

The Complexity of the World, the Simplicity of God: A Spinozist Perspective

Delivered at a Meeting of the Washington Spinoza Society, Nov. 19, 2018

Daniel Spiro

My daughter, Hannah Spiro, is the rabbi of Hill Havurah, the Jewish congregation on Capitol Hill. On May 29<sup>th</sup>, she was invited to give a prayer to open the pro forma session of the U.S. House of Representatives. That prayer provides the inspiration for tonight's talk. Here are Hannah's words:

May the one who blessed our ancestors bless these souls and their sacred work.

On this day after bittersweet Memorial Day, may the one who blessed our ancestors bless these souls with the courage to hold complexity.

May they pursue a bright future while remembering those at risk of being left behind.

May they find opportunity in diversity.

God, grant them the strength to hold complexity in your complicated world.

On this day after Memorial Day, remembering those who died in service, may the one who blessed our ancestors bless these souls and their service.

Grant them the energy to serve with compassion.

May they see your divine face in the face of each person they serve and in their own reflection, as these souls serve those created in your image.

May their compassion and mercy shine.

God, thank you for the opportunity to serve your varied and beautiful creation.

To see a video of the prayer, please go to the 3:30 mark of the following link:

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?446135-1/us-house-holds-pro-form-session>.

There are multiple themes invoked in this prayer, but none more important than that of recognizing complexity in this diverse world. Rabbi Hannah indicated that it takes real courage to hold such complexity. By contrast, the safe path, the easy path, is the road of simplicity – to ignore the extent of the world's variety and diversity, and over-simplify whenever possible. Most people choose that easy path, and statesmen typically cater to their choice. Yet Hannah's prayer implores them to resist that temptation. To take the road less traveled. The one strewn with rocks, cognitive dissonance and headache-inducing inconsistencies. That happens to be the road traveled by true philosophers. Even Spinoza, the great champion of cosmic unity,

recognized that in the world before us, the world of our senses, complexity is the coin of the realm.

In this talk, I will examine Spinoza's perspective on complexity – where it exists and where it doesn't. In Part 1, I will argue that when it comes to the world that most of us experience on a daily basis, Spinoza offers us a realm of infinite complexity and multiplicity. His philosophy was replete with warnings about why politicians in particular would have a tendency to ignore this complexity and to do so at *our* peril.

Then, in Part 2, I will argue that in contrast to the complexity of reality when perceived as *Nature*, Spinoza viewed reality considered as *Substance* to be perfectly simple. Why is this so notable? Because Spinoza famously used the term “*Deus et Natura*,” meaning “God ... or nature,” to suggest that God and nature are one and the same thing. And yet, when it came time to define the term “God,” he defined it in terms of Substance, which for him epitomized simplicity. So here we have the same concept, “God,” viewed both as infinitely complex and absolutely simple. If nothing else, this is a paradox begging for philosophical analysis.

In the talk's third and final part, I hope to provide a synthesis of these ideas. Assuming Spinoza is correct that we need to take both complexity and simplicity seriously, the question from a practical standpoint is “How?” How do we make room for each? How does a person who truly loves God, as Spinoza would beseech us to do, gain enlightenment from the appreciation of both complexity and its polar opposite? That is the fundamental question I have set before us this evening.

## **I. The Complexity of God-as-Nature or the World**

Centuries before Franz Rosenzweig referred to the world as a “bubbling plenitude,” Spinoza paved Rosenzweig's trail. From God's “finite nature,” Spinoza taught, “infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things, have necessarily flowed.”<sup>1</sup> To be sure, this so-called “God-intoxicated” pantheist taught that “the whole of nature is one Individual,” but then he went on to say that in this one Individual, the “parts, i.e., all bodies, vary in infinite ways.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, I suspect he was speaking for himself as well when he explicated Descartes' philosophy by saying that “a part of matter, however small, is by its nature divisible. I.e., there are no Atoms, or parts

---

<sup>1</sup> Ethics Part I, Prop. 17. Spinoza's writings will be cited here using Edwin Curley's translations (Princeton Press, Princeton, N.J.). Volume I was published in 1985; Volume 2 in 2016. I will cite both the page number in the relevant Curley volume (in the case of this first citation, Vol. 1 p. 426). Moreover, I will also provide the cite to the Opera Posthuma (OP), the collection of Spinoza's writings that was released in 1677 soon after he died (in this case, the relevant provision can be found at OP II/62 at 15-18).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*, Part II, Prop. 13, L. 7; Curley, Vol. 1, p. 462; OP II/102 at 13-14.

of matter which are, by their nature, indivisible.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Spinoza clarified in the *Ethics* that nature lacks any single form that is so potent as to be indestructible or supreme. Specifically, he stated that “no singular thing [exists] in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger ... and by which the first [thing] can be destroyed.”<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say that when Spinoza was talking about the world, he took seriously its *absolute* infinitude and variety.

