

**Philosophy 203**  
***History of Modern Western Philosophy***

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**Class 7-8 - Spinoza's Ethics**

# More Nietzsche on Spinoza

Not to speak of that hocus-pocus of mathematical form in which, as if in iron, Spinoza encased and masked his philosophy...so as to strike terror into the heart of any assailant who should happen to glance at that invincible maiden and Pallas Athene - how much personal timidity and vulnerability this masquerade of a sick recluse betrays (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §5).

I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted. I have a *predecessor*, and what a predecessor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just *now* was inspired by "instinct." Not only is his overall tendency like mine - making knowledge the *most powerful* affect - but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself; this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world order, the unegoistic, and evil. Even though the divergences are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the differences in time, culture, and science. *In summa*: my solitude, which, as on very high mountains, often made it hard for me to breathe and made my blood rush out, is at least a dualitude (Letter to Franz Overbeck, 30 July 1881).

# Three Aspects of Spinoza's Philosophy

1. Monist metaphysics;
2. The relationship between mind and body; and
3. Freedom of the will and the problem of error.
  - ▶ “His parallelism debars him from treating any aspect of the mental as ‘occult’ or ‘queer’... and his naturalism debars him from treating anything as occult or inexplicable “(Bennett 196).
  - ▶ Isaac Bashevis Singer, “The Spinoza of Market Street”

# Monism - An Overview

- There is just one thing: the most real being.
- Mostly, he calls this thing God, though one also can call it nature, or Nature.
- 'Deus sive Natura': God, in other words Nature.
- Individual bodies and minds are attributes of this single substance.
- We, and all the things around us, are ways of God/Nature to be.



# An Argument for Metaphysical Monism

From Jonathan Bennett

- “If there are two Gods, then either God A knows about God B or he does not. If he does not, he is not omniscient and so is not a God (in the Christian sense). If he does, then he is partly passive -acted upon - because he is in a state of knowledge of God B which must be caused in him by God B - and so again he is not a Christian God” (Bennett 119).
- One can replace ‘God B’ in this argument with anything.
- The argument rules out not only another God, but also any other reality.
- If we think of ourselves as individuals separate from God, we are limiting an infinite God.
  - God would not be omnipresent.
- God just is the world, and we are not individuals separate from God.
- We are part of God, modes or attributes of God, ways for God to be.
- Atheism? Pantheism?

# Monism - The Dirty Work

Adapted from Tlumak

Three steps:

- ▶ Substance exists (E).
- ▶ It is infinite (I).
- ▶ It is unique (U).

# Substance Exists

E1. Substance is independent.

E2. Whatever has an external cause can not be independent.

E3. So, substance has no external cause, and must be its own cause.

E4. Anything which is its own cause must exist.

EC. So substance exists.

# E1

E1. Substance is independent.  
E2. Whatever has an external cause can not be independent.  
E3. So, substance has no external cause, and must be its own cause.  
E4. Anything which is its own cause must exist.  
EC. So substance exists.

- E1 follows from Spinoza's definitions, most saliently:
  - ▶ “By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed” (*Ethics* 1D3, AW 144).
- Distinguish between objects and properties.
  - ▶ Another term for ‘object’ is ‘substance’.
  - ▶ Other terms for ‘property’ are ‘mode’, ‘attribute’, and ‘affection’.
- Properties depend on objects in a way that objects do not depend on properties.
  - ▶ For redness to exist, there must exist red things.
  - ▶ Properties need to be properties of something.
  - ▶ Things need to have properties.
  - ▶ But they do not depend on particular properties.
  - ▶ The red car can be painted yellow without ceasing to be what it is.

## E2 and E3

- Spinoza would have seen E2 as following directly from E1.
- E3 follows from E1 and E2 directly.
  - by modus tollens

E1. Substance is independent.  
E2. Whatever has an external cause can not be independent.  
E3. So, substance has no external cause, and must be its own cause.  
E4. Anything which is its own cause must exist.  
EC. So substance exists.

# E4

E1. Substance is independent.  
E2. Whatever has an external cause can not be independent.  
E3. So, substance has no external cause, and must be its own cause.  
E4. Anything which is its own cause must exist.  
EC. So substance exists.

- Consider the uncaused, or self-caused, cause.
  - ▶ “By that which is self-caused I mean that whose essence involves existence; or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing” (*Ethics* 1D1, AW 144).
  - ▶ The very notion of an uncaused cause is pretty much unintelligible, now.
  - ▶ A cause must be temporally prior to its effect.
  - ▶ (Ignore worries from quantum mechanics and relativity theory about backwards causation.)
- Spinoza’s notion of ‘cause’ is related to explanation.
  - ▶ A cause of something may explain its existence.
  - ▶ If you ask why I am tired, I can explain that it is because I did not get much sleep last night.
- An unexplained cause, or an unexplained explanation, or a phenomenon which explains itself, is not so repugnant.
- ‘God is an unexplained cause’ becomes ‘God’s existence needs no explanation’ becomes ‘something which is self-caused could not be conceived of as not existing’.
- That last claim is E4.
- E4 and E3 entail EC, that substance exists.

# The Infinitude of Substance

- I1. Substance exists and is its own cause.
- I2. No finite thing is its own cause.
- I3. An infinite substance must have all attributes.
- IC. So, substance must be infinite, and have all attributes
  - I1 comes directly from the prior argument, E.

# I2

- I1. Substance exists and is its own cause.
- I2. No finite thing is its own cause.
- I3. An infinite substance must have all attributes.
- IC. So, substance must be infinite, and have all attributes.

