial arts since a long time, asked during the General Assembly: "what is spirituality"? It is interesting to observe that the question was asked by someone from our community and this question shows that for a Western mind, spirituality is not always a familiar realm. Starting this research, I asked myself this question and came across an element which has become obvious to me from my life experience and which is that a key component of good attitude towards life, our ancestors and the world in general has to start with gratitude. Hence for me, expressing gratitude towards life and the world is a fundamental element of spirituality. Going with gratitude we also have respect attitude as a key element of spirituality. I mean a general respect attitude, not one directed to a specific person or a specific god or God but to life and the world in general. Of course gratitude and respect need to show in our daily life, with people, animals and Nature in general. And with spirituality comes a feeling of wonder for the bounty of the word and in interest in it. Cultivating spirituality means to me to be connected to the world. I mean connected in a pragmatic way. Therefore I am talking of an immanent spirituality and I have the feeling that this immanent spiritual approach matches the way spirituality is experienced in Japan in general and at Meiji Jingu and Shiseikan in particular. This is my current appraisal of spirituality and I am looking forward to experience and find more about this important topic during my research stay in Japan and enrich this experience, all the more as I am not a specialist of these matters. As a final point, on this topic, I would like to add that this immanent and is something completely different and bears a transcendental dimension.

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The link between Shinto spirituality and Budo is stated clearly in the Shiseikan 35th anniversary publication (/1/). With the Budo approach we have to train and unite mind and body together with learning the technique sustaining martial arts. Spirituality calls for refinement at mind and heart level, while with martial art practice we improve our body capabilities. Mind and body however, go in parallel and strongly influence each other: A good execution of martial art techniques requires a calm and at the same time wilful mind, and conversely martial art practice helps pacify the mind and develop qualities such as awareness, attention and responsiveness. Hence the case for Shugyo (the discipline for personal development of body and mind) presented by Master Takahiro Yamada in /1/ and other sensei in the same publication.

Spiritual development, the tenet of mind and body working in parallel, practice of a manual activity having reached excellence in its domain, are also hallmarks of Spinoza's work and life as we shall see and hint at bridges between Japanese and Western ways of thinking.

3. Who was Spinoza?

Baruch (Dutch name) Spinoza (born Benedito de Espinhoza and later known as Benedict de Spinoza) was born in 1632 in Amsterdam in a Jewish Sephardic family which had migrated from Portugal (and was almost certainly from Spanish origin). The strong Jewish community in Amsterdam has been escaping the Inquisition religious movement which resulted in forced conversions and expulsions from Portugal. The Netherlands at that time were already a cosmopolitan society with more religious freedom (although conflicts still existed) than other European countries; the economy was well developed with a flourishing international commercial activity in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Besides trade, art and intellectual life were also well developed and made The Netherlands an influential country in the 17th century. Baruch lost his mother when he was 6 years old and his father was a merchant and an active participant in the Jewish religious community. He had a traditional Jewish upbringing and was fluent in many languages (Portuguese, Dutch, Hebrew, Spanish and French). He later learned Latin (as well as old Greek and other languages from Antiquity) and later wrote all his books in Latin.

When Spinoza was fifteen years old, he witnessed the punishment of Uriel da Costa who received 39 lashes and while lying on the ground was trampled by the whole Jewish religious community because of his strong inclination for rationalism and a Nature-based religion. After the punishment, Uriel Da Costa committed suicide. Spinoza distanced himself from religious studies and started to become interested in philosophy and sciences. It should be noted that in those days the most important and innovative books in physics, optics, medicine and philosophy were being published in Amsterdam. Spinoza continued his studies with van den Enden a notorious free thinker, who introduced him to scholastic and modern philosophy, including Descartes (a contemporary also living in the Netherlands during that period). Spinoza set himself for the pursuit of "true wisdom, which could be communicated, and which once discovered and reached would result in a never-ending supreme joy" (/9/). In parallel Spinoza had started working in his father's import business to make a living.