To Spinoza, not only is this world infinitely varied, complex and yes, fraught with peril, but so in particular is the human condition. He taught that a human being is “a part of the whole of nature, whose laws human nature is compelled to obey, and to which it is forced to accommodate itself in ways nearly infinite.”<sup>5</sup> He maintained that “human power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes.”<sup>6</sup> And he saw in human emotions a process of frequent vacillation in which love freely flows into hatred and vice versa, causing the same people to both love and hate the same objects at the same time. This should not be surprising, given that Spinoza viewed the human body as being “composed of a great many individuals of different natures, each of which is highly composite,”<sup>7</sup> and all of which constantly interact not only with other parts of one’s own body but with other bodies as well.

In short, Spinoza paints a picture of a human being as an amalgam of highly disparate parts that is constantly being bombarded by forces outside itself, some of which are far mightier than we are. The result of these interactions is an array of emotions that frequently contradict one another and overwhelm us. It’s not a pretty picture. But for Spinoza, this is what it means to be human. He crowned this frightful portrait with statements about how people are “usually envious and burdensome to each other,” “naturally inclined to hate and envy,” and “far more ready for vengeance than for returning benefits.”<sup>8</sup> Such is the price of living inside a war zone in which we do battle not only with other people but also with ourselves. Infinite complexity, you see, can be a formidable foe.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Descartes’ “Principles of Philosophy,”* Part II, Prop. 5; Curley Vol. 1 p. 269; OP I/190 at 8-10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ethics*, Part IV, Axiom 1; Curley, Vol. 1 p. 547; OP II/210 at 25-27.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, Part IV, Appendix # VI; Curley, Vol. 1 p. 589; OP II/267 at 24-26.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, Part IV, Appendix # XXXII; Curley Vol. 1 p. 593; OP II/276, at 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, Part II, Prop. 13, Postulate I; Curley Vol. I p. 462; OP II/102 at 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> See, respectively, *id.*, Part IV, Prop. 35, Scholium; Curley Vol. 1 p. 564; OP II/234 at 5-6 ; *id.*, Part III, Prop. 55, Scholium; Curley Vol 1 p. 525; OP II/183 at 22; *id.*, Part III, Prop. 41, Scholium; Curley Vol. 1 p. 518; OP/II 172 at 31-32.

But there is, according to Spinoza, an antidote to this fighting – at least on the level of a human individual. It’s called using reason to unveil the complexity, or at least some of the clearest and most distinct manifestations of it. Spinoza taught that “[he] who understands himself and his affects clearly and distinctly rejoices, and this joy is accompanied by the idea of God. Hence, he loves God and does so the more, the more he understands himself and his affects.”<sup>9</sup> In this philosophy, our goal is to understand all the various causes that lead us to feel the way we do, for no sooner do we begin to understand these causes than the power of fear, hatred and other dangerous emotions starts to subside.<sup>10</sup> This process involves understanding our emotions and understanding the surrounding objects that interact with us, including other people.<sup>11</sup>

Spinoza stated near the end of his *Ethics* that “[t]he more we understand singular things, the more we understand God.”<sup>12</sup> In his philosophy, nothing is more beneficial to our psychological health, personal power and freedom than that. If instead of lusting for ephemeral goods such as money, status or fame, we as individuals use our powers of reason to cleave to God and understand particular things (all of which manifest the divine nature), we can achieve what Spinoza calls “blessedness” or inner peace.

