

The Roots of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Philosophy of God

**Delivered at the Washington, D.C.
Spinoza Society, Goethe-Institut
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Outside of university philosophy departments, the Heretic of Holland remains a relatively obscure figure in modern American society. Even in undergraduate philosophy curricula, Spinoza is not among the most frequently discussed thinkers. Among pre-modern thinkers, Socrates and his progeny, various 18th and 19th century Germans, Descartes and Rousseau from France, and Mill, Hume and Locke from the British Isles all receive substantially more attention than Holland's greatest sage.

While it would be easy to attribute Spinoza's anonymity to a conspiracy of ignorance among the masses, the truth is that Baruch himself shares some of the blame. When students who confront the teachings of Spinoza invariably start by reading the master's *Ethics*, these students encounter both style and substance that appear antiquated, if not primitive, by modern standards.

Stylistically, the reader faces, instead of poetic prose, a plethora of "definitions," "axioms," "proofs," "corollaries" and "propositions." In other words, the reader encounters Spinoza's infamous Geometrical Method, which invokes a mathematical model to grapple with the inherently insolvable riddles of philosophy. But what makes this method particularly jarring to the modern reader is the substance of Spinoza's initial "proofs" of God's existence. Presumably with a straight face, Spinoza asks the reader to accept that God, or a single "substance" exists, based on the following syllogism:

There exists a substance that has each attribute. No two substances can have an attribute in common. There cannot be a substance without an attribute. Therefore, there must not be two substances. (*Ethics*, Part I, Prop. XIV.):

The reasoning here is all well and good, but Spinoza begins with premises that few of us should accept as self-evident. Why, for example, must there be a substance possessing every possible attribute? So even though his arguments might be valid, they are logically unsound, having been built on foundations of sand.

In short, when a reader today turns to Spinoza for wisdom, s/he is immediately faced instead with but another pre-modern effort to prove God's existence based on pure logic, pure reason, or, if you prefer, pure semantics. After Kant, we all accept that such efforts are unpersuasive. So we are left to wonder what, if anything, Spinoza has to offer the 21st century mind.

The answer, to the impatient reader, is "nothing." Nothing at all. But for those who are willing to accept that a metaphysician might have something to say even if his reasoning is often flawed, Spinoza is a gold mine. This stems from the fact that whereas he is not able to *prove* his conclusions to a high degree of mathematical certainty, Spinoza is nevertheless able to enunciate these conclusions clearly enough. To present them as alternatives to more prominent metaphysical systems, be they secular or religious. And once his metaphysical system is understood and carefully considered, the modern reader is hard pressed not to see its viability, its harmony with the dictates of common sense and, most importantly, its potential for providing inspiration.

Rather than encountering Spinoza for the first time through syllogisms, a student of philosophy might be better advised to approach him initially through another doorway. All philosophers, even the most rigorous rationalists, bring to their workplace a series of perspectives or basic concepts that form the basis of their formal philosophical systems.

Sometimes these preliminary perspectives or concepts are identified explicitly by the philosopher; other times, the philosophers might not even be aware that they adopt these perspectives or concepts, let alone that the latter exert such a profound influence on the philosopher's mature reasoning.

For Spinoza, as for all other philosophers, certain fundamental Principles and Underpinnings lay the foundation for his metaphysical system. One might call these the *PU*s of *Spinoza*, because in each case the Principles and Underpinnings can be expressed by words beginning with the letters P and U. In discussing Spinoza's metaphysics tonight, I intend to show how it has emerged from a number of PUs. In each case, I would argue, a Principle or Underpinning would be evaluated by most intellectuals living over 300 years after Spinoza's death as quite sensible and worthy. Also, when these seemingly sensible PUs are taken in the aggregate, I would contend, they lead to a philosophy that, if not identical to Spinoza's, is at least consistent with his in many fundamental respects. If for no other reason than this, Spinoza must be taken extremely seriously by the modern student of philosophy.

