

Kant, Spinoza, & the Pantheism Dispute

PHIL 880

September 7, 2021

This week's discussion concerns Spinoza, the reception of his thought in Germany (in particular the dispute or controversy (the so-called "*Pantheismusstreit*") concerning whether Spinozism was accepted by certain prominent German intellectuals of the time (in particular, G.E. Lessing). We'll also look at the extent to which Kant avoids Spinozism (as he intends the Critical philosophy to show) despite similar philosophical commitments.

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1 Who is Spinoza?

Bento (in Hebrew, Baruch; in Latin, Benedictus: all three names mean "blessed") **Spinoza** (1632–1677) was born in Amsterdam and died in The Hague. He was born into a community of Portuguese Jews that had settled in the city of Amsterdam in the wake of the Portuguese Inquisition (1536), which had resulted in forced conversions and expulsions from the Iberian peninsula. His father, Miguel de Espinoza, was a successful, though not particularly wealthy, merchant.

Though Spinoza had a traditional and devout Jewish upbringing his relationship to Judaism was complex, and he was ultimately excommunicated on 27 July 1656, from the Jewish church, on the basis of his philosophical works (he was at this time only 23). While it is not exactly clear which doctrines in particular were the basis for the excommunication, it would likely have been due to several doctrines that he denied, including the immortality of the soul; the notion of a transcendent, providential God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and that the Law was neither literally given by God nor binding on Jews (see [\(Nadler 2016\)](#)).

The two most influential works of Spinoza that are relevant for our purposes are his *Ethics* (1677) and his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670). The ostensive aim of the latter work, which was widely vilified in its time (one critic called it “a book forged in hell by the devil himself”) is to show that “the freedom to philosophize can not only be granted without injury to piety and the peace of the Commonwealth, but that the peace of the Commonwealth and Piety are endangered by the suppression of this freedom.” But it seems that Spinoza’s ultimate intention is actually to expose the historical and largely arbitrary basis of Scripture and religion, and thereby to undercut the political power exercised in modern states by religious authorities. He also defends, at least as a political ideal, a tolerant, secular, and democratic state.

If the *Theological-Political Treatise* was controversial, Spinoza’s *Ethics* was genuinely earth-shaking. So much so that it was not published until after Spinoza died, in 1677, though there is some evidence that it was ready to be published at least as early as 1675. Writing to his friend Oldenberg Spinoza says,

a rumor was spread everywhere that a book of mine about god was in the press, and that in it I strove to show that there is no God. Many people believed this rumor. So certain theologians—who had, perhaps, started the rumor themselves—seized this opportunity to complain about me to the Prince and the magistrates. Moreover, the stupid Cartesians, who are thought to favor me, would not stop trying to remove this suspicion from themselves by denouncing my opinions and writings everywhere. When I learned this from certain trustworthy men, who also told me the theologians were everywhere plotting against me, I decided to put off the publication I was planning until I saw how the matter would turn out. (Letter 68, IV/299; quoted in [\(Curley 1994\)](#))

Spinoza died about a year and a half after this—on 21 February, 1677—of a lung disease that was possibly due to the dust of the lenses he had been grinding in order to support himself. He was only 44. A few months later his friends arranged for the publication of the *Ethics*, along with his correspondence and three other unfinished works: the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Political Treatise*, and a *Hebrew Grammar*.

I primarily focus below on issues raised by the *Ethics*, especially since it contains, at least in miniature, many of the same political and ethical themes present in the TPT. Since the *Ethics* is an extraordinarily rich work, our discussion will not be adequate to the topics it covers, nor the depth of detail that they warrant.

2 What is the “Pantheism Dispute”?

The so-called “Pantheism dispute (or controversy)” (*Pantheismusstreit*) refers to the scandal and its aftermath that arose from the public declaration by [Friedrich Jacobi](#) that [G.E. Lessing](#), the famous artist, critic, and public intellectual, was in fact a spinozist. The public contention of Jacobi’s rocked the German intelligentsia, and was publicly contested by Lessing’s friend, and prominent philosopher, [Moses Mendelssohn](#).

Though the dispute involved various elements peculiar to German culture at the time, it also clearly articulated a set of issues regarding the compatibility of German (and largely European) “enlightenment” (*Aufklärung*) ideals with tradition conceptions of the self, of God, and of the human being’s place in the natural world.

