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Spinoza: Does Thought Determine Reality?

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St. Isaac Jogues Novitiate
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Intro

In the introduction of his book, *God in Exile*, Fr. Fabro lists five mandatory conditions of an adequate conception of God. Spinoza's philosophy violates two of those, as we shall soon hopefully see. Not only that, but he takes human thought to levels that it should not attain, but first a little on him and his philosophy.

Baruch Spinoza and His Philosophy

Baruch Spinoza was a Portuguese Jew born in Amsterdam in 1632. He was excommunicated from his synagogue at the age of twenty-four, and died of consumption in 1677¹. He was a glass polisher by trade, but his real love was philosophy. He followed Descartes in his method and in some of his ideas, but the philosophy which he created was ultimately his own. He was offered the chair of philosophy at Heidelberg but refused it "to preserve complete freedom"². His most important work is his *Ethica*, but it was his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* that got him in the most trouble. He was denounced as an atheist after publishing it, but his philosophy has had a bit of a resurgence after his death and has greatly influenced modern philosophy to this day.

Spinoza's main thought, as Copleston points out, is that there is only one substance, which he calls *Deus sive Natura*, God or Nature. He believed that it was divine, indivisible, unique, and eternal. He believed that it was its own cause, and that it was not distinct from nature. Although indivisible, it consisted of an infinite number of attributes, each of which expressed an eternal and infinite "essence" according to Spinoza³. We could only know two of these attributes, extension and thought, and they formed a sort of intermediate step between what we experience in nature and this infinite substance. Finite modes or manifestations of this infinite substance made up the objects of what we experience.

The total amount of activity seen in the world around us is what Spinoza called "motion-and-rest", and for him it was a constant. This was the first characteristic of this infinite substance considered under the attribute of extension. The second was the entire system of bodies that made up this universe, which makes up what he called the "face of the universe". These formed what he called the immediate and mediate infinite and eternal modes of this infinite substance considered under the attribute of extension. Similarly, "absolutely infinite understanding" and the "total system of minds" make up what he would have called the immediate and mediate infinite and eternal modes of this infinite substance under the attribute of thought. All of nature consisted of one individual "whose parts...vary in infinite ways without any change of the individual as a whole."

Spinoza believed that this infinite substance had to manifest itself in what he called modes, and that the particular things of our experience are nothing other than the manifestations, or modes, of this infinite substance. These particular things,

¹ His family may have been Marranos, Jews who converted to Catholicism in the Iberian Peninsula instead of having to leave their country, 205

² *A History of Philosophy*, Frederick Copleston, SJ, 206

³ 216

ourselves included, express the attributes of this infinite substance in some particular manner. We are dependent upon it for our existence, and our actions are even determined by this infinite substance. There was also a close relationship between thought and extension even on this level, for every extended thing had a corresponding idea of it. The mind, for example, was the idea of the body. And then lastly, this infinite substance was not separate from its finite modes. It did not exist part from it, but rather was immanent to it.

Atheism and Pantheism in Spinozan Metaphysics

In short there is only one thing for Spinoza, *Deus sive Natura*, God or nature. There are several things excluded from this infinite substance though, namely transcendence and personality. From this radical identification of 'God' with nature, God's transcendence is denied, and from the absolute necessity for 'God' to act according to the idea Spinoza has of him, God's personality is denied.

First, that Spinoza identified God with the universe isn't hard to see as its pretty manifest in his writings. For example, he states, "*I do not separate God from nature in such a way as did all those I know*", and even more damaging, "*Nor is it any more a question for me at this point why it is the same thing or not much different...to hold that the universe is God.*" But this equation of God with the universe was not an elevation of the universe into the divine, but rather a collapse of the divine into what is merely natural. For example, he continues, "Nothing...happens in nature that is at variance with the universal laws of nature."⁴ What he has just described here is not God, it is just nature. God's transcendence has been denied, while still calling it God.

This is a clear violation of one of the conditions that Fr. Fabro puts forth in order to have an adequate conception about God. For he states, that God must "be transcendent in himself and not merely the sum or totality of the world." He continues, "thus, any form of monism...is atheism." Spinoza's philosophy is definitely monistic, and has God only being immanent, and not transcendent. As Copleston points out as well, "there is no question of a transcendent God 'intervening', as it were, to create a particular body or a particular mind. There is (just) an endless chain of particular causes." And then later on Fabro quotes another author, "For, although Spinoza admits God to be the first and only cause of all things...he imagines a God totally different from the true God who is possessed of the highest wisdom...and a supremely freewill...And so it is the same thing as if he denied that the true God exists."