As a result of a lengthy internal struggle, Spinoza gradually broke with the prevailing dogmas of Judaism. The conflict built up with Jewish religious authorities who nevertheless tried to avoid a scandal and offered him in 1656 a rent of 1000 florins in exchange for not openly breaking up with the prevailing dogmas. Spinoza refused this arrangement and was excommunicated. This terrible punishment meant that nobody from the Jewish community, including family and close friends, could have any contact of any sort with him. Spinoza was completely isolated from his community. This came on top of the death of his father and sister in 1656, his relatives, and the discontinuation of the family business which went bankrupt amid these family events and the conflicts with the community. Spinoza was also victim of a murder attempt and decided to leave Amsterdam for security reasons and having a more peaceful life. At that time he adopted his famous

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motto: "caute!" (be cautious!). He first moved to Rijnsburg (near Leyde) in 1660 and then to Voorburg in 1663 and The Hague in 1670.

Spinoza's life is now organized around writing books, exchanging with scientists and philosophers who also come to visit him and earning a modest living by grinding lenses and making scientific instruments. The only book published under his name during his lifetime is: "Descartes' Principles of Philosophy". He also wrote:

"On the Improvement of the Understanding", Theological-Political Treatise" (published anonymously in 1670), "The Ethics" (his masterwork, finished in 1674 but only published after his death). However due to the criticism and opposition he was facing, he had to abandon the various publications projects that he or his friends have been undertaking.

As a lens grinder, Spinoza was famous for the quality of his lens and European scientists would come and visit him, to order lenses and discuss projects for large astronomic instruments. Christiaan Huyghens, the famed Dutch astronomer was one of his friends, among other scientists and mathematicians. Philosophers were also exchanging with him and Leibniz for instance came to see him to discuss and understand his ideas.

Spinoza believed in a philosophy of tolerance and benevolence, however never giving-up on his demanding search and ethics and he actually lived the life which he preached. This makes him a rather unique example in Western philosophy and one can say that he practiced what he preached. In that respect his life has been similar to the life of a martial arts master. Adamant about keeping his independence Spinoza refused the chair of philosophy from the famed University of Heidelberg, in fear that it might curb his freedom of thought. Although devoting much energy and time to his spiritual and philosophical research, Spinoza remained connected with his time and events. His book: "Theological-Political Treatise" was a defense of a secular and constitutional government and in support of a political figure, Jan de Witt, who himself was protecting Spinoza from political repression until he was himself murdered in 1672. This book has been the only one written in rather plain language.

Suffering from lung problems (tuberculosis) possibly aggravated by his lens grinding activity, Spinoza prematurely died in 1677 at the age of 44. During the 17th and the 18th century, political and religious authorities have been fighting his ideas and prosecuting anyone who would openly support him. In order to make Spinoza and his ideas known, his supporters had to publish criticism of his work, the only allowed possibility to mention him! However as from the 18th century Spinoza has become popular in the enlightenment movement and as from the 19th century his ideas inspired scientists in biology and medicine (e.g. among many others French biologist Claude Bernard) and also among thinkers and philosophers: for instance Goethe, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein in the 20th century have paid tribute to Spinoza's groundwork of spiritual and modern thinking.

Einstein declared in 1929 to Rabbi Herbert Goldstein in answer to a question on his religious belief: "I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals Himself in the lawful harmony of the world, not in a God who concerns Himself with the fate and the doings of mankind...."

Spinoza is still inspiring the work of scientists, in particular in the area of biology (/13/) and most neuroscientists and psychologists are adopting Spinoza's views on the mind-body relationship (/16/) and his theory of emotions (a minority of neuro-scientists are adopting Descartes' or Leibniz's views). Spinoza is also inspiring many personal development works (/9/, /18/). An interesting anecdote happened during WW2 and is told us by Irvin Yalom (/8/): Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi ideologue was in charge of confiscating Jewish belongings and was faced with the project of taking hold and destroying Spinoza's personal library. Spinoza

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however was a problem for him because he could not understand that a Jew had produced such a sublime work (actually A. Rosenberg was influenced by Goethe's admiration of Spinoza) and so finally A. Rosenberg made sure that Spinoza library was not destroyed but kept safe so that the "Spinoza problem" could be further investigated and possibly explained.









Spinoza (global.britannica.com) Statue of Spinoza

Spinoza's house in Rinsjburg

Spinoza's study room and library

All photos from article on Spinoza in wikipedia (in English).

