

## Misreading Spinoza's "Deus sive Natura"

As I was reading through Chapter 14 of *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*, I noticed and reflected upon a reoccurring notion not only limited to the literature I had before: that Spinoza is Naturalizing God or Deifying Nature. Leibniz, Spinoza's immediate colleague and debating partner during the November month of 1676, too, took this to be Spinoza's aim. The author of *The Courtier and the Heretic*, Matthew Stewart, flirts with the idea as well. Indeed, it seems to almost every interpretation of Spinoza that I read, this hypothesis stirs up without fail. The general idea Stewart has in mind, as expressed by two explicitly made but not yet expounded upon arguments, is that Spinoza's aim was chiefly political: Spinoza wished to undermine the orthodox tradition of overarching authority. Spinoza was more so interested in a "transvaluation" of all values more so than demonstrating, however rigorously, the true nature of God (I paraphrase Definition 6 of Chapter 1 of the *Ethics*!),

[that being] absolutely infinite, maintaining an infinity of attributes, each of which expresses its infinite and eternal essence.

More importantly, he says in the subsequent corresponding Explication:

I say absolutely infinite, not infinite in its own kind. If we say [that being] is infinite in its own Kind, then we can prevent certain attributes from pertaining to its True Essence.

Indeed, this seems like a digression into self-gratifying recollection of the master's idea; but I think it is unjustly overlooked, this crucial definition, when philosophers, dimwits, scientists and charlatans attempt to "pin down" what Spinoza thought of God. They fall prey to their presupposing and imposing interpretation of an [external] doctrine in their own terms. Right by their side, Spinoza joins in the attack against Science or the attack against God. The author of

The Courtier and the Heretic joins in, claiming that Spinoza's understanding of God is best "understood in the negative." Spinoza is "best" understood by contrasting his doctrines with the standard, the conventional, the orthodox. I feel this argument presupposes a (political) agenda for Spinoza by portraying his system as best understood from the negative. I think Spinoza's system is best understood in its positive aspects: absolutely infinite, necessity of all things, dogs and men as modes, and all that. It's tantalizing and difficult work understanding Deus sive Natura, but as Spinoza says "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare." Merely because it is understood best by us "in the negative," this does not sufficiently support the argument that Spinoza had a personal vendetta or political agenda outside of describing to the followers of reason what God's nature necessarily is. Indeed, Spinoza is just talking about really opaque stuff.

But of course, to the Scientific mind today, Spinoza is "Naturalizing God", in so far as the Scientific mind debates with the Theologian from Source work; and to the Theologian today, Spinoza is "Deifying Nature", in so far as the Theologian claws for an attempt to destroy the Scientist's Spinozistic leaning. It is an incorrect assumption for these intellectual brutes to ever believe that Spinoza's God's true essence is ever Nature or God exactly. No, these are but attributes, and an attribute is "what the intellect perceives of a substance."

We must understand this seemingly forgotten or never truly observed (by our opponents) Definition 6 of the first Chapter of the Ethics. To ask: Is he dirtying up the divine, or is he exalting the dirt? Well, we have a meaningless question, and you have not attended to the arguments or notions of the work correctly. Spinoza is doing neither: He is speaking of God, or Nature proper.

"Deus *sive* Natura." Spinoza was called "our Jew" by Leibniz, "that odd [Jew] philosopher", "apostate Jew", "the Atheist Jew", Jew-this, Jew-that. Never have I seen such casual prejudice looming beneath the thoughts of great thinkers as if it were argument itself. Perhaps it is merely a form of referential endearment to consistently take note of his ethnic background. But even today, it seems the most any philosopher can say of Spinoza is either "Who?" or "He was that Jew, right?" What has any of this to do with his works? This seems to be the doorway into [my] argument that Spinoza has gone unduly unnoticed by the population at large. Obscure and esoteric philosophers, marginalized by the Western (analytic) tradition, chant loudly but unheard into the ears of positivists and Wittgensteinians who demand the conformity to Language as the God of Man. We've taken the God of old and turned Him into a patriarchal phenomenalist linguist. And anything Spinoza has to say, in the rigorous Doctor's mind, is precious or just a silly mode. It must be Nature or it must be God—the embattled theologians and philosopher-scientists continue.

"Deus *sive* Nature." Seymour Feldman, editor and writer of the introduction of Samuel Shirley's translation of the Ethics, treats us to an enlightening explanation of much of the nomenclature Spinoza radically redefines throughout the course of his masterwork. Introduction, Definition 8. Sive or Seu reads:

The orthodox translation of these Latin words is 'or.' Spinoza nearly always uses them to indicate an alternative expression for what he is trying to say, and this in fact gives us a valuable insight into the interlocking of concepts that characterises his system. But the English 'or' is frequently disjunctive; e.g. you can travel by this road or by that. So the unvarying translation of sive (seu) by 'or' can be quite misleading.