And then secondly, that Spinoza applies an absolute necessity to 'God' to act according to his idea of him is pretty evident as well. For he writes, "Hence it follows that God does not act from freedom of will." 'God' is only free in that "He is self-determined in His actions." And this is the key point here, "He is not free in the sense that it was open to Him not to create the world at all or to create other finite beings than those which He has created." We see the same thing in the quote above, that says, "Nothing...happens in nature that is at variance with the universal laws of nature." Things are necessary, and there is no deviation from that *at all*. 'God' has an understanding of 'His' essence and *must* act according to that. Where is God's ability

⁴ Ibid, 146, Newman Press, Cornelio Fabro, 1964 (*Introduzione all' Ateismo Moderno*), Translation and edited by Arthur Gibson in 1968, New York, New York

to create from nothing, or out of His own sheer goodness, or to bestow favors upon us? Those things don't exist per Spinoza.

This is a clear violation of another of the conditions that Fr. Fabro puts forth in order to have an adequate conception about God. For he states, that God must “be a *supremely free, personal being* in his relations with the world and with man and that, consequently, the creation of the world and of man proceed from the sheer liberality and generosity of God and not from any intrinsic necessity of his nature; thus, all *rationalist schools of philosophy (idealist and immanentist)*, identifying intellect and will in man and in God, are atheist.” Where within such a system is there room for the hand of God to reach into this creation and change water into wine, or bread and wine into the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ? There isn't, and so once again, it “is the same thing as if he denied that the true God exists.”⁵

Both of these are important to notice, as Feuerbach mentions, “Every negation of an attribute of God is thus a partial atheism, an area of godlessness. In proportion as I remove from God a property, I remove from him his very being. If, for example, compassion and mercy are not attributes of God, then I am alone in my suffering – God is not anymore my comforter.”⁶ Similarly here, if God's transcendence is denied, then among other things my littleness is denied, and then what Jesus says is also denied, unless you become like little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. If I am just a necessary part of God, then what point is there in humbling myself in hopes of entering the Kingdom of God? So too, if God's personality is denied, then God's generosity is denied, and what point is there in being grateful to this God who didn't have to create me but did and has showered graces upon me?

It is no wonder that people denounced Spinoza as an atheist very early, “in the wake of his first published writings.”⁷ He was accused of “skillfully and covertly teaching atheism,” having “stripped off all religion in order to avoid the guilt of being superstitious”, that he has negated God, “a negation that takes the form of identifying God with the universe”, and has asserted “an equivalence between the real and the ideal order.”⁸ Another author stated, “A reading of his book will easily reveal that the word *God* is but a *mock* word, a *decoy*, so to speak, to put the reader on the wrong scent.” And then Fabro himself starts off this chapter by saying, “Spinoza (1632-1677) indisputably led modern thought to a second step toward atheism; and this step was much more crucial than the Cartesian one.”

Metaphysical Immanence of Reason

There is something far deeper going on here though than the mere negation of a few of God's attributes, as serious as that is, but an elevation of the human thought to levels that it should not attain. As Fr. Fabro points out, “whereas the Cartesian cogito introduced an epistemological immanence... Spinoza...was the progenitor...of the metaphysical immanence of reason.”⁹

⁵ Ibid, 156

⁶ *God in Exile*, Fabro, 45

⁷ Ibid, 122

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Fabro, 120

Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* has led some people to falsely believe that a thinking thing determined reality, namely that he existed. Similarly, Spinoza seems to believe that the idea he has of the universe necessarily determines reality about the universe. Copleston explains it well when he says, "In Spinoza's view we have or can have a clear and distinct idea of substance, and in this idea we perceive that existence pertains to the essence of substance." What is really important to notice here is that it is from his idea alone that he is making statements about the necessity of the existence of this substance in reality. He is not just saying that he understands these things conceptually, but that because he can see them clearly and distinctly, then they must be true, and true in reality.

Fr. Fabro continues to point out that what we have going on here is the "reduction of the real to the 'essence'"¹⁰. Existence is being "subsumed" into essence, essence referring more to the definition of something than its act of being, which effects a being's existence. When Spinoza was talking about how substance was the cause of itself he said that, "existence must be concluded from its definition *alone*."¹¹ That *alone* should give us all pause. It is not that existence should be gathered from reality, or confirmed by experience, or discovered by trial and error, or through consulting an authority on the matter, no, existence should be gathered from the definition *alone*. Fr. Fabro continues that there is a "direct correspondence between thought and reality...inherent in the new principle of immanence, used with ruthless consistency as the fulcrum of his whole system."¹² We see this clearly in Spinoza.