4. The Legacy from Spinoza

Today there are many publications and studies about Spinoza but his books are seldom read by the general public. This is easily explained by the fact that his books are indeed difficult to read. There are several reasons which explain why. Spinoza was writing in Latin and his main topic, the one covered in "The Ethics" has been metaphysics, itself a difficult and not very popular topic. Then in his work Spinoza was using the concepts and vocabulary of the Middle Age scholastic philosophy, still strongly influenced by Aristotle. The scholastic philosophy is in itself difficult to understand for us nowadays as it is really coming from a very different world. Then the geometrical method used by Spinoza makes his argumentation very precise but at the same time a difficult read, even if one has a scientific background. And last but not least, Spinoza had to mitigate the risks he was taking by expressing his ideas by making his books difficult to read and to understand.

Despite all these difficulties, the influence exerted by Spinoza on the making of the modern Western world has been considerable. His ideas have been seminal in the development of the 18th century Enlightenment in Europe and America which has been the cornerstone of the modern Western way of life. His ideas extend from democratic governance to a critical view of religions and insights in the psychology of feelings and emotions.

Relevant to the context of this research, we can highlight:

- His fundamental immanent view of the world, God is Nature, as opposed to the transcendental view that traditionally sustained Western philosophy and religion. In an immanent view, the body and the soul are strongly connected as part of the same world and the cause of what is happening is also found in this world.
- In Spinoza's views, Good and Evil have no absolute value but are rather labels that we attribute to fit our view and understanding. I note that in /1/, Master Takahiro Yamada notes, in his article about Shugyo, and talking about the connection between Budo and Shinto mentality, that "demonic points are scarce", further referring to the atmosphere of purity and clarity that is found in Shinto.

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- By providing an alternative to materialism and religion, Spinoza has provided a framework in which science and spirituality can develop in harmony.
- Spinoza's approach to life, his pursuit of spiritual joy and self-improvement are inspiring modern psychology and personal development approaches. As Spinoza lived the life that he preached, he indeed appears as a role model for modern thinking and self-development.

5. Bridges between Shinto Spirituality and Budo and Spinoza

Japanese way of thinking, as reflected in Shinto and Budo, and Western way of thinking, whether in Christian religion or in Spinoza's philosophy appear indeed as two different worlds.

The Shinto world view (as analysed and summarized for instance in /2/) is experiential, mythological, asserts relative truth, imbeds communal personhood and ethics, and is indigenous, ethnic and tribal based with identity in clan or nation.

On the other hand, Spinoza's world view and philosophy relies on the development of a rationalist approach, imbedding a universalizing scope with individual personhood and ethics and identity in self.

But drawing conclusions from these two summaries is misleading. Actually Japanese way of thinking as reflected in Shinto and Budo is better appraised from experience as it is indeed action-centered (as opposed to belief-centered). And, similarly with Spinoza, getting immersed in the history of his life and the realm of his ideas and philosophy is a learning experience that opens many doors.

From my short journey in Shinto way of thinking and my Budo practice, as well as from my encounter with Spinoza's work and life, I could sense that many bridges presented themselves for connecting the experiences in these two worlds.

First of all the common approach to an immanent view and experience of the world is striking, as noted earlier. In Shinto, the Divine is expressed through Kami who are present in all natural elements and beings and are the life-force of the natural world. Similarly for Spinoza, the Divine is Nature and is present in all natural elements and beings. In /19/, Araya kancho states that "God ...did not create the world from the outer space as such but rather, it became the universe itself". In Spinoza's word: "Deus sive Natura" (God or Nature), or as summarized in /7/. "Mind, matter, creation, creator – all these are simply names of the same eternal self-sustaining thing". The closeness of these two views is indeed striking.

In /19/ we also find the mention of "Genki": "a very powerful original energy that was bestowed upon us when we were born. So long as we maintain our Genki-ness, we will keep growing". From this description, the feeling of another bridge with an important concept in Spinoza's philosophy comes to mind: "conatus". Spinoza attributes to organisms an endeavour, which he calls "conatus", and which he describes as "their persistence in their own being", "meaning that they resist damage, fracture, … and if injured, they restore themselves out of their own inherent principle of existence" (/7/). Spinoza further develops the idea that "every organism strives to progress, grow and reach a higher perfection. He aims, in doing so, at increasing his power of Being" (/9/, p146).