Among the most basic PUs in Spinoza is *Unity*. This refers to ontological unity — the sense that all earthly beings are ultimately structurally connected, or unified. To adopt such a principle is to hold that there exists in all of reality merely a single substance, not separate substances for mind and body, and certainly not separate substances composing each earthly organism.

A decade before writing the *Ethics*, Spinoza gave an argument for ontological unity that differs greatly from the *a priori* reasoning found in the *Ethics*. In Spinoza's *Short Treatise on*

God, Man and His Well-Being, he asks whether “all these attributes which are in Nature are only one, single being, and by no means different ones (though we can clearly and distinctly understand the one without the other).” [Section I, 23] The answer provided was that “[b]ecause of the unity which we see everywhere in Nature, if there were different beings in Nature, the one could not possibly unite with the other.” [*Id.*] In other words, the ontological unity Spinoza inserted at the heart of his mature philosophy was consistent with what he observed as a younger man studying nature.

While Spinoza, the “God-intoxicated man,” might be commonly associated with the belief in a single great ground of being, he was not concerned solely with the great and powerful visions of the astronomer but also with the tiny, microscopic visions of the biologist. Armed with this latter perspective, this lens-crafter viewed nature as being composed at one, very profound level of infinitely divisible microscopic bodies, fundamentally cut from the same living, unified cloth. Now, 300+ years and numerous scientific discoveries later, nobody would scoff at a chemist or microbiologist who shared the same perspective in affirming such unity.

A second of Spinoza’s PUs is *Ultimacy*. This is the bookend of unity, for in considering the latter we must consider the smallest of the small, whereas ultimacy requires that we consider Being on the grandest possible scale. In formulating his philosophical system, Spinoza did not rest on the notion that all of reality is a single, unified substance. He also contemplated what concepts could be used to characterize this substance in terms of its scope or power. And he fixed upon the notion of substance’s ultimacy in the sense of it being as great and powerful as it could possibly be. No other perspective would seem properly respectful. Nor would any alternative be consistent with Spinoza’s humility as a merely human expression of unified

substance or Being — one whose perspective is way too limited to justify positing limitations in the power of Being itself.

So far, it might appear, Spinoza's metaphysical foundations are not altogether different from those of many traditional theists. Theists commonly find unity in earthly beings, since all such beings are viewed as having been created from the outside by a single divine source, which is none other than omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and any other omni-excellent characteristic that we could envision. But now we come to the third Spinozist PU: *Parsimony*. Parsimony, in this case, doesn't refer to being economical with money, but is used instead in the broader philosophical sense of the term. Parsimony refers to being economical with the means to any end; in this case, with the assumptions that one makes to reach a particular set of metaphysical beliefs. To the lover of parsimony, the more unnecessary assumptions that are made, the more absurd the philosophy becomes.

For a theist, metaphysical beliefs are not reached without first assuming the truth of Scriptural anecdotes or principles concerning the origin of the world and its creator. But to Spinoza, any story with a plot line is simply verboten in reaching one's basic metaphysical principles. Moreover, Spinoza not only did away with any fundamental reliance on assumptions that are grounded in myth, he also refused to posit the existence of *any* being or beings that are metaphysically separate from the world of nature, since he found such beings unnecessary for constructing a working hypothesis as to why the world exists as we know it. He couldn't, for example, assume that a world as physical, as material, as this one could have resulted from a being that in no respect shares in materiality. Under the principle of parsimony, there was no *need* to make such an assumption, so it was unacceptable to do so.

Devoted as he was to the principle of parsimony, Spinoza could not accept creationism or emanationism. He could not tolerate the plot lines proposed by the creationists. Similarly, he saw no reason to adopt the emanationists' belief in incorporeal divine intermediaries. Instead, Spinoza arrived at the economical principle of immanence. All that exists is either an expression of a single, unified substance, or is substance itself. And to return to the principle of ultimacy, this substance, the ground of all earthly beings, may aptly be regarded both as omniscient and omnipotent. In other words, not only is this unified substance aware of literally everything that exists, but substance also expresses in (physical and mental) reality *all* that resides in its absolutely ultimate intelligence.