Perhaps this is why Fr. Fabro points out that "the crux of the whole matter lies in the rationalistic identification of intellect and will, and of will and freedom, and of freedom and necessity; the charge (of atheism) was based on the total immanence of the act maintained by Spinoza."¹³ Freedom for Spinoza is the ability to "exist and act solely from the *necessity* of its own nature." For him, this infinite substance, or 'God', "exists freely...because he exists solely out of the necessity of his own nature." This linking of freedom to necessity is what Fabro calls "closed-circuit" freedom and "represents a deepening of the Cartesian notion to this extent, that the interpolation of the freedom-necessity of Stoic metaphysics into the interior or immanence effects a perfect weld between knowing and acting." Again, this is a necessity that is derived from an idea of this infinite substance, and not necessarily from reality.

Thomistic Ideas on the Subject

As a way of cleansing our pallet a little bit, I would like to end by presenting a few of St. Thomas' ideas on what we've touched on so far. St. Thomas tells us that it is God alone Who is *ipsum esse subsistens*; in God alone is His essence His existence. He is His own existence. And this is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob that I refer to, not Spinoza's idea of God.

Secondly, St. Thomas tells us that there was obviously a time when creation did not exist. He points this out in question 46 of the prima pars of his *Summa* that, "*In*

¹⁰ Fabro, 138

¹¹ Ibid, 137

¹² Ibid, 138

¹³ Ibid 127

*the beginning God created heaven and earth*¹⁴, and yet again, “It is said, *Glorify Me, O Father, with Thyself with the glory which I had before the world was; and, The Lord possessed Me in the beginning of His ways, before He made anything from the beginning.*”¹⁵ There was a time when the heavens and the earth did not exist, and we see this clearly in the light of Sacred Scripture and the light of St. Thomas Aquinas.

And then thirdly, St. Thomas tells us that it was out of God’s goodness, and not mere necessity, that He created us. For he states, “There are two reasons why the knowledge of the divine persons was necessary for us. i) It was necessary for the right idea of creation. The fact of saying that God made all things by His Word excludes the error of those who say that God produces things by necessity. ii) When we say that in Him there is a procession of love, we show that God produced creatures not because He needed them, nor because of any other extrinsic reason, but on account of the love of His own goodness.”¹⁶

Spinoza therefore gives us a good example of why St. Thomas points out in his *Summa contra Gentiles* that God revealed things that could be known about Himself through the light of natural reason alone because i) few would possess knowledge of Him, ii) after a long time, and iii) with the admixture of many errors. Spinoza has spent a lot of time trying to develop his understanding of ‘God’, and it is clear that it has with it the admixture of a lot of error.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Spinoza’s philosophy violates two of the mandatory conditions of an adequate conception of God as put forward by Fabro, first God’s transcendence in equating God with the universe, and second his personality in imposing a radical necessity on God to act in a certain way, namely only the way nature acts. He also takes human thought to levels that it should not go in thinking that existence of his infinite substance should be derived from a definition alone. It is God that determines reality, not human thought. We should try to discover reality, and hopefully respect it once we do, but it is not human thought that determines reality.

¹⁴ STI,46,3

¹⁵ STI,46,2

¹⁶ STI,32,1,RO3

Appendix A

The Mandatory conditions of an adequate concept of God are:

- (a) that *God* be recognized as admitted as the Supreme Being, an object of truth that must be affirmed in order to afford an effective foundation to any truth. Thus, any *agnosticism* which declares the existence of God to be inaccessible to the human intellect is already slipping downgrade toward, and will ultimately reveal itself as, atheism, because it does not get through to God, does not recognize and admit God and so leaves man “God-less”;
- (b) that *God* be *One and Supreme*; thus, pagan *polytheism* throughout the ages, with its admission of several gods, is equivalent to the denial of God;
- (c) that *God* be *Spirit*, i.e. that his being actualize in the supreme degree the highest form of being that is intelligent and volitional life; thus, all forms of *naturalism*, *panpsychism*, and *vitalism* are so many forms of atheism.
- (d) That *God* be *transcendent* in himself and not merely the sum or totality of the world or immersed in it as a force, life or universal Mind; thus, any form of monism (and therefore *pantheism*) is atheism: we shall see in the sequel the many forms of monism in the thought of antiquity and in modern philosophy;
- (e) That *God* be *a supremely free, personal being* in his relations with the world and with man and that, consequently, the creation of the world and of man proceed from the sheer liberality and generosity of God and not from any intrinsic necessity of his nature; thus, all *rationalist schools of philosophy* (*idealist and immanentist*), identifying intellect and will in man and in God, are atheist.

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Bibliography

There are no sources in the current document.