Jacobi’s contention is that enlightenment rationalism leads to atheism, and the annihilation of the self, and thus of responsibility and morality. According to Jacobi, Spinoza had subsumed all reality under the One—viz. “substance”, “nature”, or “God”—with the ultimate result being that any real distinction between one individual thing and another and between all things and God, is merely a kind of illusion. For Jacobi, Spinoza thus stood as the philosopher par *excellence*. Philosophy is or entails Spinozism, and Spinozism in turn is or entails atheism—or at least does so on the assumption that, since Spinoza’s God, viz. Substance, lacked the attributes of a person, it could not satisfy the requirements of any religious conception of God.

The moment man sought to prove scientifically the veracity of our representations of an immaterial world that exists beyond them, to prove the substantiality of the human spirit, and of a free Author of this universe who is however distinct from it, of a Providence conscious of its rule, i.e. a personal Providence, the only one that would be truly Providence—the moment he tried this, the object likewise disappeared before the eyes of the demonstrators. They were left with merely logical phantoms. And in this way they discovered nihilism. ([Jacobi 1994, 583](#))

If enlightenment rationalism, instead of freeing us and promoting moral action, in fact leads to “nihilism”, what is the alternative? Jacobi suggests instead that we base our philosophy on our immediate intuitive knowledge of our own and others existence. This immediate knowledge requires a kind of “leap” (*salto mortale*), or more literally, a “mortal leap” or somersault in which one flips head over heels. His contention is that philosophy (metaphorically) “walks on its head” by allowing itself to base its views in abstraction and the demands of a certain kind of rational explanation. Jacobi

contends that such a leap is needed to put one's feet firmly on the correct basis of a kind of rational intuition or common sense. Exactly how this immediate knowledge or "intuition" should be understood is something Jacobi never quite succeeds at explaining, leading many (including Lessing himself, Mendelssohn, and Kant) to construe Jacobi as advocating for a kind of anti-enlightenment irrationalism that privileges convention, faith, and received Scripture as the primary basis for belief.

Kant intercedes in this debate (as do others on his behalf, such as Reinhold) to argue that the Critical philosophy provides a backstop to the kind of nihilism Jacobi rejects, while nevertheless remaining a rationally grounded doctrine (though it curtails the limits of what we can rationally know). Hence, one of the attractive and influential features of the Critical philosophy is that it provides a moderate position between the extremes of nihilism (Spinozism) and immediatism (or irrationalism).

3 What are the central doctrines of "Spinozism" as received in Germany?

Spinoza's position is complex, and much disputed. But it is nevertheless possible to give a sketch of several positions, as they were received in Germany, that lead to the "nihilistic" conclusions to which Jacobi objects. All of these positions are present in his great work, the *Ethics*. I first briefly list these and then address them in further detail below.

- A. Explanatory rationalism
- B. Substance monism (or simply "monism")
- C. The identification of God with nature
 - Rejection of a personal god
 - Rejection of final causation
- D. The rejection of both leeway and source conceptions of freedom of the will

3.A Explanatory Rationalism

Spinoza advances a version of what I will call "explanatory rationalism" (this is sometimes also referred to as "metaphysical rationalism"—e.g. (Dasgupta 2016)—though they need not be identical). What is explanatory rationalism?

Explanatory Rationalism: For every fact F , there is a sufficient explanation (or reason) why F , rather than *not* F , is the case

To advance explanatory rationalism in this sense is thus to hold what has been called the "Principle of Sufficient Reason (or Ground)", or PSR, for short. We can see that Spinoza advances a specific version of the PSR from texts in the first part of the *Ethics*:

E1p11d2: For every thing a cause or reason must be assigned either for its existence or for its non-existence. For example, if a triangle exists, there must be a reason or cause which prevents it from existing, or which annuls its existence. Now this reason or cause must either be contained in the nature of the thing or be external to it.

E1p8s2:...[I]f a fixed number of individuals exist in Nature, there must necessarily be a cause why those individuals and not more or fewer, exist.

E1a2: That which cannot be conceived through another thing must be conceived through itself.

E1a3: From a given determinate cause there necessarily follows an effect; on the other hand, if there be no determinate cause it is impossible that an effect should follow.

There are three important features of Spinoza's explanatory rationalism, and its version of the PSR, that he espouses.

1. Explanation is specifically restricted to a being's (*non-*)existence.
2. Explanation is *both* metaphysical *and* conceptual
3. Explanation is (or at least requires) necessitation

Let me say a bit about each of these points.

The first point is that, for Spinoza, to say that everything has an explanation is to say that for anything that *is*, there is an explanation of its existence. Spinoza construes being as coming in two forms—viz. substance and mode (or sometimes “accident”). Substance and mode are distinguished by virtue of their dependence relations (or lack thereof). Substance is independent of all being, while modes depend on substance for their being. This means that all explanation of modes ultimately adverts to substance, while explanation of a substance adverts only to the substance itself.