Spinoza regularly used the term "God" interchangeably for substance. And why not? Consider that his substance resembles the theist's God in so many ways. It has been said that the theist's God is infinite, eternal, incapable of criticism by any sensible standard, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, ultimate and unique. All of these terms could meaningfully be used to refer to Spinoza's substance.

To Spinoza, the belief in the God of immanence is required not only by the principle of parsimony but also by that of ultimacy. He discusses the God of the Bible who creates the world from outside Himself as an incomplete God, who turned to creation as a way of completing Himself. But to Spinoza, substance, being ultimate, is not incomplete, but possesses all. Similarly, Spinoza discusses the Biblical God as employing a human-like will to create a world of terrible suffering. How, Spinoza asks, is that possible, without giving up God's omnipotence, and therefore God's ultimacy? To the Spinozist, rather than viewing all that exists as the expression of a human-like will who creates from the outside, it would be far more sensible to

view the world as the expression from the inside of one who is knowledgeable about what is expressed but who expresses in a manner that transcends will. Consistent with ultimacy, with ultimate power, God's nature is to express all things in God's intellect. And Spinoza adds that God *must* express all such things, for nothing else could be consistent with the principle of ultimacy, with the notion of God's perfection and completeness. In his words,

To those who ask why God did not so create all men, that they should be governed only by reason, I give no answer but this: because matter was not lacking to him for the creation of every degree of perfection from highest to lowest; or, more strictly, because the laws of his nature are so vast, as to suffice for the production of everything conceivable by an infinite intelligence... [*Ethics*, Appendix to Part I.]

Some have ridiculed Spinoza's God as a lifeless, soulless machine, which expresses itself without purpose in infinite ways. But that God, far from ultimate, isn't even human. He is subhuman. Spinoza might respond that there exist better metaphors for God or substance than that of the machine. For example, one may consider Spinoza's God as engaged in a beautiful dance with H-mself, expressing with intelligence both movement and rest in different times and places. As another metaphor, consider the notion of a human daydream. It is done consciously, but not as a product of the will. The entire world that is knowable to human beings may be viewed as but a single day dream of an infinite God. That is my personal favorite metaphor for Spinoza's God and God's relationship to the world around us. So though we might see in this world of earthquakes and starvation a corpus of evidence of God's inadequacies and limitations, what we really note are the limitations of our own minds. The *true* God, Spinoza would contend, is capable of expressing all that can be expressed and, in fact, God does so, albeit in ways that we humans can barely understand.

Implicit in the above discussion, and in all of Spinoza's writings, is a fourth PU:

Universalism. Spinoza writes from the perspective of someone who might happen to be human residing here on Earth, but who wishes to philosophize as a species-less expression of God that views God as much as possible from the standpoint of the universe as a whole. Armed with this perspective, Spinoza disdains the extent to which theologians have clothed their ontological principles in human garb. It is commonly said that God must be viewed as acting with a human-like will, for how else would we as humans find Him meaningful as an exemplary entity? And what is more important, a theologian might add, than framing a philosophy of God that maximizes God's potential to generate meaning in our lives and inspire us to good acts and worthy emotions?

Rubbish, Spinoza would respond. Philosophers ought no more decry the value of meaning than that of apple pies or moms. But that doesn't mean philosophers need to espouse views that distort the fundamental nature of God, which would not only disrespect God but demean our own potential as semi-rational entities. As Spinoza once wrote in a letter,

when you say that you do not see what sort of God I have if I deny in him the actions of seeing, hearing, attending, willing, etc. and that he possesses those faculties in an eminent degree, I suspect that you believe there is no greater perfection than can be explicated by the aforementioned attributes. I am not surprised, for I believe that a triangle, if it could speak, would likewise say that God is eminently triangular, and a circle that God's nature is eminently circular. In this way, each would ascribe to God its own attributes, assuming itself to be like God and regarding all else as ill-formed. [1674 letter to Hugo Boxel.]

That perspective, to Spinoza, is the antithesis of philosophy.

A fifth PU in the Spinozist system is *Priority*. This term is used in the sense that in order to understand *any* concept or being, it is vital to first understand what is ontologically prior to that concept or being; in other words, is it crucial to understand its cause.

Arguably, the principle of priority is the most fundamental notion in Spinoza's

metaphysics. Without this notion, Spinoza would be left with a single eternal, unified substance, on the one hand, and a multiplicity of ephemeral, earthly beings, on the other. There would be no meaningful way to link the two domains of being. Consequently, the reader would be left with a Hobson's choice — either accept the reality of substance or God, and view the world as we know it as merely illusory or trivial, or accept the world of multiplicity and give up the belief in unity, and with it the realms of the eternal and the divine. To save us from that choice, the principle of priority would find a special place for all the actors on the world's ontological stage — for God, for all finite earthly beings (such as ourselves), and for the minimal number of conceptual intermediaries that Spinoza felt compelled to embrace in order to link finite *beings* with *Being* itself.

Spinoza's metaphysical system is largely a rebuke to the notion that life consists of little more than an array of causal chains flowing from one earthly being or event, to a previous one, to one before that, and so forth, in infinite successions that lead to the beginning of time. Must not there be a first cause? Something whose existence is simply a given, a necessity, and that accordingly is able to ground all finite beings that come to be born and all events that come to occur? To Spinoza, the first cause, the ontologically prior being, is none other than *Being* itself or, as he more commonly refers to it, substance or God. Spinoza's God is the only entity to which it can be said that *it* is the ultimate cause of itself, or truly independent. Ontologically, there is nothing outside of or *prior to* God. But all other entities owe their existence to God, and are therefore merely dependent entities. It is only through God that earthly beings come to exist and are able to be conceived.

Spinoza uses the term “mode” to refer to all beings, physical and mental, that are

ontologically dependent upon God. This is consistent with one of the conventional 17th century meanings of the term mode as an entity that is dependent for its existence on another entity. But the term also had a second, related meaning in that a mode is a particular instance of a universal category. So, for example, Jane's smile is a mode of her face. Or a running deer is a mode of a moving object. Modern commentators also agree that Spinoza uses the term in this second sense as well.

In the Spinozist system, all ephemeral forms that exist in spacial-temporal reality, such as a human being, or a plant, or even an idea that someone has on a particular occasion, are known as finite modes of God. Merely because these beings are dependent upon God does not undermine their importance in Spinoza's system, for these beings are vital vehicles in expressing God's nature. Moreover, unlike some metaphysical systems that view beings hierarchically in terms of their proximity or remoteness to God, Spinoza's system regards all modes as perfect and necessary expressions of the divine. The difference between the modes, hierarchically, is simply that some modes possess more power or substance than others. But all are necessary vehicles to express the absolute, infinite intelligence, or the idea of God.

To the Spinozist then, a human being or, for that matter, a dog, is a critical and valued, expressive component of a unified realm. God, far from being a remote player in this drama, is alive right beneath the spacial-temporal surface — grounding the very existence of each earthly being, and redeeming them in their divine origin.

Because God is not merely one of many earthly beings, but the active principle that underlies *all* such beings, it is not precisely accurate to call Spinoza a pantheist. Spinoza does not affirm that God equals the totality of all earthly beings. God is prior to that totality; God is

Being itself. And the earthly beings, rather than equaling God, are *in* God. That is why Spinoza may best be termed a panentheist — one who believes that the all is in God, who is ontologically prior to all else.

Unfortunately, perhaps, from the standpoint of the simplicity of Spinoza's metaphysics, his system does not consist merely of God and God's finite modes. Not only is God ontologically prior to the finite modes but so, too, are what Spinoza refers to as God's infinite modes. These are features or qualities of Being that can be said to exist everywhere and anywhere, rather than in a particular time and place. For example, motion-and-rest is an infinite mode. So is intellect. Like the finite modes, the infinite modes are themselves dependent upon substance for their reality.

Just as infinite modes may aptly be termed intermediaries between finite modes and substance, so also are the attributes of God, which Spinoza says are infinite in number. Spinoza's official definition of a divine attribute is "that which intellect perceives as constituting the essence of substance." [*Ethics*, Part I, Defn. 4.] He identifies two, and only two, divine attributes of which human beings are aware — extension and thought. So what Spinoza is saying is that when it comes to understanding God not merely in terms of God's manifold expressions or modes but in terms of God's actual essence, we know very little: God is a thinking being and a physically extended being. And beyond that, God's essence is ineffable to the human mind.

In addition to giving us what paltry information we have about God's essence, the attributes also are essential to helping us understand the essence of a finite mode. According to one commentator, the modes are written in a language that would be incomprehensible if the

divine attributes — extension and thought — were not available to translate that language to the intellect. Another way of expressing that thought is that any earthly body or idea could be conceived on an infinite number of levels and therefore construed in an infinite number of ways; only by organizing such entities in terms of the way they partake of extension and thought are we as human beings able to understand these entities and communicate to one another about our knowledge.

Armed with the above concepts, Spinoza the philosopher confronted a human society thirsting for simple solutions to the search for meaning. What started as a metaphysics grounded in the value of parsimony, or economy, evolved into a complex system that hardly possessed the simplicity that is often associated with a parsimonious way of life. But there was no alternative for Spinoza to such complexity. For concepts like substance, infinite and finite modes, and attributes were deemed necessary to resolve as many issues as could possibly be raised with his system's integrity. If the price that had to be paid for his system's complexity is that Spinoza's metaphysics would be scarcely recognized hundreds of years later, he was obviously willing to pay that price.

Once the building blocks of his system were in place, Spinoza could tackle such practical concerns as whether human beings are immortal. Superficially, Spinoza would appear to be bound to oppose such a view. After all, he held to the doctrine of parallelism, or the idea that every mental item has a corresponding physical item, and vice versa. To use his words, "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things." [*Ethics*, Part II, Prop. VII.] If this is true, and if it is taken as undeniable that the body dies, how then can the human mind be immortal? Perhaps it cannot. But don't tell that to the Spinozist. For Spinoza

theorized that as long as the human mind is capable of thinking eternal thoughts — based either on reason or, particularly, on the still higher form of knowledge known as “intuition” — that mind is in a very real sense immortal. Certain of its ideas will live forever in the attribute of thought. To be sure, these ideas will be void of the memory, imagination, or sensation of the person who thought them. Yet because these thoughts preserve something that was unique about the human being, it is fair to say that they are sufficient to establish his or her immortality.

Spinoza’s willingness to use the term God for substance, or to affirm human immortality in the face of his own parallelism, reflects what may be termed a sixth PU: *Pragmatic-Rationalism*. This is a principle that Spinoza certainly did not enunciate, and might not admit to holding. But it appears nevertheless to describe his approach.

Pragmatic rationalism combines two concepts that arguably are inconsistent with one another. The rationalist seeks a philosophy that complies with the dictates of reason, and to the extent possible, pure reason. Pragmatists, by contrast, adopt beliefs because they prove useful in their lives, producing tangible benefits or at least a more meaningful existence. Spinoza is the quintessential rationalist; few would deny that. And that is why the “rationalism” in this principle is expressed as the noun, rather than the adjective. But what should happen when Spinoza hits a fork in the road? When two competing approaches equally well harmonize with the dictates of reason, and with any PU that Spinoza associates with rationalism? In those instances, and there are no small number of them, Spinoza gravitates to the pragmatic alternative.

Perhaps this is why he finds unity underlying the world. Perhaps this is why he affirms the “intellectual love of God” above all other values, despite his disdain for the concept of God as it is taught in churches or synagogues. Perhaps this explains his willingness to affirm

immortality, despite the opportunities he had to reject it. Perhaps this caused Spinoza in his *Theological-Political Treatise* to affirm the truth of so many unprovable Biblical statements, excepting, of course, for those statements that blatantly contradict principles of pure reason or our own observations of the laws of nature. And perhaps this explains why so many of the world's greatest geniuses have been able to find in Spinoza the foundations of an inspiring world view, and not merely a bunch of definitions, axioms, proofs, corollaries and propositions.

Pragmatic-Rationalism differs from the other PUs identified above in two important respects. First, as acknowledged above, Spinoza may not admit to having adopted this principle. This can be contrasted to the other five PUs, which either were explicitly stated by Spinoza or can fairly easily be unearthed from his basic teachings.

Second, if I am correct that Spinoza did adopt the principle of Pragmatic-Rationalism, and while recognizing that this is a considerable *if*, it might be said that this principle is the most basic of all the PUs. Spinoza adopted unity, ultimacy, parsimony, universalism and priority once he started to philosophize. But, it is my belief that pragmatic-rationalism was the perspective he took when beginning the entire enterprise of philosophy.

There is no denying that Spinoza, above all else, adopted rationalism as a philosophy of life. He demanded a world view that in all fundamental respects was more reasonable than any alternative. Consequences be damned; the will to truth must be obeyed! Yet any rationalist thinker, be s/he a mature one or merely an intellectual youth, will encounter situations where there is no compelling way to resolve a philosophical issue. Sometimes one answer will appear, at least to the intuition, to be more reasonable than any alternative. Commonly, however, two alternatives present themselves as equally reasonable perspectives. These are the "forks in the

road" alluded to above. And it is in dealing with these forks, I would argue, that Spinoza instinctively, if not consciously, gravitated toward the pragmatic paths.

P-U is a sound made by many a school child to denote a stench. But the PUs of Spinoza emit a fragrance that puts the inquiring but hopeful soul at ease. For these Principles and Underpinnings, taken together, support a world view that harmonizes with the dictates of reason without denying people the sense of belonging and piety that they need to nurture their own spirituality. And they support an ethic that would enable people to endure with equanimity even the most powerful stench — because that stench would be intimately connected in the Spinozists' mind with the single substance that is worthy of love and aptly described by the term "perfect."

Permit me to conclude this talk the way it began — with a glance at Spinoza's writing style. Consider the possibility that Spinoza survived his bout with tuberculosis in 1677 and was able to write one more book. Consider, also, that in writing such a work, Spinoza put aside the geometrical method and chose instead the form of a novel. This shouldn't be difficult to imagine, really. Spinoza wrote beautifully, when he cared to.

When Nietzsche wrote his philosophical novel, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his central character grew weary of the herd-animalism of the townspeople and went up to the mountains where the air was clean, unspoiled by societal decadence. In Spinoza's hypothetical novel, we can imagine just the opposite progression. The novel could start with a person alone on a mountaintop. There she sits, in contemplation. Reflecting on substance, on Being itself. In substance, she locates the root, the ground, underlying each tree, each rock, each star in the sky. And she finds this root not as some remote cause but as the very fabric of each natural form, a

fabric that is forever exhibiting itself in manifold ways through movement, through dance.

But Spinoza's novel would not end with a person in isolation, contemplating substance or God. For though Spinoza's philosophy begins with God, it consists primarily of an examination of certain finite modes of God known as human beings. To Spinoza, the most free person is one who lives in society, with other divine modes similar to oneself and therefore best able to exist symbiotically with one another. So the Spinozist hero or heroine would leave the mountains, and enter the town or perhaps even the city, interacting with others about such seemingly profane topics as high finance, or politics, or the defense of the state. And this heroine would be able to engage in such pursuits without being enthralled by the passions that these pursuits typically produce, the corrosive ambitions, the base desires. And at root, she would be able to do this because she has never forgotten the lessons learned in the mountains — the fact that she and all others she encounters are in God.

Spinoza's philosophy begins with God. And it moves forward to study humans. But it never leaves God. For his God is not merely a spirit or force inside of each earthly being. Rather, his God is a fabric of holiness in which we as earthly beings must locate ourselves.