

BY JESSE N. McDADE\*

## Spinoza's Concept of God

Almost anyone who has taken the second semester course of an History of Philosophy sequence will have read something about Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677). The centrality of his doctrine of Substance and Modes when coupled with the subtle but profound ramifications of Parallelism and Pantheism has led many thinkers to categorize him as the "God-intoxicated" philosopher. Other thinkers, however, perceive him as an atheist.<sup>1</sup> How is it possible for Spinozistic ontology to be interpreted in such a conflictual fashion? This essay attempts to contribute to our understanding of the problem by focusing on those aspects of his doctrine that has resulted in the charge of "atheist".

### INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of Spinoza may be described as the fullest expression of the tendency of modern thought to rely on itself, unaided and unhampered by "authorities" of any kind. It achieves its unity, not by ignoring anything that seems to have a *prima facie* claim to reality, but by its all-inclusive comprehensiveness. For Spinoza, the universe is the exemplification of the fact of science as it existed in the seventeenth century—the fact of mathematics, of geometry. It was a cosmos in which a knowledge of the effect depends on and involves a knowledge of the cause. It was a logical deductive system of implications, in which the material and the mental, the human and the divine all have their proper place, and in which nothing is capricious or contingent, but everything is ordered according to immutable laws.

In the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza is in effect introducing a set of definitions and elucidations of each of his fundamental notions of Substance, Cause, Attribute, Freedom and Necessity, successively explaining each in terms of the others; but he employs these terms in a peculiar way, which must be carefully observed, for nothing but confusion and misunderstanding can result if these terms are taken in their vague and popular meanings.

#### *The Notion of Cause*

The word "cause" as it is used in Spinoza's writing, must be divested of many of its present associations, and particularly of its association with

\*Dr. McDade teaches philosophy at Morgan State College, Baltimore.

<sup>1</sup> Vergilius Ferm (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Religion*. New Jersey: Littlefield Adams and Company, 1959. p. 731.

Note: All citations without further indication, giving part and proposition numbers, are taken from H. H. Joachim's *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1901.

the causal laws of modern experimental science. What is common to Spinoza's use and our contemporary use of the word is simply that a cause is taken to be anything which explains the existence or qualities of the effect. To Spinoza to explain means to show that a true proposition is the logically necessary consequence of some other; explanation essentially includes or involves exhibiting necessary connections, and necessary connection in this context means a strictly logical connection to be discovered by a logical analysis of the ideas involved.<sup>2</sup>

The ideal of scientific explanation for Spinoza is purely mathematical and deductive. "Cause" means, not force, nor mechanical or efficient cause, but that in terms of which a thing is intelligible—its logical ground, its *arche*, its principle of intelligibility. Though Spinoza characteristically refuses to define this basic concept, it is clear that to him, "cause" is always to be identified with formal cause alone.<sup>3</sup>

In the expository part of this paper I shall show that Spinoza always employs the Cartesian Analytical Model of Geometry as the causal model for his system and conceptualizations.

### *Substance*

The first definition of the *Ethics* deals with what at first appears to be a purely scholastic concept—*causa sui*. But Spinoza's whole system is contained in this concept in embryonic form. "By that which is self-caused (*causa sui*)," he says, "I mean that of which the essence involves existence, or that of which the nature is conceived as existent."<sup>4</sup> "One substance cannot be produced by another for if a substance can be produced from something else, knowledge of it would depend upon knowledge of its cause and consequently it would not be a substance."<sup>5</sup> Substance then is self-caused. Its essence involves its existence; it exists by virtue of its own essence, requiring for its existence no external cause, no other essence.

To say that the universe is self-caused is possible only if the universe is without beginning and without limit. If the universe (substance) had a beginning something else must have produced it. If it were finite, then something would have to exist that limits it, which is beyond it. But that which is beyond it, in its turn, would be limited by something else; and so on to ad infinitum. Consequently we must conceive the universe as infinite, that is, not limited, not determined by something else; and without beginning, that is, eternal.

The reason for this view is that Spinoza considered mathematics with its so called "eternal truth" as the model of science. Moreover, Spinoza gave particular preference to geometry, which entitles one to disregard the concept of time, excluding it in principle from its reasonings. From this it

<sup>2</sup> John H. Randall, *The Career of Philosophy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 439

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza* (Harmondsworth Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

followed that Spinoza made real causes, acting in time, equivalent to logical sequences and timeless conclusions.

Substance exists in itself and is conceived through itself; the conception of substance can be formed independently of any other conception.<sup>6</sup> From this definition Spinoza draws the conclusion that substance is by nature prior to its modifications, that it, to its modes. The separation of substance from its modes is very clearly expressed in the proof of Proposition 5, Part 1, of the *Ethics*. "A substance is naturally prior to its modifications, it follows that, setting the modifications aside, and considering substance in itself . . . ."

### *Attributes*

To conceive substance as all-inclusion and infinite is the same, in Spinoza's language, as to conceive God as possessing infinite attributes. The attributes of substance are simply the essential nature of substance as conceived by the intellect, and are called "attributes" because to conceive substance intellectually is to "attribute" such and such a nature to substance.

Although there are an infinite number of attributes we are able to know two of them, namely, thought and extension. The relations between the two systems or orders, his two attributes, he conceives as like the relation between geometry and algebra in the mathematical discipline. Analytic geometry maintains that the same mathematical order or relations can be expressed either geometrically or algebraically. The circle is thus either the idealized extended perfect figure suggested by the figure drawn; or it is the algebraic formula  $a^2 + b^2 = r^2$ . The figure and the algebraic formula are both alike the circle, "conceived under the attribute" of geometry or extension, and "under the attribute" of algebra or thought. This is the conception Spinoza is seeking to generalize in his doctrine of attributes.<sup>7</sup>

### *Necessity*

Substance and attributes are eternal: once given, it could not be otherwise, any more than a triangle could have a different sum of its angles than two right angles. "Things could not have been brought into being by substance in any manner or in any order different from what has been obtained." (I, prop. 33) "God never can decree, not ever could have decreed, anything but what is; God did not exist before his decrees, and would not exist without them;" "(Scholium to I, prop. 33)—for God is identified with his decrees."

For Spinoza, freedom is necessity understood. "It is not in the nature of reason to regard things as contingent, but as necessary." (II, prop. 44) There are no purposes in nature. To find purposes and natural ends there makes the real cause, the structure of process, an effect of what is in reality its consequence.

<sup>6</sup> *Ethics*, Pt. I, Def. III.

<sup>7</sup> Randall, p. 439.

Under the spell of his mathematical vision, Spinoza is throwing out Aristotle's functional view. He is reducing all ends or "final causes" to purely formal causes. He transforms, we may say, "God" from an ideal to an equation.

### *Modes*

We have said that substance exists in itself and is conceived through itself. On the other hand, the modes, which are essentially the conditions of substance, exist in and are conceived through something other than themselves, that is, in and through substance.

Now let us look further at the idea of substance and modes. Spinoza says that from substance all of its modes, finite as well as infinite, always and necessarily follow—and with such necessity that it is impossible for them not to follow. This means that substance is impossible without its modes. Yet, we said earlier that substance existed independent of its modes.<sup>8</sup>

The causal explanation of the relation between substance and modes is a mathematical one. A line segment has a definite extension, a definite length. However, the points which lie on this segment—and there is nothing else on it except points, plus the relationship of continuity between them—have no extension, no magnitude; neither length nor width. Thus the segment and the parts differ in nature; they are different in principle and opposed as to quality: the segment is something extended and has a definite length, while the points are non-extended and have no length at all. At the same time, however, the segment presupposes points as its limits and that which contains or includes in itself, in infinite numbers. And conversely, the point contains in itself the necessary condition of the segment.

Further, a non-extended point (and a point must be conceived as non-extended) is as it were, a spatial zero, for a point is the lower limit of the line, as zero is the lower limit of number. Consequently, no matter how many points we put together, we will never obtain a segment of even medium length: a segment is something more than and qualitatively different from a simple mechanical aggregate of parts which make it up, so substance is not a simple mechanical aggregate of finite things. Infinite substance and its finite modes differ in principle, by their nature or quality: substance is one, infinite, indivisible, indestructible, and determined only from within; whereas finite things are many, limited, destructible, and determined in the final analysis by the whole aggregate of things, and not exclusively by its own nature or essence. This fact is also related to the relation of existence with essence. In finite things there is a necessary break between existence and essence. But it is also essential to observe that this is true only when we consider some particular mode in isolation. For Spinoza says, "the more we understand particular things, the more we understand God."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> H. H. Joachim, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1901) pp. 43-45.

<sup>9</sup> Richard McKeon, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1928), p. 67.

"Whatever is, is in God and without God nothing can either be or be conceived." (I, prop. 15) We see that all knowledge and every event is caught up and embraced in one logical system. From this system, all things—laws, events, facts, knowledge, objects—flow forth of necessity as from the nature of the triangle it follows that the sum of its angles is equal to two right angles.

### *Motion*

Galilean and Cartesian physics induced Spinoza to regard all physical phenomena as varying manifestations of a constant stock of motion (or motion and rest). With his caution, however, Spinoza suspected that motion might be one of several types of physical energy. He therefore did not identify Extension with motion, but rather described motion as an infinite and immediate mode of Extension—infinite as exhaustive of all finite modes of motion and immediate as a direct manifestation or expression of motion.

Yet the face of the physical world as a whole preserves a certain sameness in spite of countless changes in detail. This, however, is the result of the conservation of motion. Spinoza thus describes it as a mediate or indirect mode of Extension; but it is infinite in as much as it includes all things that can be reduced to motion. The physical phenomena or ordinary expression are finite, because each is limited by other finite modes. Each finite mode is finite because it is not also the other finite modes.

### *Conatus*

Each particular thing, interacting with other particular things within the common order of nature, exhibits a characteristic tendency to cohesion and to the preservation of its own identity, a "striving (conatus), so far as it lies in itself to do so, to persist in its own being" (Ethics Pt. III, Prop. VII). This striving towards cohesion and the preservation of its own being and identity constitutes the essence of a particular thing, in the only sense in which particular things, which are not substances, can be said to have essences. Particular things, being dependent modes and not substances, are constantly undergoing changes of states as the effects of causes other than themselves; as they are not self-determining substances, their successive states cannot be deduced from their own essence alone, but must be explained partly by reference to the action upon them of other particular things. Each particular thing possesses a determinate nature of its own only in so far as it is active and not passive in relation to things other than itself, that is, only insofar as its states can be explained otherwise than as the effects of external causes; only so far as a thing is an originating cause—and clearly a dependent mode cannot be entirely an originating cause—can any individuality, any determinate nature of its own, be attributed to it.

The importance of this doctrine of conatus is that it qualifies what would otherwise seem a too crudely mechanical or atomistic account of

the physical world.<sup>10</sup> It implies that our ordinary distinctions of sub-systems within the single physical system of nature do have some justification in reality, although these sub-systems are never to be represented as genuinely independent substances; for this would imply that their states can be understood without reference to the order of causes in the all-inclusive system.

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<sup>10</sup> H. A. Wolfson, "The Problem of the Origin of Matter in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy*, 1926. p. 603.