To say, as in the second point, that explanation is both metaphysical and conceptual, is to say that “explanation” picks out *both* a real relation between existences (call this the “grounding” relation) *and* the proper way of conceiving of those existences and their relation (Spinoza calls this “adequately conceiving” of something or having an “adequate idea” of it). To have an adequate conception of something is to understand that thing *through* its ground.

Finally, Spinoza understands grounding relations (and the contents of the ideas of such grounding relations) to necessitate their consequences. That is, the relation between a ground and its consequent is not probabilistic, statistical, or counterfactual. It is also not *merely* logical, in the sense of being solely a function of relations between particular sorts of representational content, in the sense that the content <triangle> entails the content <three-angled>. It is (as per 2), both a logical (or ideal) and a metaphysical (or real) relation. There are various strengths of such a thesis that one might endorse, but Spinoza seems to hold a very strong version, according to which the particular

existence of a being cannot be explained except by adverting to the existence of another particular being. Thus, though there are general explanatory laws one can articulate, all explanation is ultimately based in particular existences and is not a general feature of things.

3.B Substance Monism

Spinoza's conception of substance is closely related (and inspired by) Descartes's, which says,

By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. (*Principles*, §51)

However, Descartes denies that the conception of something's being "independent" applies in the same way to God and to finite (created) beings.

Hence the term 'substance' does not apply *univocally*, as they say in the Schools, to God and other things; that is, there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures. (*Principles*, §51)

For Descartes there is no single sense of the term "substance" (*substantia*; *ousia*) such that it could be applied to both God and to finite beings. This position has engendered a significant interpretive literature by contemporary scholars.¹

Spinoza adopts the Cartesian definition of substance in terms of independence:

E1d3: By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed.

Note Spinoza's point that a substance *is* "in itself" and is *conceived* "through itself". This is an expression of his explanatory rationalism, in that it concerns both the metaphysical nature of substance and the proper conception of it. In stating his definition of "substance" Spinoza is agreeing with Descartes (and scholastic Aristotelians) that a substance is an independent being. But given Spinoza's explanatory rationalism and adherence to the PSR, he construes a substance as a being whose existence is not explained through anything else. This contrasts with modes, which *are* beings whose existence is explained through something else.

For Spinoza, what it is to exist (or being) comes in two forms – existence through oneself or through another. He calls the former sort of being "substance" and the latter sort of being "mode".

Spinoza's monism flows quite naturally, if controversially, from this division. He ultimately holds that there cannot be more than one being whose existence is explained through itself. Hence there

¹ See (Schechtman 2016) for an overview.

is only one substance and all other beings are merely modes of this one—this is often expressed in the Greek motto “Hen kai pan” or “all in one” that Jacobi attributes to Lessing in his confession of Spinozism.²

3.C God or Nature (Deus sive Natura)

Spinoza’s monism argument establishes that all plurality is a plurality of modes, and that such modes are “in” another being—substance—of which there is only, God, or alternatively, nature. To say that all things are “in” God is not yet to say something with which much of organized Judeo-Christianity would disagree. For example, consider the Paulinian claim that “In him [God] we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Spinoza’s heresy is to reject that God is in any sense like a person—God has neither understanding nor will, nor does God do anything for a purpose or end.

Spinoza argues against God’s “personality” (i.e. of God being a person). He denies the Judeo-Christian conception of God as willing or understanding that which depends on (or is “in”) him. Spinoza says, “God, or Nature, acts from the same necessity from which he exists” (IV, Preface) and understands this necessity as akin to mathematical necessity:

E1p17s1: all things have necessarily flowed, or always followed, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles

Hence, all that exists flows from God’s essence, without it needing to be the case that God understands or decrees/wills anything.

Spinoza argues against there being a purpose (or “final cause”) to any existence as follows.

E1Appendix: if the things which have been produced immediately by God had been made so that God would achieve his end, then the last things, for the sake of which the first would have been made, would be the most excellent of all. ... [T]his doctrine takes away God’s perfection. For if God acts for the sake of an end, he necessarily wants something which he lacks. And though the theologians and metaphysicians distinguish between an end of need and an end of assimilation, they nevertheless confess that God did all things for his own sake, not for the sake of the things to be created. For before creation they can assign nothing except God for whose sake God would act. And so they are necessarily compelled to confess that God lacked those things for the sake of which he willed to prepare means, and that he desired them. This is clear through itself. (Appendix II/80, p. 112)

² For more on the details of Spinoza’s monism argument see my notes [here](#).

