

Chapter 5

Spinoza



Figure 5.1: Baruch Spinoza

5.1 Introduction: Spinoza's Life and Works

Spinoza's life

- Born in 1632 in Amsterdam – Background: Portuguese, Jewish, and moderate means
- 1656: excommunicated and then (1660) expelled from the city for his unorthodox (to say the least) religious views:
 - Bible human-made, and full of contradictions
 - Against providentialism, the notion of a human-like God, creatio ex nihilo (creation out of nothing), immortality of the soul etc.

- Then lives a secluded life – makes lenses, turns down offers of positions as professor at Heidelberg
- Dies in 1677 in The Hague

Spinoza's Works

Apart from his comments on *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* (1633), will not publish anything under his own name

- *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*
- *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*
- *Theological-political treatise* where he expresses his revolutionary ideas about religion and politics
- *Ethics* posthumously published, along with the *Political Treatise* and other works

Spinoza's Intellectual background

Spinoza is a man of his time: aware of the new science, the new philosophy, and the new political developments in the 17th century Western Europe. In particular, he is mostly influenced by Descartes's philosophy. That said, he will reject:

- Descartes' method of doubt – to which he prefers the geometrical order
- Descartes' metaphysical dualism (the idea that there exists two substances: body and thought) – to which he substitutes a kind of monism (only one substance exists), of which thought and extension are the attributes (the two faces of a same coin if you wish)
- Descartes' idea of the human nature, its ability to knowledge and happiness – Spinoza being much more “optimistic” on all these points

Spinoza's *Ethics* is extremely abstract. But it is nothing like a mathematical treatise which has nothing to do with the real world as we experience it, quite the contrary. His entire system of philosophy (metaphysics and epistemology) is oriented toward the possibility of a life of fulfillment for humans. For example, one of the most intriguing and beautiful features of the philosophy of Spinoza is, I think, his attempt to account for a seeming paradox, i.e. the possibility humans' freedom and well-being in a world of eternal necessity. After all, the title speaks for itself.

5.2 The Geometrical Method: Spinoza: an heterodox Euclidian

The Geometrical Order: what is it?

- Euclid's *Element of Geometry*
- Aristotle's method for proper science: axiomatic method
Common notions, general principles and logical deduction

Why the Geometrical Order?

- Reminder: analysis and synthesis according to Descartes: the order of analysis is more understandable (*Meditations*)
- Spinoza: There is a controversy about whether the geometrical order is central to his philosophy. It certainly seems to make it harder to access. A few possible explanations: (1) the geometrical order allows to present a perfect body of truth; (2) the geometrical order is as neutral as the mind of the reader should be when reading Spinoza's ideas about God and Religion; (3) Take seriously the most basic (and self evident) idea we have of what existence – substance – and see how far we can go with it.

Differences between Spinoza's and Euclid's method – The status of definitions

While in Euclid, definitions are “postulates”, that is “requests” that the reader accept the existence of the objects defined (lines, points etc.), it is not the case for Spinoza's definitions:

- The definitions are not complete.
- The definitions do not contain the postulation of the existence of the defined objects

In addition, in Spinoza's work, the scholia are essential for understanding.

What does guarantee the truth of the definitions?

The question of the truth of the first definitions and axioms is, of course, crucial for any axiomatic method. The first principles from which everything else is deduced cannot be themselves deduced, on pain of an infinite regress. But then, where do they come from and what does guarantee their truth?

- In Aristotle: intuition and dialectic

- In Spinoza: These definitions come from an intellectual grasp (see Part IV appendix): Using our intelligence constitutes the life of our mind, i.e. the life of the best part in us. It is what gives us the opportunity of feeling joy when sharing with other spirits. The definitions come from the collection and organization of all the thoughts that the good spirits of the time share and discuss—Zeitgeist.¹

—→ *The definitions are meant to correspond to common, uncontroversial, notions that everyone should agree on.*

5.3 Basic Metaphysics: Substance, Nature and God

5.3.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Spinoza, *Ethics*, Book I + Editor's introduction p. 97-99
- Study Questions:
 1. What is the “geometrical order” that Spinoza follows in his *Ethics*? Why do you think he uses this method? What is the difference with the presentation of the *Meditations*?
 2. How do you understand the relationships between substances, modes and attributes? Give an example to illustrate.
 3. What are the characteristics of Spinoza's notion of substance?
 4. Spinoza gives four proofs of God's existence. Describe them briefly. How do they compare with Descartes'?
 5. How does Spinoza show that there is only one substance?
 6. How do you understand Spinoza's claim that “whatever is, is *in* God” (Prop. 15, my emphasis)?
 7. How can Spinoza maintain together that (1) Everything that exists necessarily follows from God's nature; and (2) God is a free cause of everything?
 8. Note in passing the passages in which Spinoza refers to, and criticizes Descartes' view (without naming him).

¹Cf. Cristofolini, *Chemin dans l'Ethique*, PUF, 1996

- Discussion questions: What kind of God is Spinoza's God? Do you think an atheist could endorse Spinoza's metaphysics?

