

Deus, sive Natura: Substance and Determinism in Spinoza's Ethics

by Joshua DeJoy

But the fact is that Spinoza is made a testing-point in modern philosophy, so that it may really be said: You are either a Spinozist or not a philosopher at all. —Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 1825-1830

Baruch Spinoza's posthumously published *Ethics* is one of the most influential and systematic works of modern philosophical thought. In it, he details his thoughts on various subjects, including substance, causal necessity, and determinism. Spinoza, through establishing that there is only one substance—namely, God/Nature—arrives at the conclusion that humans do not actually exercise free will, that our actions are determined. Spinoza begins with monism, establishes that God and Nature are identical, and then concludes from this that actions ostensibly chosen freely are actually determined by external causes. This conclusion, the process used to reach it, or both, are critiqued by different philosophers, including Jonathan Bennett and Georgi Plekhanov. Ultimately, while Spinoza's monism relies on somewhat dubious or superfluous theological justifications and his determinism is insufficiently elaborated and suggests some dubious consequences, his argument is compelling and historically significant. While not perfect, Spinoza's thoughts are a remarkable and systematic exposition of determinism that cannot be fully dismissed. This essay summarizes Spinoza's arguments for a pantheistic monism and determinism, examines three critiques of Spinozism, and finally concludes by assessing Spinozism's staying power today.

Spinoza's argument for determinism—indeed, his entire metaphysics—begins with monism, or the belief that the world is made up of one substance. To begin Part I of *Ethics*, he defines several terms, most crucially *substance*, “that which is in itself and is conceived through itself;” *attribute*, “that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence;” *mode*, “the affections of substance;”

and *God*, “an absolutely infinite being” (Spinoza 217). Spinoza also provides, at the beginning of Part I of his *Ethics*, several axioms that are self-evident based on his definition of these preceding terms—for example: “All things that are, are either in themselves or in something else” (Spinoza 217). Crucially, Spinoza's Axiom 5 says, “Things which have nothing in common with each other cannot be understood through each other; that is, the conception of the one does not involve the conception of the other” (Spinoza 218). Based on the definition of substance, Spinoza arrives at Part I, Proposition 2—“Two substances having different attributes have nothing in common”—because the conception of one substance cannot involve the conception of another, and commonalities in attributes necessarily invoke multiple substances (Spinoza 218). Due to Proposition 2 and Axiom 5, Spinoza concludes, “When things have nothing in common, they cannot be the cause of the other” (Spinoza 218). Therefore, there cannot be more than one substance—substances must be conceived of in and of themselves, and invoking one substance as the cause of another violates this definition (Hampshire 38). This single substance, according to philosopher Stuart Hampshire, “is therefore to be identified with Nature conceived as a whole or as the totality of things” (Hampshire 38). Spinoza thus establishes a monist view of reality made up of one substance.

Along the way to establishing monism, Spinoza makes something of a detour to prove the existence of God (“or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence”), which reinforces his monism (Spinoza 222). Curiously, he begins with a version of

the ontological argument developed by St. Anselm and employed in a modified form by René Descartes (Allison 59). This argument, however, especially its reliance on existence as a perfection (although Spinoza does not expressly state this part of the argument), was already discredited in Spinoza's time (Allison 59). Spinoza's real goal is to establish an identity between God and the "substance consisting of infinite attributes" (Spinoza 222), or between God and Nature, "with [N]ature considered as an infinite ... and necessary system of universal laws" (Allison 35). The practical effect of this position is to render the idea of God as a being incoherent and, in reality, reduce God to Nature, or "a demonstration of the nonexistence of God—at least of the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition" (Allison 60). This attack on the Judeo-Christian idea of God is somewhat concealed in the phrase *Deus, sive Nature* [God, or Nature] (Spinoza 321), which nevertheless shocked public opinion and was branded as heresy and pantheism (Hampshire 39). Other early modern philosophers saw in Spinoza's philosophy a radical, even atheistic aim. George Berkeley, opposing Spinoza, said, "Spinoza [is] the great leader of our modern infidels, in whom are to be found many schemes ... such as undermining religion *under the pretence of vindicating and explaining it*" (qtd. in Melzer 253, emphasis added). Similarly, Pierre Bayle claimed, "One calls Spinozist all those who hardly have any religion, and *who do not hide this fact very much*" (qtd. in Melzer 253, emphasis added). Given the circumstances in which Spinoza wrote—he was excommunicated from the local Jewish community, attacked by both conservative theologians and Cartesians, and then *Ethics* was published posthumously and subsequently censored—an esoteric reading, through which one attempts to "read between the lines," in this section in particular is warranted (Melzer xii; Nadler; Spinoza 213). Spinoza thus removes the personal qualities of God and reduces the God/Nature concept to an ordered Nature.