E4Preface: As he [God, or Nature] exists for the sake of no end, he also acts for the sake of no end. Rather, as he has no principle or end of existing, so he also has none of acting. What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, or primary cause, of some thing. (IV, Preface; II/207, p. 198)

Spinoza sees the notion of acting for the sake of an end (the end being the final cause) as undermining the sense in which God or nature is perfect and complete. Acting for ends, or final causation, is instead merely a feature of finite minds (such as human minds) striving for things they lack. But there are no final causes independent of the strivings of such finite beings.

3.D Freedom

Spinoza understands actions done from causes external to oneself to be a kind of bondage, or unfreedom. Such actions thereby manifest a lack of power. Spinoza does *not*, however, consider free action to be action done in the absence of any necessitation. Rather, he views free action as done from the necessity of one's own nature, rather than something external to it.

E1d7: That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner.

The being that exists from the necessity of its nature alone is God. Hence only God is “free” in the sense with which Spinoza is concerned. Human beings are always, at least to some extent, necessitated by things external to their own nature. What then to say about the freedom of human beings?

The freedom of a human being is commensurate with the power she can exercise, or the sense in which she can control her actions rather than being controlled by things external to her.

E4Appendix: The desires which follow from our nature in such a way that they can be understood through it alone are those that related to the mind insofar as it is conceived to consist of adequate ideas. The remaining desires are not related to the mind except insofar as it conceives things inadequately, and their force and growth must be defined not by human power, but by the power of things that are outside us.

But the nature of any finite thing is to be determined by causes external to it. We see this from Spinoza's discussion of finite modes in E1:

E1p28: Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity.

Thus the ideal of the free human being is just that, an *ideal*. We can strive to be more like the virtue and free human being, but we can never perfectly realize this ideal since it would mean being totally self-determining and that characteristic is true only of God and not of its modes. Humans thus lack freedom both in the sense that any particular human action cannot be other than it is (there is no “leeway”—no “alternative possibilities” of action) and that no action has its source solely in the human agent (there is no sense in which each of us is the ultimate source of our own actions).

It is often argued that Spinoza’s system is “necessitarian” in the sense that (i) all truths are necessarily true; (ii) all existing beings necessarily exist.³ However, this characterization of Spinoza’s position is somewhat anachronistic. It would be better to say that Spinoza’s system explains why everything that exists does so, and why nothing else exists. One can say of these explanations, that they are necessary but this amounts to nothing more than a claim about what follows from the nature of what. As Spinoza puts it:

E1p33s1: A thing is called necessary either by reason of its essence or by reason of its cause. For a thing’s existence follows necessarily either from its essence and definition or from a given efficient cause. And a thing is also called impossible from these same causes—namely, either because its essence, or definition, involves a contradiction, or because there is no external cause which has been determined to produce such a thing.

So the concept “necessary” is simply a label for the way in which something follows from the essence or (real) definition of a thing, or from its cause. This once again tracks Spinoza’s explanatory rationalism, in that all things are explained through themselves or through something else. Spinoza thus reduces claims of necessity/impossibility to truths about essences and what follows from them.

Similarly, Spinoza denies that there is any contingency or possibility apart from the way in which finite minds apprehend things.

E1p33s1: a thing is called contingent only because of a defect of our knowledge. For if we do not know that the thing’s essence involves a contradiction, or if we do

³ See the [SEP entry](#) on Spinoza’s modal metaphysics for a survey of recent positions.

know very well that its essence does not involve a contradiction, and nevertheless can affirm nothing certainly about its existence, because the order of causes is hidden from us, it can never seem to us either necessary or impossible. So we call it contingent or possible.

Contingency and possibility are thus likewise not features of the world so much as features of our (or finite minds more generally) limited understanding of it. So while it is true that there is no other way things might be than they in fact are, this is really just to say that everything that is, is explicable in terms of its own nature or that which it (causally) depends on and that there is nothing else which admits of an explanation. To think that there is is a kind of illusion generated by the limitations of our own minds.

4 What similarities or differences are there between Kant's views and Spinozism?

Kant also endorses a form of explanatory rationalism. However, he denies nearly all the aspects of Spinoza's system. That is, he denies substance monism, the identification of God with nature (and the concomitant claims regarding God's personality, and final causation), and (perhaps most importantly) he denies that human beings cannot act freely—instead defending the view that human agents are the ultimate sources of their actions. However, there are also some notable ways in which Kant and Spinoza agree. I take these points in turn.

