

BARUCH SPINOZA (1632 - 1677)

Sympathetic with the New Mechanical Philosophy as presented by Galileo and Descartes. The physical universe is to be explained as a unified mechanical system operating under a closed, fixed set of laws, expressible in mathematical terms.

Like Hobbes, but unlike Descartes, Spinoza thought that the main point of philosophy must be practical and concerned with the ethical side of human life. Philosophy must show what the supreme Good is for human beings and provide a means of attaining it. Spinoza thought that the highest good for human beings would be something that would provide a continuing source of satisfaction, free one from anxiety, give one stability and tranquility. Like Plato and Epicurus, Spinoza thought that this requires a particular type of virtue and that a particular type of knowledge is essential to this virtue. Unlike Hobbes and Epicurus, Spinoza defined this knowledge as

Knowledge of the union existing between the mind and the whole of nature

and he equated this knowledge with what he called

The intellectual love of God

One must begin the pursuit of this goal by improving the use of one's understanding. Spinoza's main interest was in formulating the nature of the good life. A proper understanding of the world in which we live is essential for living well. But this sort of understanding requires critical examination of traditional beliefs. One of these is Theism as it is traditionally defined.

Traditional theism rests on three doctrines

- 1) God is distinct from the universe
- 2) God is ultimately inaccessible to human understanding
- 3) God is an independent, unquestionable source of truth through direct, supernatural revelation.

Spinoza distinguished **three grades of knowledge**:

- 1) Confused or inadequate ideas - uncritical reliance on the senses, memory, imagination, hearsay and tradition. Comparable to Plato's notion of Opinion.
- 2) Adequate Ideas - ideas justified by a reliable scientific procedure which explains things in terms of cause and effect.
- 3) Intuitive Science - A comprehensive theory, composed entirely of adequate ideas, of the universe as a whole.

Human beings come by their ideas and beliefs mostly in a haphazard, unsystematic way. These are confused or inadequate to the extent that they are not based on an understanding of the real natures and causes of things .

By noticing patterns in the way things happen, we infer that the events forming these patterns are governed by some general law of nature, such as the laws of expansion and contraction, free fall, impact, density, etc.

It is only when we reach the point of being able to define in precise mathematical terms the sorts of events we are trying to explain, we begin to have some adequate ideas. Falling objects, for example, move at a mathematically precise rate of speed in proportion to elapsed time.

Scientific explanation is the sort of explanation in which the state of a thing at a particular time can be mathematically deduced from the state of that thing at another time.

Spinoza thought that every physical law of nature could be mathematically expressed and proven on the basis of more general laws of nature. Laws of heating and cooling, expansion or contraction, for example, could be proven on the basis of the laws of impact and inertia. The most general laws of motion (conservation of energy), he thought could be demonstrated to follow from metaphysical principles concerning **Substance** (God-or-Nature). This would complete the structure of Intuitive Science.

Deducing this conclusion would show that every change in the state of anything is necessary. Whatever happens must happen. Things could not be any way but such as they are. A superstitious, anthropomorphic way of putting this would be something like "Whatever happens is God's will." Spinoza would reform this way of describing God by saying instead something like

*Whatever occurs is from the necessity of God's Nature.
God does not act on purpose, does not form intentions or deliberate
about what to do.*

There are close similarities between Spinoza's philosophy and the philosophies of Plotinus and the ancient Stoics.

What exists is an absolutely indivisible unity all particular things. Facts which have beginnings or endings are completely determined by the nature of God or the universal Mind.

But God is not something distinct from the world of bodies in motion. The nature of matter and the basic laws of nature are fully and completely determined by God.

Spinoza tells us that what exists may be called Substance. This is an all-inclusive unity. Substance cannot be a part or fragment of some greater, more inclusive unity. Substance must be infinite. So, it cannot be produced by anything. So, It must always have existed and it must be impossible that there could ever have been nothing at all.

Aristotle was wrong to name something substance just because it could not be a property of anything. Aristotle's general rule was that only that which is not present in or predicable of something is to be called substance. This meant that individual stones, trees or horses are substances by Aristotle's definition. But Aristotle neglects the fact that these things are necessarily in Space and in Time and they are necessarily connected into causal networks. Such things can only be understood through putting in them in their places in the wider unity in which they must exist.

All the part or fragments of Substance should be understood as the Modes or modifications of Substance.

Traditional Theism thinks of God and Nature as two radically different kinds of existence. God is uncreated, eternal, spiritual and is sharply distinct from Nature. Nature is created, temporal, physical and totally dependent for its being on God.

But there can only be one Substance.

This single, indivisible, eternal and infinite substance must have infinitely many attributes. An attribute is a way of conceiving the essential nature of substance. Human beings know of two general ways of conceiving Substance. These are the attributes of Extension and Thought.

Substance conceived as something that thinks is to be called God.

Substance conceived as something extended is to be called Nature.

Substance may be referred to as God-or-Nature (*Deus sive Natura*).

It is an error to think of God and Nature as distinct, radically different kinds of substance. God and Nature are the same substance, conceived under different attributes.