Spinoza draws radical conclusions from his monist thesis that there exists a single substance, Nature, including the orderly determination of the universe and even human behavior. Part I, Proposition 29, concludes, "Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature

determined to exist and to act in a definite way" (Spinoza 234). Only substances are determined by themselves, and God/Nature is the only substance, so all other things must be determined, in the final analysis, by God/Nature—that is, by natural laws, without contingency (Spinoza 234). Everything within Nature is determined. Will itself—divine or mortal—is constrained by this, and, according to Proposition 32, "cannot be said to be a free cause, but only a necessary or constrained cause" (Spinoza 235). The first corollary to this is the radical position "that God does not act from freedom of will" (Spinoza 235). Humans are, of course, a part of Nature (and of nature), and are likewise constrained by the lack of "freedom of will." It should be noted here that one of the results of Spinoza's subversive pantheism, whereby God is more or less depersonalized, is that there is no Judeo-Christian God to protect humans' free will, in part because the problem of theodicy is no longer an issue when God is constrained as much as he is in Spinoza's philosophy. In Part III, Proposition 2, Spinoza causally collapses the mind and body—that is, he notes that they are both caused by God (or Nature)—and thereby removes a place for the will to exercise any independent role in determining human action (Spinoza 279). Human actions are now "completely explicable by purely physical laws and in terms of physical equilibrium and of the recent disturbances of this equilibrium" (Hampshire 129). We are thus left with humans governed by the laws of Nature, not by free will.

Of course, not everyone will accept that human behavior is entirely law-governed and that humanity has no free will. Spinoza anticipates some objections to this deterministic position in *Ethics*, beginning with the fact that there was not, at the time, a scientific explanation of human behavior and that language suggests that humans have free will. The reliance on words that appear to describe free choice, especially in vernacular writing, proves an obstacle for acceptance of determinism, especially for non-philosophers. In the Scholium to Part III, Proposition 2, Spinoza dismisses discussions of the ordinary senses of the words "will," "choice," "judgment," etc., as unscientific—the perceptions of these phenomena are undoubtedly real, but they describe something that does not meaningfully exist (Hampshire 129; Spinoza 280). One could also argue

that if humans' actions are determined by natural laws, then a rigorous science of human behavior should be possible. In his own time, there was no science of human behavior in any proper sense of the term—psychology did not exist. Spinoza, in the same Scholium, seems to have faith that such a science would emerge and would be capable, in principle at least, of discovering laws of human behavior:

Again, no one knows in what way and by what means the mind can move body, or how many degrees of motion it can impart to body and with what speed it can cause it to move. Hence it follows that when men say that this or that action of the body arises from the mind which has command over the body, they do not know what they are saying, and are merely admitting, under a plausible cover of words, that they are ignorant of the true causes of that action and are not concerned to discover it (Spinoza 280).

Unfortunately, centuries after Spinoza's death, humanity has yet to explain human actions by means of rigorous laws, although progress has arguably been made toward this end. Moreover, relying on the current ignorance of explanations for human behavior explained in physical, determined terms is a poor argument for drawing *a priori* lines of human ignorance (Hampshire 130-1). That said, a powerful challenge to this ever-upward, ever-more-comprehensive march of science exists in the form of quantum mechanics and developments in mathematics regarding uncertainty: "In the last fifty years [prior to 1951], physicists have abandoned the more simply mechanical models as essential to all physical explanation, and have admitted vast complexities of structure of an unmechanical kind, not only in the study of the human brain, but in other branches of biology and physiology ..." (Hampshire 133). While it is difficult to say *a priori* that these difficulties are inherently impossible to overcome, they certainly provide a formidable challenge to the rational explanation of human behavior and therefore of Spinozist determinism.

A second critique of Spinozist determinism, taken up by Jonathan Bennett, is aimed at Spinoza's description of the psychological and social consequences of accepting determinism. In Part III, Proposition 48, Spinoza claims that if one, for example, hates Peter, but then considers that he is not

the cause of the hatred, that the hatred toward and overall will diminish (Spinoza 302-3). As Bennett notes, this is not exactly how hatred works. Further explanation, which may cause one to consider causes other than Peter in one's displeasure (say, for example, that Paul assisted or even prompted him) will not necessarily lessen one's hatred toward Peter absolutely, but at most proportionally, as now the hatred directed toward Peter will be added to the new hatred directed toward Paul (Bennett 338). In other words, hatred is not a finite resource. Spinoza's later, further-reaching conclusions, including that understanding the causes which make events necessary will allow the mind to exercise greater control over the emotions prompted by those events (in Part V, Proposition 6), are likewise dubious (Spinoza 367). Bennett notes that this is not how emotions work at all—at best, the emotions will change somewhat involuntarily, either from anger to frustration or from one target to another (namely, its causes): "When I think of Peter deterministically, much of my hate is redirected towards his ancestors and schoolteachers; I have as great a total amount of hate as before, and now it is harder to control because it is wide-ranging and unfocused" (Bennett 339). These are admittedly pretty significant weaknesses in Spinoza's arguments regarding the effects of accepting determinism in one's interpersonal life. However, if Spinoza is wrong about the effects of determinism, that does not invalidate determinism. That said, if Spinozist philosophy has little practical effect and clearly not much of a positive practical effect, its utility is certainly put into question.

A third, final, critique, one that is much friendlier to Spinoza than the two previous ones, is that of Russian Marxist philosopher Georgi Plekhanov, commonly called the Father of Russian Marxism, citing German materialist philosopher Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach. Plekhanov notes that Feuerbach "made the subtle observation ... that *pantheism is a theological materialism*, a negation of theology but as yet on a theological standpoint" ("Fundamental Problems," emphasis in the original). Much of this theology in Spinoza's *Ethics* seems contrived to avoid serious repercussions, as per an esoteric reading, but nevertheless the abstraction of Nature would be troubling to strict materialists like Feuerbach and Plekhanov (it should be noted

here that Feuerbach was a non-dialectical or so-called vulgar materialist, whereas Plekhanov was a dialectical materialist). Feuerbach's main criticism of Spinozism is that "in it the sensible, anti-theological essence of Nature assumes the aspect of an abstract, metaphysical being" (qtd. in "Fundamental Problems"). Plekhanov, seeing Feuerbach as not just the bridge that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels took to get from Hegelian idealism to dialectical materialism but also from Spinozist semi-materialism to dialectical materialism, approved of Feuerbach removing Spinozism's "theological pendant." He notes with satisfaction that "it was from the standpoint of this kind of Spinozism, which Feuerbach had freed of its theological pendant, that Marx and Engels adopted when they broke with idealism. ... Consequently, *the Spinozism of Marx and Engels was indeed materialism brought up to date* ("Fundamental Problems," emphasis in the original). Spinozist determinism still stands without the backing of God or an abstracted Nature. Plekhanov himself argued something very similar in another article, in which he notes "freedom [of the will] is merely necessity transformed into mind" ("The Role" 12). That is, by understanding that one's actions are historically conditioned and "an inevitable link in the chain of inevitable events," many are able to summon an indomitable will ("The Role" 12). This is similar to Spinoza's collapsing of the body and mind in terms of causation of human actions. Plekhanov, because he understood Spinoza as the product of his time and as an advancement philosophically, conducted a friendly criticism in his discussion of philosophical developments, and even after this criticism, Spinozist determinism stands. Indeed, despite the aforementioned three critiques, it is clear that Spinozism has some staying power and, if nothing else, importance in the history of the development of human thought.

Spinoza's *Ethics* provides a comprehensive metaphysical discussion of the nature of the universe, causality, human actions, and morality. His work, which influenced philosophers as diverse as Hegel, Marx, Kant, Goethe, and Nietzsche, was considered dangerous enough that even the Dutch—along with the Catholic Church—censored it. By beginning with a metaphysical examination of substance, Spinoza puts forward for his famous "God, or

Nature" formulation while establishing the universe as a monist substance capable of being rationally understood. He then proceeds to logically posit, although shockingly, that humans—and even God, to the extent that a personal God exists—do not have free will but are likewise law-governed and capable of being rationally understood. Recent challenges to Spinoza's philosophy, especially the development of scientific thought in the intervening centuries, provide a challenge to his positions, especially determinism, although these are by no means definitively fatal. At any rate, one can still learn a great deal from *Ethics* and the debates surrounding it.

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