4.A Kant's Explanatory Rationalism

Kant's acceptance of explanatory rationalism, and with it a version of the PSR, is complicated by the fact that he ultimately denies that we can have what he calls "cognition" and ultimately scientific knowledge, of anything through an application of the PSR alone. Instead, all cognition and knowledge must be based in a joint contribution by both the senses and the intellect. For matters concerning which no such sensory contribution is possible there can be no knowledge.

Kant endorses the PSR as a law of reason's activity, which is to say, our capacity for reason always seeks to find the (sufficient) condition for any conditioned object, until we come to something that is (i) the condition for all other conditioned objects; (ii) itself "unconditioned" in the sense that nothing is a condition for *it*.

Kant articulates versions of these claims at the end of the Introduction to the *Dialectic* to the first *Critique*. He says (I've added brackets to mark claims)

[A] the proper principle of reason in general (in its logical use) is to find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity

will be completed. But this logical maxim cannot become a principle [*Principium*] of **pure reason** unless we assume that [B] when the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself unconditioned, also given (i.e., contained in the object and its connection). [C] Such a principle of pure reason, however, is obviously **synthetic**; for the conditioned is analytically related to some condition, but not to the unconditioned. (A307-8/B364)

Kant makes three important claims in this passage, which I've marked out in brackets as [A]–[C]. In [A] Kant articulates what he calls the “logical maxim” of reason:

The logical maxim of reason: find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding, such that their unity is completed

He also argues for another principle [B], that he later goes on to call the “supreme principle of pure reason” (A308/B365), a principle which he thinks is “obviously synthetic” [C].

The supreme principle of pure reason: when the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself unconditioned, also given

Kant construes the distinctive activity of reason, in its “logical” use, as grasping or “comprehending” (*Begreifen*) the conditioning relation between materially distinct cognitions or judgments, such that the assertion of one judgment is the sufficient ground for the assertion of the other, to the exclusion of its opposite. In effect, the logical maxim is the drive or exhortation to do this until there is no further possible condition for assertion. Thus the “completed unity” of the cognitions of the understanding is found in that system of inferences in which a (sufficient) condition for the assertion or truth of every cognition or judgment is provided.

But Kant considers the logical maxim as requiring the satisfaction of a further condition before it can be eligible for being a “principle of pure reason”, where by “pure reason” Kant seems to mean reason in its “real use” as a faculty of cognition.⁴ Why is it ineligible as stated? Kant claims that it requires the further assumption that “when the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself unconditioned, also given”. This is an existence claim about condition and conditioned. The maxim thus enjoins any use of reason to *seek* conditions for some conditioned being, while the principle of reason says that there *exist* conditions for any conditioned being, and that the whole series of such conditions must be “given”.

As we've seen though, Kant denies that we can be “given” in sensory experience (specifically, in intuition) any unconditioned condition of an object of experience. So the law through which reason acts (i.e. the PSR as the “supreme principle” of reason) will not be satisfied by anything we can

⁴ Kant also talks of the real use of reason in terms of a “transcendental faculty” (A299/B355-6), which is broadly consistent with his use of “pure” with respect to other “transcendental faculties” such as pure apperception, or pure sensibility (i.e. the pure forms).

experience. Kant's view is thus that theoretical or "speculative" reason is always left unsatisfied with regard to its comprehension of what may possibly be experienced.

4.B Against Monism

Kant denies that we are mere modes of a single unitary substance. For example in his lectures on religion he is reported to argue that,

my own self-consciousness testifies that I do not relate all my actions to God as the final subject which is not the predicate of any other thing, and thus the concept of a substance arises when I perceive in myself [*indem ich an mir selbst wahrnehme*] that I am not the predicate of any further thing. For example, when I think, I am conscious that my I, and not some other thing, thinks in me. Thus I infer that this thinking in me does not inhere in another thing external to me but in myself, and consequently also that I am a substance, i.e. that I exist for myself, without being the predicate of another thing. (*Pölitiz Religion*, 28:1042 (1783/84))

Kant also goes so far as to say that "the concept of a substance arises when I perceive in myself that I am not the predicate of any other thing" (28:1042). He then argues that the Spinozist is faced with a dilemma: Since there is only one substance in which everything inheres either I, as subject, am this substance, and therefore God — which contradicts my dependence, or I am an accident — which contradicts my awareness of myself as subject, as "I" (28:1052; cf. 28:1042).⁵

Kant's claims here are somewhat puzzling. One thing he could be arguing is simply that we are conceptually, and therefore rationally, unable to construe ourselves as anything other than substances capable of thinking (though this need not mean we must construe ourselves, with Descartes, as specifically *mental* substances). Something like this seems to be his point in claiming that,

in all our thinking the I is the subject, in which thoughts inhere only as determinations, and this I cannot be used as the determination of another thing. Thus everyone must necessarily regard Himself as a substance, but regard his thinking only as accidents of his existence and determinations of his state. (A349)

Kant may be thus taken to argue that *pace* Spinoza, we can have no adequate idea or conception of ourselves as modes, for modes do not *think* in the sense of being the ultimate explanation of acts of thinking.

