

Chapter 12

Spinoza's Pantheism: God and Nature Relationship

Key Words: Spinoza, pantheism, God, nature, Substance, intellectual love of God, *Natura Naturans*, *Natura Naturata*.

Spinoza advocates an extremely unorthodox conception of God. He derives it from his concept of Substance, employing the geometrical method that relies on self-evident axioms and those propositions logically deduced from them. Naturally, his views have attracted criticism and the wrath of the established orthodoxy. With his extreme emphasis on logical relationships and necessity Spinoza's conception of God would have looked excessively intellectual. He even talks about a concept called the "intellectual love of God". But, on the other hand, this emphasis on logic forced him to conceive a highly unique pantheistic conception of God, the world and their interrelationship.

What makes Spinoza unique is his personal commitment to his philosophical theories. In his personal life, Spinoza remained highly committed to his theories and philosophical assumptions, as his life and death exhibited exemplary and exceptional simplicity, modesty and courage, which are seen only in people with high moral character. The purpose of philosophy for him was to arrive at a clear and correct understanding about oneself and about God, which would enable one to lead a fearless life. Spinoza holds that philosophical wisdom liberates man from the fear of death and enables him to meditate on life. Russell observes that Spinoza lived up to this precept. He adds that even in the last day of his life Spinoza remained entirely calm and not exalted. Like Socrates he went on conversing, as he would on any other day, about matters of interest to his interlocutor. Russell observes that, unlike some other philosophers, he not only believed his own doctrines, but practiced them. (*A History of Western Philosophy*)

Though he talks about the intellectual love of God, this love is not exclusively intellectual, as the term is normally understood; as different from experiential or indifferent to one's personal life. He firmly believed that the mind's highest good is the knowledge of God, and hence its highest virtue is to know God. Spinoza says that to know God is to love God and it also consists in having a perspective of the whole, as God encompasses everything. This would also enable us to understand ourselves

and our emotions and passions, so that we can direct our attention to the adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God.

Spinoza thus proceeds from the definition of Substance given by Descartes and also by the Scholastic thinkers and following its implications reaches a notion that concludes that there cannot be anything else other than God and nature cannot be different from God. But before we trace this pantheistic conclusion let us see the way he evolves this notion from the ancient concept of Substance: God as the only Substance.

God as the Only Substance

As indicated above, Spinoza was influenced by the Scholastic thinkers and more specifically by Descartes, in construing his notion of Substance. He defined Substance in the following way; “the conception of which does not depend on the conception of another thing from which it must be formed.” Spinoza affirms that, if this is true, then there can be only one Substance. Here he agrees with Descartes, who held a notion of homogenous Substance. He thus subscribes to certain traditional descriptions of God, where the latter is understood as infinite being, infinite substance, unique, eternal and simple.

These similarities apart—largely an agreement following from the definition of the term Substance—Spinoza’s position is drastically different from the Scholastic and the Cartesian views. This is more evident if we examine the God-world relationship. At the outset, Spinoza argues that both Scholasticism and Descartes fell short in understanding the implications of conceiving God as an infinite being or substance, though they too held such a view. As they have argued, Substance cannot but has to be infinite. But such a notion of infinite Substance insists that there should not be anything else existing other than it, as if anything else exists independent of it, then it is not infinite in the true sense of the term. Finite things are not absolutely independent, though they may be independent of each other (as conceived by Descartes). They must be at least dependent on God, otherwise they cannot be treated as finite. God is present in all finite things, upholding them in existence.

Spinoza takes off from these assumptions about the infinite substance and the so-called finite substances. He affirms that the independent identities of finite substances cannot be final and absolute. They cannot be absolutely independent of God who is infinite. Hence Spinoza argues that they must be in God. Spinoza holds a

more radical account of the God-world relationship. According to him all finite beings are modifications of God and nature is not and cannot be ontologically distinct from God. The infinite God comprises in Himself all reality. Spinoza underlines the fact that, logically, by virtue of its definition, there can be, or be conceived, no substance other than God. Everything that exists is either God or a mode of God or Substance which consists of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence exists.