5.3.2 Substance, attributes, and modes – Prop 1-10

One crucial aim of the first two books of the *Ethics* to lay down a view of the universe and of human nature, such that humans can free themselves from the superstitions of common religions, and understand how to live well in leading a life of reason. The view of the universe that Spinoza offers may seem abstract and impersonal. These characteristics are precisely what should allow us to achieve true fulfillment, free from the mystifications of the institutional religions.

In the first book, Spinoza deploys the essentials of his metaphysics, that is to say, his view on the fundamental constituents of the world. This view is rather simple:

in the universe there exists nothing but substances and their affections (Proposition 6, Corollary)

and we will learn soon after this that there is only one substance: God, or Nature.

But before we turn to Spinoza's views on God, let us see what are the main concepts of his metaphysics.

Substance : “that which is in itself and is conceived through itself”

Substances are the fundamental constituents of the universe

Substances necessarily exist as primary and infinite beings, which moreover are unique of their kind (that is, two substances cannot share the same attribute)

Attributes : the ways in which the intellect conceives of substances as their essence

The essence is unique, but is grasped by the intellect under various aspects, or points of view .

Modes : all the ways in which a substance can be modified or, in Spinoza's terminology ‘affected’ (without, of course, changing anything of its true, essential, nature of substance.)

A substance remaining unchanged in its essential nature, it still can be modified in various ways. These modifications are the modes.

Just as the essence of a substance, a single mode of a substance is going to be grasped by the intellect under various aspects or points of view. This will be the *modifications of the attributes*.

Example :

- An analogy²
 - Substance = ocean
 - Attribute = movement (in general)
 - Modes = Particular waves

Note that we could consider the substance-ocean from the point of view of another of its attributes, for example its color (in general), the modes of which are the various variations of color of particular parts of the ocean

—→ *We can have one unique substance, the essence of which is understood from the point of view of its various essential attributes, and the variations of which constitutes its particular modes.*

- In Spinoza's philosophy:
 - Substance: the only substance is God
 - Modes: ideas, bodies, minds, in fact, everything that exists in God
 - Attributes: an infinity, including thought and extension (these are the only two attributes that the *human* intellect can conceive of.)

—→ *These concepts are classical concepts at the time. Anybody with a minimal baggage in philosophy would find them "natural". Spinoza's starting point is the philosophical language that all philosophers of the time accept.*

5.3.3 Deus sive Natura – Prop 11-15

Once all the characteristics of substances have been deployed, Spinoza turns to a much more controversial claim: that there exists only one sub-

²from A. Robert Capogrini, *History of Western Philosophy*

stance in the entire universe, and that this substance is nothing else than God.

God exists necessarily – Prop 11

Four proofs of God's existence:

1. Ontological Argument: based on the definition of God as infinite substance – given that substances necessarily exist
2. Modal Argument: if God's existence is not impossible, then God necessarily exists.
Premise: Causal Principle: For all X , there must be a cause for X 's existence or non-existence
Consequence of the premise: For all X , either X exists necessarily, or X 's existence is impossible.
3. Cosmological argument: The existence of finite beings requires the existence of an infinite being.
4. Ontological Argument, version 2: an absolutely perfect being necessarily exists.

—→ *Just as Descartes' argument, Spinoza's "proof" of the existence of God rely heavily on strong assumptions (the definition of God, the definition of a substance, the causal principle etc.).*

God: the unique substance – Prop 12-15

- God is the unique substance: otherwise, there would exist a substance which shares an attribute with God, which is impossible
- God IS everything, and everything is IN God. God is the entirety of the universe – God = Nature
- In particular, it is a mistake to think that there exists a corporeal substance, which is distinct from, and created by God.
- if the corporeal substance is indeed a substance, it cannot be caused but by itself

- there cannot be but one substance
- there is no contradiction in thinking that the corporeal substance is also in God, if one conceives of the corporeal substance as infinite, one and indivisible. A contradiction arises only if one misconceives of the corporeal substance as finite, multiple and divisible. But a substance is necessarily infinite and indivisible.

—→ *Everything exists “in” God: according to Spinoza, there is only one unique infinite and indivisible substance. Everything that exists is then either a mode or an attribute of the unique substance. But what does it mean exactly? In what sense do all mathematical truths, laws of nature, humans, emotions and feelings, tables, chairs and cockroaches all live “in” God?*

5.3.4 Eternal Necessity – Prop 16 to end

Everything exists necessarily as a consequence of God’s nature – Prop 16

- Everything happens necessarily as a consequence of God’s nature, as an infinity of modes

Mathematical necessity – just like it follows from the essence of the triangle that the sum of the three angles equals 180 degrees, it follows from the essence of God that everything that exists does indeed exist.

This is the sense in which God is **causes** of everything: the cause - effect relationship is understood here in the sense of a *logical, necessary connexion*.