However, Kant does appear to be arguing something stronger in the lectures, namely that we (in some sense) *perceive* or are otherwise conscious of the status of ourselves as substances, and thus as the ultimate explanatory locus of our acts of thinking. Kant says something similar in the second

⁵ See (Allison 1980, 207; Wuerth 2014, 143–44 and ch. 5 passim) for relevant discussion.

edition of the Paralogisms, arguing that “in the consciousness of myself in mere thinking I am the **being itself**” (B429; emphasis in original), which indicates that though I have no cognition of myself (for that would require intuition), I nevertheless am *conscious* of myself as the subject of my thoughts — as being the being itself who is thinking this very thought.⁶

Thus Kant seems to be arguing not merely that our self-conception is one of ourselves as substantial thinkers, but also that we are *conscious* of ourselves as such. This might seem to simply beg the question against Spinoza, and indeed it may. In order to avoid such a charge Kant would seem to need some further argument, for the kind of “immediate consciousness” to which Kant appeals might otherwise seem mysterious. And there do seem to be at least two avenues for Kant to pursue in making such an argument (though I won’t pursue them in any detail here). The first contends that the only possible explanation of the source of our conceptual content for <substance> comes from the consciousness of ourselves as such substances. A second argument is that the only explanation for our consciousness (and presumably knowledge) of our actions as *ours* (e.g. of the thought I am currently thinking as *my* thought and not someone else’s) is due to the agency/causal ultimacy with which we act in so thinking.⁷

Kant also has a further route to claiming that there is more than one substance. He contends that each of us, as rational beings, are conscious of ourselves as subject to the moral law. But the moral law is a law that holds of and between *persons* as ultimate moral subjects. Thus, at least on what Kant calls “practical” or “moral” grounds, we have reason to hold that there are a plurality of substances that stand (or are capable of standing) in moral relations to one another.

4.C God Is Not Nature

Recall that Spinoza’s claim that God and nature are the same relies on two further claims, namely that God is not a *person*, in the sense of lacking an understanding and will, and that God does not act for any end or purpose. Kant rejects both of these positions. On Kant’s view God does not act “blindly” or “mechanically” out of the sheer necessity of his (its) nature. Rather God represents that which is to be done (through its intellect) and wills that it be done (through its will). In this sense God acts for ends, which he/it realizes through his/its power. Kant contends that this is compatible with also holding that God is deeply unlike any finite being in that the mind of God is not *discursive* but is rather an intuitive intellect.

Recall that an intuitive intellect has four key features—viz. it is (i) intellectual, (ii) comprehensive, (iii) productive, and (iv) non-discursive. Kant thus contends that God’s intuitive intellect, though radically different from our own discursive intellect, is nevertheless similar in having an understanding and will, and in acting for ends.

⁶ For further discussion of these and related issues see (Ameriks 2000, 69–70; Pereboom 2006; Marshall 2010; Wuerth 2014, 167–69; McLearn 2020a).

⁷ For discussion of these two arguments see, for the first (McLearn 2020b, 2020a) and (McLearn 2019) for the second.

One issue facing Kant is that, if personhood requires possession of both an understanding and a will, it is unclear how one should ultimately differentiate these in the intuitive intellect of God. In finite beings the will is defined as the faculty of desire, which is “the faculty of the soul for becoming the cause of the actuality of the object through the representation of the object itself” (29:1012; see also An 7:251; 6:211, 399; 29:894, 1024; 25:577, 1109, 1514). This is in contrast to the understanding, which is *not* the cause of the actuality of the object through the representation of it. But since God’s intellect is *productive* there is no gap between God’s representation of an object and its actuality or existence. Perhaps the best Kant can say here is that personhood requires, not two distinct faculties, but rather the ability to represent objects and the ability to actualize the objects of one’s representation. In finite beings these abilities are distinct, while in God they are unitary.

Kant also faces a second problem. Recall that part of the equation of God and nature for Spinoza stems from the way in which reality follows directly from God’s essence, without any choice, decision, end, or other representation being involved. Spinoza states that,

E1p17s1: all things have necessarily flowed, or always followed, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles

So, just as we do not need to construe a triangle as a person to explain the sense in which it follows from the essence of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles, so too we do not need to construe reality as “flowing from” God’s essence by virtue of any personal attribute of God.