Ethics are an important topic. In /19/, we find that "In Shintoism, the supreme virtue is to take part in constructive activities for the whole". And in /2/ (p59) we find this statement about Shinto, that "when ethics

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is transmitted through rituals, there is no need to rely on a set of commandments or laws". Ethics are also a very important topic for Spinoza; his masterwork is "The Ethics". Interestingly, in Spinoza's approach to ethics there are also no commandment or moral law. Ethics are conceived as an ethology based virtue. And the tools to reach that goal are the intimate and rational knowledge and understanding of feelings and the polishing of these feelings to develop the positive ones, and develop the freedom from the negative ones. So, interestingly Shinto and Spinoza both avoid the use of commandments and moral laws, but they reach that same goal of developing ethics with a different solution in each case (not all things are the same in this world!). However, thanks to this common approach in avoiding commandments and moral laws, both approaches allow a discarding of moral judgements such as "evil" in their appraisal of human behaviour.

In Shinto, important values are purity, sincere heart (or honesty) and harmony. If we understand purity in the meaning giving to it in the Japanese way of thinking and Shinto, and not in the usual moral sense of Western religions, then obviously purity and sincerity are values that have been shared by Spinoza and which have shown in his life. Harmony is a more complex case. My understanding is that in Shinto this means first of all contributing positively to the harmony to the community in which one lives (and is closely connected to as per Japanese way of living). Spinoza has been disruptive in the Jewish community of his time, as well as with the religious and political authorities. However his ideas all pointed, whether in the political, social or personal arena towards the attainment of harmony. It is also interesting to note here that in reference to the "Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors" of Emperor Meiji, Spinoza, through his life and work, has been meeting the five obligations corresponding to the articles given in example, namely: loyalty, manners, bravery, faith, frugality. Of course faith would have to be understood in the specific context of his time, environment and endeavour. He demonstrated strong loyalty and bravery when Jan de Witt, the Grand Pensionary of the Netherlands and friend of Spinoza, was assassinated in 1672 by the mob; Spinoza reacted by intending to post a bill with these words "Ultimi barbarorum" (ultimate barbarians) to denounce this crime. His host managed to lock him in his house, to avoid him being murdered by the mob had he acted on his idea. This story has been reported by Leibniz who had visited Spinoza after these events took place.

The last important matching point between Shinto spirituality and Budo on one side and Spinoza on the other side and that I wish to highlight is the importance and practice of self-improvement and personal development. In Shinto practice, specific rituals, such as Kagami Biraki illustrate the high priority given to self-improvement. As noted earlier it is also an important goal in Budo. In /20/, Araya kancho gives us a detailed account of this learning process in Budo in general and in Kashima-shinryu specifically and mentions that "this is truly an infinite progression of 'learning' and 'becoming'". Also of importance, as highlighted in this conference is "the prerequisite of this is that you are able to do ginmi (<a careful investigation>) of your own heart by yourself". With Spinoza, we find ourselves in known territory as selfimprovement and self-development have been at the core of both his personal life and of his work and ideas. In his personal life, he worked on improving his skills in lens-grinding to the point of becoming renowned by scientists throughout all Europe as they were coming to him to get their advanced scientific instruments. A key element in Spinoza's approach is "joy" that he defines "as passing over from a lesser perfection to a higher perfection". In his approach, his first step is in highlighting the importance to the body, which goes with the mind and is on par with it in dignity. This position breaks away with both the traditional Christian view which neglected the body and Descartes philosophy which sees the mind and the body as separate entities with prevalence to the mind. In Spinoza's view, the duality does not lie between mind and body but between two fundamental emotions, joy and sorrow which influence our "conatus". Through rational and sincere introspection as well as observation of other, Spinoza developed a theory of emotions. In this theory emotions are labelled according to their contribution to joy or sorrow on one axis and according to their nature as either "active" or as "passive" on a second axis. A person is in a passive state if he reacts to the world, whereas he is in an "active" state if his actions have their origin within him. With these concepts, joy

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versus sorrow, active versus passive, conatus and the knowledge of emotions that Spinoza has developed a powerful approach to personal development and which has inspired many books on this topic in the recent years. In conclusion Spinoza's ideas relating to personal development combine the goals of joy and happiness with the way to self-improvement and perfection and self-empowerment. Through my personal and therefore nevertheless limited experience, with this approach one does feel a stranger when immersed in Shinto rituals or in Budo practice.