So that is what Spinoza taught when writing to us *as individuals*. But remember – no matter who we are, our powers are limited. We are always at risk of being destroyed or weakened by the laws of nature, or by other distinct beings more powerful than us. We must recognize that in a world this complex and dangerous, we desperately need other people – both to support us as individuals and to protect our society. It should not be surprising that two of Spinoza’s final three books contained within their title the words “Political Treatise.” Clearly, the older and wiser he became, the more he appreciated the critical import of optimizing our political system. After all, even the most psychologically healthy among us is at risk of death, captivity or other unspeakables if we happen to live in a fundamentally unjust regime.

Imagine Spinoza coming back to life today and witnessing what masquerades as 21<sup>st</sup> Century American “democracy.” I suspect his reaction would be very predictable: we are reaping what we sow by having such a tiny group of representatives rule over literally hundreds of millions of citizens. What’s more, we are suffering from the fact that the complexity of nature generally and the limitations of human nature in particular are such that political governance is inherently *really* hard. So when he said that “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare,”<sup>13</sup> Spinoza

---

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*, Part V, Prop. 15, Demonstration; Curley Vol. 1 p. 604; OP II/290 at 20-24.

<sup>10</sup> See *id.*, Part V, Prop. 9.

<sup>11</sup> See *id.*, Part V, Prop. 20, Scholium.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*, Part V, Prop 24; Curley Vol. 1 p. 608; OP II/296 at 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, Part V, Prop. 42, Scholium; Curley Vol. 1 p. 617; OP II/308 at 26-27.

could easily have had in mind a stable, well-functioning political system in a regime so large that the ratio between citizens and statesmen is astronomic. The leaders of this regime would have relatively few active citizens from which to draw inspiration or guidance. Instead, these leaders would face fear-based “multitudes,” to use one of Spinoza’s favorite words, and be constantly tempted to cater to people’s fears in order to gain popularity and power.

Consider Spinoza’s views of the so-called “multitude.” He adopted the ancient principle that “Nothing governs the multitude more effectively than superstition,”<sup>14</sup> and explained that the power of superstition owes itself to the ubiquity of fear.<sup>15</sup> “While the mind is in doubt,” Spinoza taught, “it’s easily driven this way or that – and all the more easily when, shaken by hope and fear, it comes to a standstill. At other times, it’s over-confident, boastful and presumptuous.”<sup>16</sup>

In authoring those thoughts, it was as if he looked into a crystal ball and saw contemporary America. If so, he would have also spotted fractionalized multitudes, each one consumed with the hatred and fear of rival factions. These groups seem to crave simplicity in their world view – narcotizing themselves in seeing one’s own fellow travelers as “good” and one’s rivals as “evil.” Not surprisingly, each group seeks leaders who peddle in simplistic, one-sided portrayals of the scene of battle. This is what Rabbi Hannah was implicitly protesting when she asked member of Congress to resist these tendencies and govern with an appreciation for complexity – for the idea that every momentous issue, like even the thinnest of pancakes, has two sides.

Spinoza would have been unsurprised that such leaders are indeed rare. “All men,” he taught, “whether they rule or are ruled, tend to prefer pleasure to difficult work.”<sup>17</sup> In the case of leadership, the easy path, the path commonly associated with political ambition, was something Spinoza decried in the strongest possible terms.

If you wish to reflect on a human quality that Spinoza truly despised, consider that of ambition. He referred to it, alternatively, as “an immoderate love or desire for ... esteem,”<sup>18</sup> “a desire by which men generally arouse discord and seditions from a false appearance of morality,”<sup>19</sup> and a “species of madness.”<sup>20</sup> Consequently, those politicians driven primarily by this quality – as so

---

<sup>14</sup> *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (TTP)*, Preface [8]; Curley Vol. 2 p. 68; OP III/6 at 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*, Preface [5] and [6]; Curley Vol. 2 p. 67; OP III/6 at 1-14.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*, Preface [1]; Curley Vol. 2 p. 66; OP III/5 at 7-9.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*, Chapter XVII [14]; Curley Vol. 2 p. 298; OP III/203 at 15-16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. 56, Scholium; Curley Vol. 1 p. 527; OP II/185 at 25-27.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*, Part IV, Appendix # XXV; Curley Vol. 1 p. 592; OP II/273 at 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*, Part IV, Prop. 44, Scholium; Curley Vol. 1 p. 571; OP II/243 at 25-26.