Hence, for Kant, to avoid the charge of “blind mechanism” (let’s call it), there needs to be some gap between what follows directly from God’s essence, and what follows from God’s understanding and will.⁸ As he puts it,

The absolute necessity of his nature and his essence [*seiner Natur und seines Wesens*] does not make his actions absolutely necessary. The absolute necessity of his essence is completely different from the determination of action according to his will [*Willkür*].” (28:335, see also 342)

Thus if there are to be things (substances) distinct from God, that are nevertheless explained through God’s personality, it must be that they are the effect of God’s causality through the exercise of his will.

Since God acts not through blind necessity but through will, Kant contends that there is a sense in which God acts for an end, namely, for the good as represented by the will (the will, for Kant, just is the capacity to act on representations of the good). However, Kant rejects that this means that God is imperfect or has needs.

⁸ See (Kain 2015) for discussion.

[God] although subjectively in need of no external thing, still cannot be thought to shut himself up within himself but rather [must be thought] to be determined to produce the highest good beyond himself just by his consciousness of his all-sufficiency; and this necessity in [*Nothwendigkeit am*] the supreme being (which in [*beim*] the human being is duty) cannot be represented by us other than as a moral need. (Ak. 8:280n)

So, Kant contends that we must see God's creative act (i.e. the act through which all of reality is created) is one according to which God acts because it is *good* so act, and not merely from the necessity of God's nature.

None of this shows that Spinoza is *wrong* so much as that his conclusion concerning the equation between God and nature is not an inevitable one. Kant is able to carve out a distinctive and epistemically possible position regarding God and his/its acts that holds God separate from the rest of nature, or reality as a whole, at least in the sense that the rest of reality is not "in" God in Spinoza's sense.

4.D Against Human Bondage

Spinoza conceives of freedom as complete independence from any external cause. Only God (substance) possesses such freedom. Human beings are always in some degree of "bondage" in that they are always subject to external causes to some degree or other. Kant does not deny this fact, but he nevertheless argues that human beings are "free" in the sense that they can be the ultimate causal sources of their actions, even if they are also often subject to external causal determining forces.

By freedom in the cosmological sense, on the contrary, I understand the power of beginning a state **from itself** [*von selbst*], the causality of which does not in turn stand under another cause determining it in time in accordance with the law of nature. . . . It is especially noteworthy that it is this **transcendental** idea of **freedom** on which the practical concept of freedom is grounded, and the former constitutes the real moment of the difficulties in the latter, which have long surrounded the question of its possibility. (A533/B561; see also A445/B473 and A446/B474)

For Kant, the idea of freedom, understood here as "transcendental freedom", is the idea of an "absolutely spontaneous" act (A448/B476)—that is, an act whose ultimate causal source lies in the subject, and is not itself determined by any temporally structured causal ground either within or without the agent. Kant denies that we can ever know whether an act is free in this sense (A557/B585), but he holds that it is at least logically/epistemically possible that there is such freedom.

Kant's view is that the "imputability" of an act—its status as an act for which one is ultimately responsible and morally evaluable in terms of attitudes of praise and blame—rests on being the "author" of the act.

Auctor is an originator of action. Originator means that in regard to its determining grounds the action can, in its first beginnings, be derived from him. Hence he is regarded as the effectual first cause. . . . If it was a dizzy spell, then the cause was merely physical and a matter of natural necessity; it rested on no originative cause in the agent. If he was drunk, however, it was his doing to have gotten so; he knew the power of drink, and could have envisaged the possibility of evil consequences; he was thus the effectual cause, and it all began with him. (*Moralphilosophie Vigilantius* 27:559 (1793))

To the extent that the drunk is the "author" of his act—i.e, is the causally ultimate originator of a free choice in deciding to get drunk—then the acts that are, strictly speaking, merely ascribable to him while thoroughly intoxicated are going to be things for which he is responsible because of the origin of those actions in the imputable decision to get drunk.

Kant considers such causal ultimacy to be present in all of our intellectual or rational actions, not just those involving the will. We can never have theoretical knowledge of our freedom in this sense, but nor can it be disproved that we lack such freedom. Moreover, since we must *assume* freedom as part of acting, Kant thinks we are rational to hold that we free in this "transcendental" sense.⁹

4.E Agreeing with Spinoza

In a note from 1797 Kant says that

the system of the *Critique of Pure Reason* revolves around two cardinal points: as system of nature and of freedom, each of which leads to the necessity of the other.
– The ideality of space and time and the reality of the concept of freedom (R 6353; cf. R 6344, R 6349).