I have therefore usually translated it by 'that is' when it implies equivalence. When Spinoza uses 'hoc est,' which he frequently does, I also translate as 'that is.'

Now this may seem quite trivial. Spinoza says that through Science you find God or through, say, the Church you find God. These are both just alternative routes to the same end. To stay true to Spinoza's system, in the words "Deus sive Natura," we see that both terms are Attributes. They are each one of the infinite Attributes which constitute the essence of God or Nature.

When we think of "traveling this road or that road," do we find that in going these disjunctive routes we witness the exact same sorts of trivial objects and environments? If I travel down path A, supposedly alternative to path B, do I expect to see the exact same sorts of things I would see as if traveling down path B? Of course not; I have taken a different route. From the perspective of someone, say, a scientist, on path A, even if it is remarkably similar to path B, that scientist will not see exactly that which, say, a theologian sees on path B.

So did Spinoza turn God into a Scientist, or did he turn the world into a soul, a spirit, the divine? Did he naturalize God, or did he deify Nature? The question is a false start.

At the level of language "deus" is a term used to reference either an object or an idea. This is what words do, as no one will contest. For Spinoza, Axiom 6 reads,

A true idea must agree with its object.

Clearly, within the confines of his system, God "agrees with" Nature. In the strictest way, God is Nature in the way that the number 4 written down on a piece of paper agrees with the idea of number four thought in one's mind. If never written down, the number 4, in so far as whatever potential arithmetical application goes, does not exist. But when it is written down, in so far as whatever potential arithmetical application goes, it does (until it is erased; but even some marks

of it still remain). Now, consider of all the number 4s in the world: This would be God, in so far as this crude analogy attempts to illustrate. God is every idea agreeing with every object; that is, as applied as Nature is in so far as it exists, God exists in so far as it [God] agrees with Nature. Take away Nature, take away God.

Back at the language level "deus" references either "God" or it references "Nature". However, by A6, "deus" references to both. It works not unlike an inclusive OR statement. The same goes for "natura"; this is evident given what has just been demonstrated. Now, when someone says "the Kingdom of God" they either mean the kingdom of God is in God or it is outside of God in so far as God's power over that kingdom. When we say "deus" we either refer to a transcendental (orthodox) or immanent (Spinozist) God. We could say, when someone passes away, "He is with God now" which would be synonymous with saying "He is in the Kingdom of God now." The message would be conveyed necessarily with both utterances. From this, as far as the communicated idea goes, the "Kingdom of God" is synonymous with "God" itself. In any event, at least, we can say that both concepts are applicable and thus efficient signifiers for God.

To the point: What is divine? Either "deus" is a referential term for all things divine or it is not. If the former, it must be granted that when someone says a thing is "divine" in the religious sense, they mean it is directly related to God's divine nature. That is, a divine cup would be divine because it mutually shares the divine nature with God. God may bestow its own nature on the cup, and God may not be on the same ontological level as the cup in so far as it and the cup partake of the divine attribute. But nonetheless, each (God or divine cups) would be

described by the word "divine" in so far as they each share divine attributes (supposing one accepts doctrines such as transubstantiation and not nonsensical, figurative symbolic materialism). Therefore, when I take action or am affected by supposed action of divine things, I could say that I was "affected by the divine" or, equally understood, "I was affected by God."

If the latter, then this would be that there are divine things outside of "deus" or God. This would mean that we could possibly refer to something as divine but its transcendent quality would either come from within it or from some external means. If God is not the source of all divine things, then divine things are either divine because of themselves or because of something else. If the former, then clearly this contradicts Scripture for:

Exodus 20:3-4 "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below."

Indeed, it seems that God dictates that the possibility of divine things having a source other than God is actually impossible. Therefore, God is the totality of divine things. When we have a divine cup, we could say, "I have a Godly cup" or "I have a cup of God." It would be the same as saying "I have a divine cup".

From this, we see that "deus", "God", "divinus", "divine" are all interchangeable referential terms for the same idea which, by A6, must agree with its object. And finally, we must conclude that when Spinoza says "Deus, sive Natura" he does not mean "Judeo-Christian God as the Jews and Christians understand it or Nature". He in fact means "the totality of divine thing or the totality of natural things". God or "deus", in effect, becomes merely a referential term for the totality of divine things, whatever those divine things may be, not a certain conception of "God" as a contrast to Nature.