- Consider Spinoza's definition of finite.
- "A thing is said to be finite in its own kind when it can be limited by another thing of the same nature. For example, a body is said to be finite because we can always conceive of another body greater than it "(1D2, AW 144).
- If a thing is finite, then there are other things that limit it.
- Explanations about the first thing are going to appeal to its relations to other things.
- If we want to explain why I am typing, we have to appeal to the keyboard, the computer, my students, parents, my family, and more.
- Since explanations about any finite thing will depend on other things, finite things can not be their own causes.

# An aside: Can substance be limited by another thing of the same nature?

- “In the universe there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute” (*Ethics* 1P5, AW 145).
- Attributes are how substances are individuated: different properties, different substance.
- If there were two or more substances with the same attributes (or nature) those things would be indistinguishable.
- Leibniz invokes a principle of sufficient reason:
  - God would have no reason to create two substances with the same attributes.
  - Spinoza does not appeal to that claim.
- Take any two things; there must be some difference between them.
  - Even if they were the same internally, they would have to differ in spatio-temporal location.
  - That’s all that 1P5 says, properly speaking.
- Two bodies might limit each other (1D2), but that only shows that bodies are not substances.

# I3

- I1. Substance exists and is its own cause.
- I2. No finite thing is its own cause.
- I3. An infinite substance must have all attributes.
- IC. So, substance must be infinite, and have all attributes

- I3 is implausible, on the surface.
- Some infinite collections omit some things.
- A line can travel in one direction without containing all points.
- Spinoza thinks of God as not just infinite, but as encompassing everything.
- This conception is part of his rejection of Descartes's common, anthropomorphic conception.

# The Uniqueness of Substance

U1. Substance is infinite, and has all attributes

U2. There can not be two substances with the same attribute.

U3. So, at most one substance exists.

U4. Substance exists.

UC. So, there is exactly one substance; we can call it God, or Nature.

- ▶ We have seen both U1 and U2 in the argument I; U3 follows from them.
- ▶ And U4 is the conclusion of the first argument E; UC follows from it.

# The Order of Things

- Some interpreters of Spinoza's work argue that we limit ourselves by thinking of substance as an individual thing.
- They suggest that we think of it as the order of things, or the realm of nature.
- That approach might be useful, psychologically, but it does not do justice to Spinoza's actual words.

# Explanatory Rationalism

everything is explicable

- God could not be separate and isolated from the world; that would limit God's power.
  - ▶ Explanation would cease to be possible.
  - ▶ If God interacted with the world, we would have to impute to God will and desire, all properties of finite beings, but only anthropomorphically ascribed to God.
- One should not think of God in the image of a human being.
  - ▶ “He who loves God will not try to get God to love him back” (*Ethics* 5P19).

# The Sanctuary of Ignorance

- Appeal to God's cedes explanatory force.
- "If a stone falls from a roof on to some one's head and kills him, [those who make God separate from the world] will demonstrate...that the stone fell in order to kill the man; for, if it had not by God's will fallen with that purpose, how could so many circumstances (and there are often many concurrent circumstances) have all happened together by chance? Perhaps you will answer that the event is due to the facts that the wind was blowing, and the man was walking that way. "But why," they will insist, "was the wind blowing, and why was the man at that very time walking that way?" If you again answer, that the wind had then sprung up because the sea had begun to be agitated the day before, the weather being previously calm, and that the man had been invited by a friend, they will again insist: "But why was the sea agitated, and why was the man invited at that time?" So they will pursue their questions from cause to cause, till at last you take refuge in the will of God - in other words, the sanctuary of ignorance" (*Ethics*, 1 Appendix; AW 162a-b, but in an alternate translation).
- Why did the big bang occur?

# Mind and Body

- There is just one substance.
- Is it material or ideal?
- Descartes posited both minds and bodies.
  - substance dualist
- Hobbes tried to explain everything with just bodies
  - materialist monist
- Spinoza claims that the one substance is both mind and body.
  - weirdo monist
- What we ordinarily think of as objects are properties, or attributes, of God.
- There are mental properties, and there are physical properties.
  - substance monist
  - property dualist

# An Argument for Property dualism

- Recall Descartes's master argument for substance dualism.
  - D1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my mind, independent of my body.
  - D2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my body, independent of my mind.
  - D3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by God, and so are really distinct.
  - DC. So, my mind is distinct from my body.
- If we are unconvinced by D3, we can weaken it, and the conclusion.
  - D1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my mind, independent of my body.
  - D2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my body, independent of my mind.
  - D3\*. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, are really distinct concepts.
  - DC\*. So, my mind is conceptually distinct from my body. I.e. mental properties are distinct from physical properties.
- The new argument gives up on substance dualism, and establishes property dualism.

# Contemporary Property Dualism

- Mental properties, like those that compose our conscious states, are not completely explicable in terms of physical properties.
- The claim that a conscious sensation just is the firing of neurons in the brain, seems difficult to defend.
  - ▶ Hobbes says that pain, or sensation of red, or taste of a mango, is just the firing of neurons in my brain.
- Still, we might argue that mental states supervene on physical states: for every mental state, there is a corresponding physical state.
- Then, instead of looking for the conscious experience in our brains, we look for the neural correlates of consciousness.
- Thus substance monism (there are just physical bodies) is compatible with property dualism (mental properties are irreducible to physical properties).
- Spinoza agrees that there is a sharp separation of mental and physical attributes, as we will see.