As Kant clearly indicates here, he construes the ideality of space and time, and thus his system of transcendental idealism, as crucial to securing the possibility of freedom. Elsewhere, Kant explicitly sets his system of transcendental idealism against Spinoza's monism, in which Kant believes genuine freedom is ruled out. The threat as Kant sees it is posed by monism, and in particular its connection to transcendental realism about space and time. As he puts it in a lecture dated from the early 1790's,

⁹ For more extensive discussion of these issues see (Pippin 1987; Wood 1984; Allison 1990, 2020; Pereboom 2006; Hogan 2009; McLear 2020b).

If I take space as an entity in itself, then Spinozism is irrefutable, i.e. the parts of the world are parts of the Godhead. Space is the Godhead, it is unitary [*einig*], omnipresent, nothing can be thought outside of it, everything is in it (*Metaphysik L₂* (1790/91?), 28:567).

Hence one point of agreement is that Kant holds that Spinoza's view follows if time and space are not taken to be ideal in the way for which Kant argues.¹⁰ That said, it has been a considerable source of perplexity as to *why* Kant thinks this.¹¹

A second point of agreement concerns the issue of modality. Recall that Spinoza construes modality as reducible either to facts about essences and what follows from them (as is the case with necessity and impossibility) or reducible to our own epistemic ignorance or finitude (as is the case with possibility and contingency).

In §76 of the third **Critique** Kant claims that an intuitive intellect, such as God's, "would have no objects except what is actual" (5:401-2). Kant's corollary claim, that modal categories are "merely subjectively valid for the human understanding" and are "not valid of objects in general" (5:402) apparently commits him to a metaphysical thesis about the status of modal properties.¹² Kant thus agrees with Spinoza that reality ultimately lacks irreducible modal properties. There is only what is, in the sense of what God intuits.

Finally, Kant also agrees with Spinoza that we are rationally required to conceive of God as existing and as the ultimate explanatory basis of the unity of phenomenal nature (i.e. what we could possibly experience) and a moral "kingdom of ends" (i.e. the totality of persons with whom moral relations could obtain).

However, Kant (in contrast to Spinoza), argues for this position via argument for the necessity of using the concept of a final end or purpose. In Kant's view we must assume a teleology of ends in phenomenal nature, in order to explain the systematicity of a scientific understanding of it. We must also assume a teleology of ends with regard to morality, since all moral beings pursue the highest good (i.e. the convergence of happiness with moral desert).

the power of judgment, provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, which makes possible the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical, from lawfulness in accordance with the former to the final end in accordance with the latter, in the concept of a **purposiveness** of nature; for thereby is the possibility of the final end, which can become actual only in nature and in accord with its laws, cognized. (CPJ 5:195-6)

¹⁰ For discussion of this and related issues see (McLear and Pereboom OBC).

¹¹ See (Messina 2014) for relevant discussion.

¹² The view is already presented *in nuce* in the first **Critique**; see (A219/B266); see also (Stang 2016, 307; Kohl 2015; Marshall 2018; Abaci 2019, chap. 9).

The concept of purposiveness plays this mediating role because it functions as a condition *both* for reasoning concerning the cognitions constituting a system of nature *and* for reasoning concerning the cognitions constituting a system of freedom (or morality). With respect to nature, with regard to reasoning concerning nature, the systematicity and (finite) intelligibility of the laws (i.e. conditions) of nature must be presupposed. Kant's position is that only the concept of nature as resulting from the purposeful activity of an organizing intelligence (i.e. God) can assure this possibility.

nature is represented through this concept [of purposiveness] as if an understanding [i.e. an intuitive intellect] contained the ground of the unity of the manifold of its empirical laws. (5:180-1)

Similarly, a system of freedom organized under the moral law must hold that a constitutive end of all moral action is realization of the highest good.

The moral law, as the formal rational condition of the use of our freedom, obligates us by itself alone, without depending on any sort of end as a material condition; yet it also determines for us, and indeed does so a priori, a final end, to strive after which it makes obligatory for us, and this is the **highest good in the world** possible through freedom. (5:450; see also 5:453)

Thus is the concept of purposiveness a condition both for cognition within a system of nature and that of freedom. The concept thereby provides a ground for the unity of the two systems in a single being capable of being the real (supersensible) ground of both—viz. the intuitive intellect of God. Kant thus differs with Spinoza with regard to the concept of a final end, but agrees that God must be considered the ultimate ground of the rational intelligibility of the unity of natural science with morality.

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