6. So what?

This last section starts with this abrupt question: so what? Where does that lead us?

We have seen that, in Budo, we have to train the mind, the body and the technique. Initially we focus on the technique and the body and we may think that the mind is not a problem. Because we may believe in "free will", we may be tempted to think that the mind will play its part and deliver whatever we want to do or to learn. Then we discover (at least in my case!) that things do not seem to work so easily. In trying to understand what is happening we may discover that the difficulty lies in the mind. I remember such a case for myself, as I had difficulty with warizuki and that was really frustrating as I could not understand why it did not work properly. Then on one occasion when I was training in this kata, I realized that at the very moment haite was pointing his sword at me, a subliminal fear was popping out and disturbing my mind, my body and my technique. Once I became aware of this phenomenon I could work on keeping a calm state of mind at that moment, thus allowing myself on working to improve my technique.

Over the years, I have found that learning in martial arts is difficult and demanding (at least for me!). At some stages, learning requires changes in behaviour and feelings, but these changes are not easy to perform.

Interestingly, Spinoza has argued that, in strong opposition to Descartes and to the Catholic Church, "free will" is an illusion and does not really exist. He rather saw freedom in the inner and rational knowledge of the causes of our emotions and actions. This proposition seems to defy the common sense but it would not be wise to discard it. At least it may explain why changing is difficult. A friend of mine, who worked many years performing research in neuro-science told me that one very active field of research presently is in identifying the chains of neurones which are involved in decision making, and in particular trying to identify the very first neurone firing the decision process through the brain. I do not know if that research will be successful in finding such a neurone, which could be labelled the "free will neurone", but the difficulty of this research just shows that indeed the idea of "free will" as understood in the past may be deceiving us.

Coming back to the mind/body relationship in the context of Budo, I wish, in conclusion to turn to another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who paid tribute to Spinoza, by entitling his masterwork "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus" (thus evocating the "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus" from Spinoza), concluded that beyond language, there is something which cannot be said, but can only be shown (it may be interesting to know that Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote this book by taking notes in a notebook while he was a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army during WW1). Therefore after this initial research I am looking forward to the next step, which is my stay at Shiseikan /Meiji Jingu and learning from my experience there.

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Annex2: Selection of quotes from Spinoza

- 1. The highest activity a human being can attain is learning for understanding, because to understand is to be free.
- 2. The more you struggle to live, the less you live. Give up the notion that you must be sure of what you are doing. Instead, surrender to what is real within you, for that alone is sure....you are above everything distressing.
- 3. If you want the present to be different from the past, study the past.
- **4.** I have made a ceaseless effort not to ridicule, not to bewail, not to scorn human actions, but to understand them.
- 5. Peace is not the absence of war, but a virtue based on strength of character.
- **6.** The more clearly you understand yourself and your emotions, the more you become a lover of what is.
- 7. Do not weep. Do not wax indignant. Understand.
- 8. In so far as the mind sees things in their eternal aspect, it participates in eternity.
- **9.** Happiness is not the reward of virtue, but is virtue itself; nor do we delight in happiness because we restrain from our lusts; but on the contrary, because we delight in it, therefore we are able to restrain them.
- 10. In practical life we are compelled to follow what is most probable; in speculative thought we are compelled to follow truth.
- 11. It is the part of a wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another.
- 12. Men are mistaken in thinking themselves free; their opinion is made up of consciousness of their own actions, and ignorance of the causes by which they are determined.
- *13. Minds, however, are conquered not by arms, but by love and nobility.*
- 14. Self-preservation is the primary and only foundation of virtue.
- 15. Don't cry and don't rage. Understand.
- 16. The less the mind understands and the more things it perceives, the greater its power of feigning is; and the more things it understands, the more that power is diminished.
- 17. Hatred is increased by being reciprocated, and can on the other hand be destroyed by love.
- 18. Will and intellect are one and the same thing.

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- 19. The good which every man, who follows after virtue, desires for himself he will also desire for other men...
- **20.** I saw that all the things I feared and which feared me had nothing good or bad in them save in so far as the mind was affected by them.
- 21. Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived.