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# Spinoza

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## Introduction

Born in 1632, he was the son of Marrano parents. They had immigrated to Amsterdam from Portugal in order to escape the Investigation that had spread across the Iberian Peninsula and live in the tolerant atmosphere of Holland. Spinoza's father, Michael, was a successful merchant and a respected member of the community. Just before Spinoza was to turn six, his mother, Hanna, the second of Michael's three wives, died in 1638. As a boy—known to his fellow Portuguese as Bento—he had been one of the shining pupils in the congregation's Talmud Torah school. As Spinoza made progress through his studies, he was being groomed for a career as a rabbi. But at the age of seventeen, he cut short his formal studies to work in his father's business, which he eventually took over with his half-brother, Gabriel. Spinoza's intellectual orientation, however, came at a cost. On July 27, 1656, Spinoza was issued the harshest writ of *cherem*, or excommunication, ever pronounced by the Sephardic community of Amsterdam. In 1661, he settled near Leiden, in the town of Rijnsburg. While in Rijnsburg, he worked on the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, an essay on philosophical method, and the *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*, an initial but aborted effort to lay out his metaphysical, epistemological and moral views. His critical exposition of Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy*, the only work he

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published under his own name in his lifetime, was completed in 1663. By this time, he was also working on what would eventually be called the *Ethics*, his philosophical masterpiece. However, when he saw the principles of toleration in Holland being threatened by reactionary forces, he put it aside to complete his "scandalous" *Theological-Political Treatise*, published anonymously and to great alarm in 1670. When Spinoza died in 1677, in The Hague, he was still at work on his *Political Treatise*; which was soon published by his friends along with his other unpublished writings, including a *Compendium to Hebrew Grammar*. Spinoza died peacefully in his rented room in The Hague in 1677.

## The *Ethics*

As its title indicates, the *Ethics* is a work of ethical philosophy. Its ultimate aim is to aid us in the attainment of happiness, which is to be found in the intellectual love of God. This love, according to Spinoza, arises out of the knowledge that we gain of the divine essence insofar as we see how the essences of singular things follow of necessity from it. In view of this, it is easy to see why Spinoza favored the synthetic method. Beginning with propositions concerning God, he was able to employ it to show how all other things can be derived from God. In grasping the order of propositions as they are demonstrated in the *Ethics*, we thus attain a kind of knowledge that approximates the knowledge that underwrites human happiness. We are, as it were, put on the road towards happiness. Of the two methods it is only the synthetic method that is suitable for this purpose.

### GOD

"On God" Spinoza begins with some deceptively simple definitions of terms that would be familiar to any

seventeenth century philosopher. His definitions begins in following order "By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself", "By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence"; "By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence." The definitions of Part One are, in effect, simply clear concepts that ground the rest of his system. They are followed by a number of axioms that, he assumes, will be regarded as obvious and unproblematic by the philosophically informed ("Whatever is, is either in itself or in another"; "From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily"). From these, the first proposition necessarily follows, and every subsequent proposition can be demonstrated using only what precedes it. For Spinoza, God is the infinite, necessarily existing (that is, uncaused), unique substance of the universe. There is only one substance in the universe; it is God; and everything else is in God.

## MODES OF GOD

This proof that God—an infinite, necessary and uncaused, indivisible being—is the only substance of the universe proceeds in three simple steps. First, establish that no two substances can share an attribute or essence. Then, prove that there is a substance with infinite attributes (i.e., God). It follows, in conclusion, that the existence of that infinite substance precludes the existence of any other substance. Then, prove that there is a substance with infinite attributes (i.e., God). It follows, in conclusion, that the existence of that infinite substance precludes the existence of any other substance. For if there *were* to be a second substance, it would have to have *some* attribute or essence. But since God has *all* possible attributes, then the attribute to be possessed by this

second substance would be one of the attributes already possessed by God. But it has already been established that no two substances can have the same attribute. Therefore, there can be, besides God, no such second substance. If God is the only substance, and (by axiom 1) whatever is, is either a substance or *in* a substance, then everything else must be in God. "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God". Those things that are "in" God (or, more precisely, in God's attributes) are what Spinoza calls modes.

## God Existing only in A Philosophical Sense

As soon as this preliminary conclusion has been established, Spinoza immediately reveals the objective of his attack. His definition of God—condemned since his excommunication from the Jewish community as a "God existing in only a philosophical sense"—is meant to preclude any anthropomorphizing of the divine being. In the *scholium* to proposition fifteen, he writes against "those who feign a God, like man, consisting of a body and a mind, and subject to passions. But how far they wander from the true knowledge of God is sufficiently established by what has already been demonstrated." Besides being false, such an anthropomorphic conception of God can have only deleterious effects on human freedom and activity.

### World and Its Relation to God

Much of the technical language of Part One is, to all appearances, right out of Descartes. But even the most devoted Cartesian would have had a hard time understanding the full import of propositions one through fifteen. What does it mean to say that God is substance and that everything else is "in" God? Is Spinoza saying that rocks, tables, chairs, birds, mountains, rivers and human beings are all *properties* of God, and hence can

be predicated of God (just as one would say that the table "is red")? It seems very odd to think that objects and individuals—what we ordinarily think of as independent "things"—are, in fact, merely properties of a thing. Spinoza was sensitive to the strangeness of this kind of talk, not to mention the philosophical problems to which it gives rise. When a person feels pain, does it follow that the pain is ultimately just a *property* of God, and thus that God feels pain? Conundrums such as this may explain why, as of Proposition Sixteen, there is a subtle but important shift in Spinoza's language. God is now described not so much as the underlying substance of all things, but as the universal, immanent and sustaining cause of all that exists: "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, (i.e., everything that can fall under an infinite intellect)". According to the traditional Judeo-Christian conception of divinity, God is a transcendent creator, a being who causes a world distinct from himself to come into being by creating it out of nothing. God produces that world by a spontaneous act of free will, and could just as easily have not created anything outside him. By contrast, Spinoza's God is the cause of all things because all things follow causally and necessarily from the divine nature. Or, as he puts it, from God's infinite power or nature "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". The existence of the world is, thus, mathematically necessary. It is impossible that God should exist but not the world. This does not mean that God does not cause the world to come into being freely, since nothing *outside* of God constrains him to bring it into existence. But Spinoza does deny that God creates the world by some arbitrary

and undetermined act of free will. God could not have done otherwise. There are no possible alternatives to the actual world, and absolutely no contingency or spontaneity within that world. Everything is absolutely and necessarily determined. In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way. Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced.

There are, however, differences in the way things depend on God. Some features of the universe follow necessarily from God—or, more precisely, from the absolute nature of one of God's attributes—in a direct and unmediated manner. These are the universal and eternal aspects of the world, and they do not come into or go out of being; Spinoza calls them "infinite modes". They include the most general laws of the universe, together governing all things in all ways.

**Laws Governing the Universe**

From the attribute of extension there follow the principles governing all extended objects (the truths of geometry) and laws governing the motion and rest of bodies (the laws of physics); from the attribute of thought, there follow laws of thought (understood by commentators to be either the laws of logic or the laws of psychology). Particular and individual things are causally more remote from God. They are nothing but "affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way" (Ip25c). More precisely, they are finite modes. There are two causal orders or dimensions governing the production and actions of particular things. On the one hand, they are determined by the general laws of the universe that

follow immediately from God's natures. On the other hand, each particular thing is determined to act and to be acted upon by other particular things. Thus, the actual behavior of a body in motion is a function not just of the universal laws of motion, but also of the other bodies in motion and rest surrounding it and with which it comes into contact.

## Modal System

In line with his rejection of classical theism, Spinoza famously identifies God with Nature. Nature is no longer seen as a power that is distinct from and subordinate to God, but as a power that is one and the same with divine power. Spinoza's phrase '*Deus sive Natura*' ('God or Nature') captures this identification and is justly celebrated as a succinct expression of his metaphysics. In isolation, however, the phrase is relatively uninformative. It tells us nothing about how Spinoza, having rejected the creator/creation relation posited by the classical model, conceives of the relation between God and the system of modes.

### *'Natura Naturans' and 'Natura Naturata'*

To fill out his thoughts on this matter, Spinoza distinguishes between Nature taken in its active or productive aspect, which he identifies with God or the divine attributes, and Nature taken in its derivative or produced aspect, which he identifies with the system of modes. The former he calls *Natura naturans* (literally: Nature naturing) and the latter he calls *Natura naturata* (literally: Nature natured). Spinoza's use of these formulas is revealing in two respects. First, his double employment of '*Natura*' signals the ontological unity that exists between God and the system of modes. Each mode within the system is a modification of nothing other than the very substance that is God. Second, his employment of

the active '*naturans*' in the first and the passive '*naturata*' in the second signals a causal relation between God and the modal system. God is not merely the subject of modes; he is an active power that produces and sustains them.

In view of the ontological unity that exists between God and the modal system, Spinoza is careful to specify that the divine causality is immanent rather that transitive. What this means is that God's causal activity does not pass outside of the divine substance to produce external effects, as it would if God were a creator in the traditional sense. Rather, it remains wholly within the divine substance to produce the multitude of modes that constitute the modal system. Spinoza likens this to the way in which the nature of a triangle is productive of its own essential properties: "From God's supreme power, or infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, that is, all things, have necessarily flowed, or always follow, 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" (IP17S1). The entire modal system, *Natura naturata*, follows immanently from the divine nature, *Natura naturans*.

**Two Types of Modes**

Into this relatively simple picture, Spinoza introduces a complication. There are, he says, two types of modes. The first consists in what he calls infinite and eternal modes. These are pervasive features of the universe, each of which follows from the divine nature insofar as it follows from the absolute nature of one or another of God's attributes. Examples include motion and rest under the attribute of extension and infinite intellect under the attribute of thought. The second consists in what may be called finite and temporal modes, which are simply

the singular things that populate the universe. Modes of this type follow from the divine nature as well, but do so only as each follows from one or another of God's attributes insofar as it is modified by a modification that is itself finite and temporal. Examples include individual bodies under the attribute of extension and individual ideas under the attribute of thought.

Unfortunately, Spinoza does little to explain either what these infinite and eternal modes are or what relation they have to finite and temporal modes. Taking their cue from a statement in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* that the laws of nature are embedded in the infinite and eternal modes, many commentators have suggested that Spinoza thought of these modes as governing the manner in which finite modes affect one another. For example, if laws of impact are somehow embedded in the infinite and eternal mode motion and rest, then the outcome of any particular collision will be determined by that mode together with the relevant properties (speed, direction, size, etc) of the bodies involved. If this is correct, then Spinoza envisions every finite mode to be fully determined by intersecting lines of causality: a horizontal line that stretches back through the series of antecedent finite modes and a vertical line that moves up through the series of infinite modes and terminates in one or another of the attributes of God.

**Causal Determinism**

However it may be that Spinoza ultimately conceives of the relation between infinite and finite modes, he is clear about one thing - the system of modes is an entirely deterministic system in which everything is fully determined to be and to act: *In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way.*

Spinoza reminds us that God's existence is necessary. It pertains to the very nature of substance to exist. Furthermore, since each and every mode follows from the necessity of the divine nature, either from the absolute nature of one or another of God's attributes, as is the case with the infinite and eternal modes, or from one or another of God's attributes insofar as it is modified by a modification that is finite, as is the case with the finite modes, they are all necessary as well. Since there is nothing other than the divine substance and its modes, there is nothing that is contingent. Any appearance of contingency is the result of a defect in knowledge, either of God or of the cause. Accordingly, Spinoza makes it central to his theory of knowledge that to know a thing adequately is to know it in its necessity, as it has been fully determined by its causes.

**Causal Parallelism**

An obvious question to ask at this point is whether it is possible for finite modes falling under one attribute to act upon and determine finite modes falling under another attribute. Spinoza's answer is an unambiguous no. Causal relations exist only among modes falling under the same attribute. His explanation for this may be traced back to an axiom set forth at the beginning of Book One: *The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause.* Given this axiom, if a finite mode falling under one attribute were to have God as its cause insofar as he is considered under a different attribute, i.e., if it were to be caused by a finite mode falling under a different attribute, then the knowledge of that mode would involve the knowledge of that other attribute. Since it does not, that mode cannot have God as its cause insofar as he is considered under some other attribute. In other words, it cannot be caused by a finite mode falling under some other attribute.

When applied to modes falling under those attributes of which we have knowledge - thought and extension – this has an enormously important consequence. There can be no causal interaction between ideas and bodies. This does not mean that ideas and bodies are unrelated to one another. Indeed, it is one of the best-known theses in the *Ethics* that the lines of causation that run among them are strictly parallel: *The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things*. In the demonstration of this proposition Spinoza says that it is a consequence of previous established propositions and leaves it at that. Nevertheless, it is apparent that this proposition has deep foundations in his substance monism. As thought and extension are not attributes of distinct substances, so ideas and bodies are not modes of distinct substances. They are "one and the same thing, but expressed two ways". If ideas and bodies are one and the same thing, however, their order and connection must be the same. The doctrine of substance monism in this way insures that ideas and bodies, though causally independent, are causally parallel.

**Mind and Cognition**

Spinoza's metaphysics touches upon his theory of mind and yields some of its most profound consequences. Most obviously, substance monism prohibits him from affirming the kind of dualism that Descartes affirmed, one in which mind and body are conceived as distinct substances. What is more, his contention that modes falling under different attributes have no causal interaction but are causally parallel to one another prohibits him from affirming that mind and body interact. Because he takes seriously the reality of the mental while rejecting dualism and eliminating interaction, Spinoza's views on the mind are generally given a

sympathetic hearing in a way that Descartes's views are not.

**The Mind as the Idea of the Body**

To understand Spinoza's account of the mind we must begin with that for each finite mode of extension there exists a finite mode of thought that corresponds to it and from which it is not really distinct. More elaborately, it commits him to the thesis that:-

1) for each simple body there exists a simple idea that corresponds to it and from which it is not really distinct and

2) for each composite body there exists a composite idea that corresponds to it and from which it is not really distinct, composed, as it were, of ideas corresponding to each of the bodies of which the composite body is composed. Spinoza counts all of these ideas, whether simple or composite, as minds. In this respect he does not consider the human mind to be unique. It is simply the idea that corresponds to the human body.

In taking this position, Spinoza does not mean to imply that all minds are alike. As minds are expressions of the bodies to which they correspond in the domain of thought, some have abilities that others do not. The greater the capacity of a body for acting and being acted upon, the greater the capacity of the mind that corresponds to it for perception. Spinoza elaborates:

[I]n proportion as a body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once. And in proportion as the actions of a body depend more on itself alone, and

as other bodies concur with it less in acting, so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly. And from these [truths] we know the excellence of one mind over the others. Here lies the explanation of the excellence of the human mind. The human body, as a highly complex composite of many simple bodies, is able to act and be acted upon in myriad ways that other bodies cannot. The human mind, as an expression of that body in the domain of thought, mirrors the body in being a highly complex composite of many simple ideas and is thus possessed of perceptual capacities exceeding those of other, non-human minds. Only a mind that corresponds to a body of complexity comparable to that of the human body can have perceptual abilities comparable to those of the human mind.

**Imagination**

A perceptual ability that is of particular interest to Spinoza is imagination. This he takes to be a general capacity of representing external bodies as present, whether they are actually present or not. Imagination thus includes more than the capacity to form those mental constructs that we normally consider to be imaginative. It includes memory and sense perception as well. Since it is clearly impossible to get around in the world without this, Spinoza concedes that it is "in this way [that] I know almost all the things that are useful in life". Spinoza consistently opposes imagination to intellect and views it as providing no more than confused perception. For him the ideas of the imagination are inadequate. They may be essential for getting around in the world, but they give us a distorted and incomplete picture of the things in it. To understand why, it is useful to begin with sense perception. This is the most important form of imaginative perception, and it is from this form that all others derive.

**Sense Perception**

On Spinoza's account, sense perception has its origin in the action of an external body upon one or another of the sensory organs of one's own body. From this there arises a complex series of changes in what amounts to the body's nervous system. As the mind is the idea of the body, it will represent these changes. This, Spinoza contends, is what constitutes sense perception.

In order to explain how this act of representation yields perception of an external body, Spinoza appeals to the fact that the changed state of one's body is a function both of the nature of one's body and the nature of the external body that caused that state. Because of this, the mind's representation of that state will express something more than the nature of one's own body. It will express the nature of the external body as well: *The idea of any mode in which the human body is affected by external bodies must involve the nature of the human body and at the same time the nature of the external body*.

It is this feature of the mind's act of representation - that it expresses the nature of an external body – that explains how such an act constitutes sense perception.

**Adequate and Inadequate Ideas**

In view of this it is not difficult to see why Spinoza judges sense perception to be inadequate. Grounded as it is in the mind's representation of the state of one's own body rather than in the direct representation of external bodies, sense perception is indirect. Since this goes for all imaginative ideas, the problem with them all is the same: *It follows, second, that the ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies.*

It is because of this that Spinoza refers to the ideas of the imagination as confused. The vision they give of external bodies is unavoidably colored, so to speak, by the lens of one's own body.

Confusion, however, is just one aspect of the inadequacy of imaginative ideas. Such ideas are also mutilated. The reason for this is that the knowledge of an effect depends upon and involves the knowledge of its causes. This is a condition that imaginative ideas can never satisfy. The mind may contain the idea of an external body, but it cannot contain ideas of all of the causes of that body. These, being infinite, fall outside of its scope and are fully contained only in God's infinite intellect. God's ideas of bodies may be adequate, but ours are not. They are cut off from those ideas that are necessary in order to render them adequate. Although imaginative ideas of external bodies are the most important examples of inadequate ideas, they are not the only examples. Spinoza goes on to show that the mind's ideas of the body, its duration, and its parts are all inadequate. So too is the mind's idea of itself. Even so, he remains optimistic about the possibility of adequate ideas.

This optimism becomes evident as Spinoza shifts his attention from imaginative ideas of singular things to intellectual ideas of common things. These common things are things that are either common to all bodies or common to the human body and certain bodies by which the human body is regularly affected. They are fully present in the whole and in each of the parts of every body in which they are present. Nevertheless, it is fairly certain that the class of things common to all bodies includes the attribute of extension and the infinite and eternal mode of motion and rest. Spinoza assures us that our ideas of them can only be adequate.

Any idea that follows from an adequate idea is itself adequate, these ideas, appropriately called common notions, can serve as axioms in a deductive system. When working out this system, the mind engages in a fundamentally different kinds of cognition than when it engages in any of the various forms of imaginative perception. In all forms of imaginative perception the order of ideas mirrors the order of bodily affections, and this order, depending as it does upon the chance encounters of the body with external bodies, is entirely fortuitous. By contrast, the derivation of adequate ideas from common notions within a deductive system follows a wholly different order. This Spinoza calls the order of reason.

## Three Kinds of Knowledge

With the distinction between adequate and inadequate perception in place, Spinoza introduces a set of further distinctions. He begins with inadequate perception, which he now calls knowledge of the first kind, and divides it into two parts.

### *experientia vaga*

The first consists of knowledge from random experience (*experientia vaga*). This is knowledge "from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way which is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect".

### *ex signis*

The second consists of knowledge from signs (*ex signis*), "for example, from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, like those through which we imagine the things". What links both of these forms of knowledge is that they

lack a rational order. It is obvious that knowledge from random experience follows the order of the affections of the human body, but so does knowledge from signs. A Roman who hears the word '*pomum*', for instance, will think of an apple, not because there is any rational connection between the word and the object, but only because they have been associated in his or her experience.

### *ratio*

When we reach what Spinoza calls the second kind of knowledge, reason (*ratio*), we have ascended from an inadequate to an adequate perception of things. This type of knowledge is gained "from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things". What Spinoza has in mind here is what was just indicated, viz.,the formation of adequate ideas of the common properties of things and the movement by way of deductive inference to the formation of adequate ideas of other common properties. Unlike in the case of knowledge of the first kind, this order of ideas is rational.

### *scientia intuitive*

We might think that in attaining this second kind of knowledge we have attained all that is available to us. However, Spinoza adds a third type, which he regards as superior. He calls this intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) and tells us that it "proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [formal] essence of things". Unfortunately, Spinoza is once again obscure at a crucial junction, and it is difficult to know what he has in mind here. He seems to be envisioning a type of knowledge that gives insight into the essence of some singular thing together with an understanding of how that essence follows of necessity from the essence of God. Furthermore,

the characterization of this kind of knowledge as intuitive indicates that the connection between the individual essence and the essence of God is grasped in a single act of apprehension and is not arrived at by any kind of deductive process.

Problems of obscurity aside, we can still see something of the ideal at which Spinoza is aiming. Inadequate ideas are incomplete. Through them we perceive things without perceiving the causes that determine them to be, and it is for this reason that we imagine them to be contingent. What Spinoza is offering with the fourth kind of knowledge is a way of correcting this. It is important to note, however, that he is not proposing that we can have this knowledge with respect to the durational existence of any particular item. As we have already seen, this would require having ideas of all of the temporal causes of a thing, which are infinite. Rather, he is proposing that we can have it with respect to the essence of a singular thing as it follows from the essence of God. To have this kind of knowledge is to understand the thing as necessary rather than contingent. It is, to use Spinoza's famous phrase, to regard it *sub quadam specie aeternitatis*, under a certain aspect of eternity.

**Politics**

Spinoza treated the political problem and the religious problem in his **Tractatus theologico-politicus**. The methods of government of state and Church, for Spinoza, are not conducive to the elaboration of a rational philosophy. Actions performed in view of the temporal and eternal punishments threatened by the state or by the Church depend on fear and hope, which for Spinoza are irrational passions. For Spinoza, too, the ultimate end of man is, as we realize, for him to know God through reason and to act in conformity with this knowledge. The state must aid man in this rational knowledge of

God. Spinoza holds that the state arose from a pact entered into by men, who at first lived in a condition of irrational nature and in perpetual war. Through this pact the members now composing the state renounced the use of force and violence in favor of authority or a sovereign who is the center of the state. The sovereign may use violence and force against the irrational instincts of his subjects. But this use of force is limited by rationality. Thus, if it should happen that the subjects are more rational than the sovereign, and then by psycho-physical parallelism the state would fall, to give place to the rise of another state more rational than the first. Thus, according to Spinoza, has come about the passage from the natural state to the rational state, with a tendency to perfect rationality.

## Conclusion

For Spinoza, there is only one substance, and there is only one individual of that substance. The one substance is characterized by an infinite number of attributes. But, we are aware only of two attributes: thought and extension. Spinoza's God *thinks*, and also is or does many other things that are beyond our reckoning and comprehension. As God is eternal and infinite, so are his attributes eternal and infinite. The things we see that are *transient* and *finite* are the temporary modifications, or 'modes' of the attributes.

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