Following his predecessors, Spinoza too provides proofs for the existence of God. His first proof demonstrates God's existence in the following lines. If God does not exist, then God's essence does not involve existence. But God is a Substance and the essence of a Substance does involve existence. Hence God exists. In the second proof he argues that if God does not exist, then there should be some reason or cause that prevents God from existing. But, then logically that reason must be of the same nature of God, since things of distinct nature have nothing in common. If that reason that has the same nature of God prevents God from existing, then there is some aspect of God's nature that prevents God from existing: which is a contradiction. To affirm contradiction to a being, who is absolutely infinite and in the highest degree perfect is absurd. Therefore, God exists without any doubt.

But this god of Spinoza is not the god of religious traditions, particularly the Judaic and Christian traditions that believe in a personal God and His prophets. Spinoza holds a pantheistic view about God and God-nature relationship, which is very close to the picture held by some Indian philosophical traditions.

Spinoza's Concept of God

As mentioned above, Spinoza's notion of God is different from the personal God of religions and theology. Like the *Advaita Vedantins* of India, he holds that individuality or personality imply determination or limitation. Owing to the fact that God is absolutely infinite, there cannot be anything external to God and independent of him and hence God cannot be conceived as acting according to ends or purposes beyond himself.

This is against the ordinarily held notions of God where believers ascribe to Him, will or intellect. The dominant view—subscribed by the Catholic Church and many other religious and philosophical traditions in the west—holds God as the first and only free cause and the essence of all things as of their existence. According to

this view, God is conceived as a regulating force of the universe and human life and He is the personal creator of everything.

Spinoza argues that, such conceptions of God are due to the essential limitations of the human mind. We seek (human) meaning in a world around us and find it in a conception of God as creator, regulator and designer. But in actuality, God must be beyond all such attributes and all limitations. Underlying such popular conceptions of God is the notion of a moral governor; the idea of the government of the world according to a purpose. This is to conceive God as being who can think or plan and decide act according to conscious purpose and design. Spinoza reminds that all determination is negation and intelligence or will cannot be attributed to God who is not a person. God is not a mere puppeteer who controls the world by pulling strings. We cannot attribute causation to him, as He does not belong to nor can be confined to a causal nexus. He is not an outer cause of the movements of things that exists independent of them. Nor is he a person who looks outside of Him to a world and model his actions accordingly. All such conceptions lead to attributing limitations to God who is absolutely limitless and infinite.

Again, Spinoza is against the idea that God does everything for the sake of the good. Such a notion is important to the Christian theological conception, which has the dichotomy between good and evil at its center. Another important concepts are the idea of sin and the notion of freedom of will. For Spinoza all these are the result of a limited vision; our inability in understanding the infinite perfection of God. It is again a human attempt to attribute our meanings to what we see around.

Spinoza, on the other hand, holds a different notion of control and states that God controls the world through natural laws. He affirms that everything in the material world happens through necessity. God is the inner cause of everything that happens in nature and hence He cannot be different from nature. He is not an external transcendent cause acting on nature from without but is the immanent principle of the world.

This view undercuts the idea of God as a moral governor, who operates with the notions of sin, freewill, goodness and evil. Instead of the idea of conceiving the world as being designed according to the rules of a divine power and regulated by a intelligence, Spinoza introduces the notion of logical necessity and states that there is nothing contingent in the nature of things. Whatever happens is part of the eternal timeless world as God sees it. All things are determined by the necessity of divine

nature for existing and working in a certain way. God necessarily causes the contingent finite things and everything is ruled by an absolute logical necessity. There is no free will in the mental sphere, as that would make the mental superior to the physical, while both are the attributes of the infinite God who is the only Substance. Everything that happens is a manifestation of God's inscrutable nature and events are what they are necessarily and they cannot be otherwise. Real wisdom consists in viewing the world as God sees it; under the aspect of eternity. Spinoza holds that everything is fixed and certain in this universe and future is also fixed as the past. We cannot alter it with our actions.

With these fundamental postulations Spinoza questions some basic assumptions of Scholasticism and Christian theology. If there is no free will, then how can one account for a notion of sin? Spinoza's view will also undercut the good and evil dichotomy and will also overthrow the idea of personal immortality. He holds that, concepts like evil, sin and free will are human inventions that aim at making sense of the workings of the universe by attributing human meanings to them. Evil and sin are negative concepts that cannot have place in the world which is not different from God. All that is negative exist only from the point of view of finite creatures and there are no negations in God. Spinoza asserts that, viewed from the perspective of the whole evil and sin does not exist. The good-evil dichotomy is a false dichotomy and they are not element in things. There is no good and evil in themselves. They are only modes of thinking and are mere subjective notions. One and the same thing can be at the same time good, bad, and indifferent. Hope and fear of Christianity are the result of viewing the future as uncertain. It is the result of a lack of wisdom.

Personal Immortality

The concept of personal immortality is one of the central doctrines of Christianity. Spinoza rejects this notion and proposes an impersonal idea of liberation. He advocates a notion of liberation that consists in becoming more and more one with God. There cannot be anything different from God. Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God. This is the primary statement of a pantheism, which Spinoza would develop further to its logical conclusions. In this sense, Spinoza conceives all finite beings as modifications of God. And the truly infinite God comprises in Himself all reality. He thus insists that nature too, which is

obviously finite, not ontologically distinct from God, but is one with it. God is nature and nature is God.

Pantheism of Spinoza

One of the most striking aspects of Spinoza's philosophy is his conception of God, which begins with his elaboration of the Scholastic and Cartesian conceptions of Substance to its logical extremes where nothing else but Substance or God alone exists. This position raises certain important questions concerning the world, the mind and body relationship (as the world is divided into the mental and spiritual substances), the relationship between man and God, human destiny and liberation. Spinoza's pantheism is an answer to all these questions.

Spinoza categorically asserts that God is the source of everything that is and He is the immanent principle of the universe. This leads to the identification of God with the world: God is the world and the world in Him or God and the world are one. Understood in this sense, God is not a mere creator of the world, who has created it and remains separated from it. He is the permanent substratum or essence in all things and the active principle or source of all reality.

To account for the relationship between God and nature Spinoza introduces two terms: *Natura Naturans* and *Natura Naturata*. The Latin term *Natura Naturans* means nature naturing, or nature doing what nature does. The term *naturans* is the present participle of *natura* and *Natura Naturans* refers to the self-causing activity of nature or nature in the active sense. It is nature in itself and is conceived through itself.

On the other hand, the term *Natura Naturata* refers to the plurality of objects. It stands for the effects or products of the principle and in this sense nature is considered as a passive product of an infinite causal chain. It is whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature, or from God's attributes. All the modes of God's attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God constitute *Natura Naturata*.

With his pantheism Spinoza presents a logical theory of God derived from the notion of substance and relates it with the way things actually exist in the world and as we humans experience them. This theory would be complete only with an explanation of the notions of bondage and liberation, which Spinoza describes with the idea of an intellectual love of God.

Bondage and Freedom

Though from the outset it looks very logical and mathematical, Spinoza's philosophy is fundamentally ethical and religious. He postulates that the goal of every individual is the attainment of perfection or happiness and this consists in knowing God. In this sense, the ultimate human goal is to know God. To know God is the mind's highest good and highest virtue and the aim of philosophy is to facilitate this.

Spinoza affirms that the human mind has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God. But various passions distract and obscure the mind's intellectual vision of the whole. He says that all the so-called wrong actions are due to such an intellectual error. We are in bondage in proportion as what happens to us is determined by outside causes. Hence what is aspired is a maximum degree of self-determination. What hampers this is the fact that we are controlled by our emotions. Hence bondage refers to our inability in freeing ourselves from emotions. This freedom can be attained only with the employment of reason.

Spinoza holds that to lead a rational life is to seek what is useful to oneself, which again means, to live and preserve one's being. This is what is virtuous to an individual. Hence to act according to virtue is to act under the guidance of reason. Emotions are hindrances to this form of virtuous life. He holds that emotions that spring from inadequate ideas are passions which are more detrimental. According to him, passions are those emotions in which we appear to ourselves to be passive in the power of outside forces and hence to overcome them is to overcome ignorance and evil.