Suppose we are not for the moment terribly puzzled by the claim that Nature is an infinite Physical Unity, the parts or aspects (modes) of which are finite, extended bodies in Space.

How are we to understand the claim that each finite thing is also a mode of an eternal, infinite thinking Substance?

Consider the old platonic notion of a Design or Plan. Designs can be made of something physical like ink, paper, electrons, or even the sounds produced when one speaks. But what is a design before it is recorded in some physical medium? Plotinus would have called the designs or plans that get materialized in Nature, the eternal thoughts in the Mind of the One. Spinoza's view is not so different from Plotinus'.

Each thing in Nature is a materially realized abstract design. Not only may we suppose that there are general abstract designs like the design of a hammer (a humanly invented design), or the design of a frog's brain-cell (a natural design), there are also absolutely specific designs like the design of the Huston Astrodome or the design of Socrates' body. All possible abstract designs taken together are the total system of thoughts in the infinite Mind of God. Given the absolute

necessity of God's way of realizing abstract designs in physical form, we must conclude, Spinoza argues, that, eventually, every possible combination of abstract designs will be physically realized.

Now go back to an old Pythagorean theme: *Shape or design determines function*. What a thing can do and the ways in which things can interact with each other is determined by their shapes, sizes, configuration, etc.

When Spinoza tells us that "**the mind is the idea of the body**", I believe that he is telling us is that the mind of a finite thing is certain kinds of functional capabilities which are determined by the design or structure of the body. This is why, for Spinoza, it makes perfectly good sense that many sorts of things possess intelligence. Not just animals. Even bacteria, viruses, the immune system, cells, and inorganic molecules may be said to have functional capabilities by which they are capable of reacting to and using information in their environments in systematic ways.

Of course, it works both ways for Spinoza. To speak of something as intelligent or as **capable of exploiting or reacting to available information**, it is logically necessary that the thing have some specific type of physical structure by means of which this functional capability is realized.

So, there is no problem, for Spinoza, as there was for Descartes, of how the Mind and Body interact. They don't interact and it makes no sense to speak of their interacting. It would be like speaking of a mousetrap interacting with its capacity to trap mice.

A human being is not a team of two things, a mind and a body, as Descartes supposed. A human being is one finite thing which thinks, has feelings and emotions and which has arms, legs, and teeth. The design of the total system of a human body is one which makes it possible to formulate abstract general laws covering each type of state in which a human body may be or in which a bodily organ or cell may be. Given any description of such a state, Spinoza envisioned, one can mathematically deduce its state just prior to that time and its next state. Causal connection is just logical connection, according to Spinoza.

These possible states are logically determined by the general design of the organism. So, one can talk about a creature in two equally correct ways.: as a

general system design (a mode of thought) which will function in certain ways and as a thing made of specific materials and having a specific size, location, number of parts, etc. (a mode of extension) Not only are both types of description equally correct, they mutually imply each other, according to Spinoza. Spinoza says, "A mode of extension and the idea of that mode of extension are the same thing expressed in two different ways."

When a person (or any rational being) comes to understand the design features of a system and the functional capabilities they support, that person's mind achieves a degree of harmony with the system of God's thought. Contrary to traditional theism, finite minds can understand God's nature at least to some degree.

SPINOZA ON THE EMOTIONS AND FREEDOM

Passive Emotions.

Examples: Greed, Envy, Fear, Anger, Hatred, Arrogance, Depression

These states are stirred up in us by factors we don't adequately understand. Because we have little or no understanding of their causes, they diminish our ability to control ourselves. Insofar as one is dominated by passive emotions, one is limited, confined, trapped by these internal psychological states. They cause one to behave in ways that are not rational. They block development of our potentiality. They hold one in check in a way that is like being kept in chains. They are dis-abling conditions. This is the opposite of freedom. The dominance by passive emotions is like what modern psychologists call neuroses.

Active Emotions.

Examples: Calm, Composure, Detached Objectivity, Confidence.

A person whose disposition is primarily toward active emotions is liberated from passive emotions. The active emotions are strengths of character. Passive emotions are weaknesses of character. A disposition to active emotions enhances life by enabling one to grow, develop and improve.

It is essential to recognize the existence of passive emotions within oneself and to understand their origins and their effects on one's life. In addition, they must also be replaced by active emotions. Like some modern psychologists, Spinoza maintains that self-understanding is the key to liberation from such harmful emotions and attitudes.

Freedom consists in the ability to act from adequate ideas of our own nature, our needs, interests and the things that influence us.

Ordinary commonsense concepts of Good and Evil are confused and inadequate ideas which must be replaced by clear philosophical understanding of our emotions and especially the external causes which stir up passive emotions.

'Good' is a label we attach to things that are useful to us.

"Evil" is a label we attach to things that are harmful to us

What is useful to us is that which enables us to persevere in being. Whatever interferes with or threatens our will to persevere is harmful.

Virtue depends only on knowledge of what is useful or harmful to us.

The more we have of clear and distinct ideas of our emotions and their causes, the more we can detach ourselves from them and attach ourselves to the universal laws of nature which are also the eternal infinite modes of God's thought.