Nothing can escape such a natural, logical, eternal necessity:

... I think I have shown quite clearly (Pr.16) that from God’s supreme power or infinite nature an infinity of things in infinite ways – that is, everything – has necessarily flowed or is always following from that same necessity, just as from the nature of a triangle it follows from eternity to eternity that its three angles are equal to two right angles. (Prop. 17, Scholium)

- That said, not everything exists in the same way: Spinoza distinguishes between:

- the immediate and infinite attributes of God: *natura naturans* (naturing nature)

- the further, finite modifications, or modes of these attributes: *natura naturata* (natured nature)

Examples (Prop 31 and 32):

- intellect and will are modes of the thought – that is, modifications of an attribute of God – and hence belong to the *natura naturata*, and not the *natura naturans*

- movement and rest are modes of the corporeal substance

There are some controversies as the precise status of these two kinds of beings, and how they relate to God between commentators. Let us focus on the main point:

—→ *Everything that exists exists as necessary modifications of a unique, indivisible and eternal substance, modifications which are the logical consequences of the nature of the substance.*

God: free cause of everything? – Freedom within Necessity

God did not create the world by an arbitrary act of free will. On the contrary, everything is a necessary consequence of its nature. This means that nothing could have been different from it actually is. But then, in what sense can God be said to be “free” ? See the scholium of Prop. 17

- Many take the notion of *contingency* to be crucial to freedom. Something is *contingent* only if it could have been otherwise. So, under this view, applied to freedom, some act is free only if the agent could have done otherwise.

- According the Spinoza, this is a misconception of the notion of freedom. Freedom does not require contingency, but only that there is no external constraint.

—→ *In short: According to Spinoza, freedom and necessity do not conflict with one another: only necessity and contingency do. But Freedom is not contingency. And what contingency is really another name for our ignorance of the causes (Prop. 33, scholium 1).*

So, with Descartes and Spinoza, we find ourselves with the following notions of freedom. A agent is free:

1. when he or she acts under no external constraints but his or her own nature, or his action is the effect of no other cause than himself or herself
2. when he or she is in a state of indifference
3. when he or she applies an absolute, arbitrary free will
4. when he or she gives himself or herself his or her own rules, that is, is autonomous

→ Spinoza denies that there exists anything like (2) or, even more, (3)

→ If (2) and (3) do not exist, then (1) and (4) both amount to the same thing: a agent is free whenever he or she is the only cause of his or her actions, the notion of cause being understood here in the logical sense.

→ *Spinoza proposes an original understanding of freedom, one which makes free action compatible with necessity.*

Nature has no ends: against the anthropomorphic conception of God

- Spinoza closes the first book by a vigorous attack against the view according to which:

Now all the prejudices which I intend to mention here turn on this one point, the widespread belief among men that all things in Nature are like themselves in acting with an end in view. Indeed, they hold it as certain that God himself directs everything to a fixed end; for they say God has made everything for man's sake and has made man so that he should worship God. (Appendix)

This view includes:

1. A finalist view on God and Nature: God and Nature has ends
2. An anthropomorphic reasoning concerning the nature God and Nature: Gods and Nature have similar features as humans
3. Human-centered views on morality

4. A “superstitious” view on religion: God and Nature are to be worshiped

Definition 15 – Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is the projection of human’s characters on non-human things

anthropos: *man* (cf. *anthropology*)

morphos: *form*

- Why do we reason in this way?
 - Because our starting point is always ourselves, we tend to conceive of the world as similar to ourselves
 - Because we tend to judge of things according to how they relate to our own aims and ends (good and bad are but other words for agreeable and disagreeable to us)
 - Any reasoning of this kind in fact reveals our *ignorance of the true causes*cf. Xenophanes: if cows had Gods, these Gods would have horns
- Why is it damageable to us?
 - leads to superstition, which leads to unhappiness
 - leads to more ignorance (God’s ways are ununderstandable)
 - Such ignorance serves the institution of the church, and their subjugating the ignorant masses. Anybody who tries to understand the true causes within nature is called an heretic. The ignorance of the masses is essential to their power.
- Why is it false?
 - From what we’ve seen before: everything follows necessary from God
 - God cannot have ends, because he does not lack anything
 - Our imagination is not true knowledge

—→ *Spinoza here attacks the entirety of the traditional view of God, the world, and humanity. His criticisms are all the more virulent than he thinks this view actually prevents us to find true happiness and well-being.*

5.3.5 Conclusion

- In the first book of the *Ethics*, Spinoza deploys his metaphysics, that is, what he thinks the ultimate nature of reality consists of. He provides a clear summary of his worldview in the appendix:

I have now explained the nature and properties of God: that he necessarily exists, that he is one alone, that he is and acts solely from the necessity of his own nature, that he is the free cause of all things and how so, that all things are in God and are so dependent on him that they can neither be nor be conceived without him, and lastly, that all things have been predetermined by God, not from his free will or absolute pleasure, but from the absolute nature of God, his infinite power. (Appendix)

—→ *The entirety of the universe, or nature, or God, is a unique, uncaused, eternal and indivisible whole logically and necessarily expressing its essence.*

- As we have, the ethical horizon of such a worldview is already present. According to Spinoza, God, or Nature is not worship, not to revere, but to understand in its true nature.

—→ *It is already clear that intellectual like and true knowledge are the keys to true fulfillment.*