The first step to attain this is to form a clear and distinct idea about our emotions, by listening to the voice of reason and understanding. This is to understand that all things are necessary and nothing in this world is accidental. Here one has to clearly and distinctly understand oneself and one's emotions. This is what Spinoza refers to as loving God. For him it is an intellectual love, which sees things as *sub specie aeternitatis*, or things as contained in God. This is to see things as following from the necessity of the divine nature and not conceiving them as separate from God. Things are conceived in their relation to the infinite causal system of Nature and as part of the logically connected infinite system.

In this sense, to know God is to conceive us and other things as part of the logically connected infinite system. Spinoza holds that from this knowledge arises the

pleasure or satisfaction of mind. This conception leads to another idea which is central to Spinoza's theory; the intellectual love of God.

Intellectual Love of God

The knowledge that we are part of the logically connected infinite system leads to pleasure. And this pleasure accompanied by the idea of God as eternal cause is the intellectual love of God. This is intellectual and not emotional, as it emanates from an understanding of the nature of the infinite God. This love also leads to the understanding about one's place in the infinite system and the place of others. Hence the love of God for men and the mind's intellectual love towards God is one and the same thing.

Spinoza affirms that this love towards God must hold the chief place in the mind. This is the understanding of everything as part of God. This is the intellectual love of God where the union of thought and emotion takes place. In this intellectual love the apprehension of truth, or the whole happens. In such an apprehension, nothing negative is contained, as nothing can be negated from the whole.

Spinoza says that this understanding involves a peculiar form of joy, which is not a mere emotional pleasure. He argues that when all objects are referred to God, the idea of God will fully occupy the mind. The intellectual love of the mind towards God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself. This according Spinoza is the inevitable consequence of us acquiring understanding. Logically, argues Spinoza, no one can hate God as that leads to self-hatred. Again a man who loves God cannot want God to love him, as he would then know that God has no passions or pleasures or pains and God loves and hates no one. If a man who loves God and wants God to love him, then he would desire that God, whom he loves, should not be God, which is logically absurd.

Quiz

1. What according to Spinoza is the mind's highest good?
(a) The knowledge of the world (b) The knowledge of God (c) The knowledge of Human mind (d) The knowledge of our passions.
2. According to Spinoza all finite beings are:
(a) Attributes of God (b) Different from God who is infinite (c) Striving to become God (d) Modification of God.

3. Which of the following is not applicable to Spinoza's concept of God?
(a) God is absolutely infinite (b) There cannot be anything external to God
(c) God is the personal creator of everything (d) God acts according to ends or purposes beyond himself.
4. According to Spinoza how Does God control the world?
(a) Through moral governance (b) Through the idea of good (c) Through natural laws (d) Through moral commandments.
5. Which of the following does not happens in the intellectual love of God?
(a) Negation of all that is negative (b) A union of thought and emotion
(c) An apprehension of the whole truth (d) Realization that one is part of the logically connected infinite system

Answer Key

1. (b)
2. (d)
3. (c)
4. (c)
5. (a)

Assignment

1. Describe Pantheism.
2. Explain the concept of the "intellectual love of God".

References

Books

1. Copleston, Frederick, *A History of Philosophy*, vol.4: *The Rationalists Descartes to Leibniz*, London, Continuum, 2003.
2. Durant, Will, *A Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers of the Western World*, Pocket Books, 1991.
3. Rogers, Arthur Keyon, *A Student's History of Philosophy*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1935.
4. Russell, Bertrand: *History of Western Philosophy*, London, Routledge Classics, 2004.
5. Thilly, Frank: *A History of Philosophy*, New Delhi, SBE Publishers, 1983.

6. Zeller, Eduard, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, London, Longmans, green and Co., 1881.

Web Resources

1. "Benedict De Spinoza (1632-1677)", in Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/spinoza/>
2. Nadler, Steven, "Baruch Spinoza", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/spinoza/>.

NPTEL IITM