many appear to be – would hardly be motivated to serve as counterweights to the passions and indolence of the multitude. If Spinoza is correct, they would find in the multitude a collection of people “governed only by affects, not by reason. Rushing headlong toward everything, they’re easily corrupted either by greed or by extravagant living. Everyone thinks that he alone knows everything and wants everything to be done according to his mentality.”<sup>21</sup>

And so, the conventional politician caters to this mentality – appealing to the fears and appetites of those in his or her political base, all the while demonizing their rivals. Spinoza was quite the cynic in this regard. He taught in his *Political Treatise* that “[s]ince everyone wants to be first, they fall into quarrels and try as hard as they can to crush each other;”<sup>22</sup> indeed, he added, the principle of “loving one’s neighbor as himself ... has no weight in the marketplace or the court, where we need it most.”<sup>23</sup>

So there you have it – a portrait of an infinitely complex creature, living in an infinitely complex world, and disdaining the very complexity he needs to appreciate in order to live a peaceful life. He thinks he knows everything, becomes frustrated whenever things are not just as his heart desires, demonizes anyone who gets in the way of his own chosen outcomes, seeks out leaders who cater to his passions even at the expense of the greater good, and finds those so-called leaders in ample supply.

Is it any wonder that, in connection with politics, Spinoza taught that “[r]eason teaches us without qualification to seek peace”?<sup>24</sup> Words like “without qualification” sound on their face to be extreme and inconsistent with the dictate to honor complexity. Yet when you consider that what Spinoza is describing in both nature and civil society is a veritable Hobbsian war of all against all, you can appreciate why he so elevated peace in his pantheon of ideals. You have to crawl before you can walk, and you need peace before you can enjoy the fruits of justice, freedom and self-actualization.

## **II. The Simplicity of God-as-Substance or the Ground of Being**

Atheist philosophers find few true precursors who date back hundreds of years. It is therefore not surprising that they would claim Spinoza as one of their own. He, after all, coined the phrase *Deus et Natura*, decried supernaturalism, and rejected the view that God’s scope extends beyond nature’s, at least if the latter is understood in its broadest possible meaning. According to the

---

<sup>21</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17 [14-15]; Curley Vol. 2 p. 298-99; OP III/203 at 17-22.

<sup>22</sup> *Political Treatise*, Chapter I [5]; Curley Vol. 2 p. 505-06; OP III/275 at 9-11.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*, Curley Vol. 2 p. 506; OP III/275 at 14-19.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*, Chapter III [6]; Curley Vol. 2 p. 519; OP III/286 at 21.

atheists who claim Spinoza, he chose to use the term “God” when he really meant nothing more than “nature” but was concerned about sounding too heretical. Since the functional definition of an atheist is someone who believes in nature but not some greater god, and the functional definition of a theist is someone who believes in a god beyond nature, then clearly Spinoza is an atheist. Full stop.

At this point, I could attempt to refute that argument by bringing in Spinoza’s own assessment, much as Woody Allen once brought in Marshall McLuhan to speak for himself. Unfortunately, whereas Spinoza’s words are with us, he himself is not. So in responding to Spinoza’s atheist appropriators, I will confine my analysis to an examination of the topics at issue: complexity and simplicity. From that lens, the contrast between the world and God, as Spinoza understood them, could not be more glaring.

Consider, as background, that for Spinoza, “God” is used in two complementary senses – as *Natura naturata* and as *Natura naturans*. The former is the sense most people think of when they speak of “nature” or the “world.” Literally signifying “Nature natured” (note the use of the past tense), *Natura naturata* refers to the infinite number of modes (i.e., expressions, forms or manifestations, or – to use my favorite formulations – states or ways of being) of the divine that have existed, presently exist or will exist in reality. It consists of ideas, extended things, and an infinite number of other finite and infinite entities that we as human beings aren’t able to perceive but whose existence Spinoza posits. He used the past tense in referring to *Natura naturata* because when we view Nature as a world – as a bubbling plentitude or as a composite of infinitely many things varying in infinitely many ways – it’s as if we’re taking snapshots of each form or group of forms that exists. Every dog, tree, rock, or idea that pops into our head is but a snapshot in spacetime, or in some realm of meaning we create with our mind. Once we take that snapshot, it’s as if we’ve removed that thing from what Hegel called the “Bacchanalian whirl” of activity and abstracted it as an item to behold. Merely adding such things together – even into an infinite collection – doesn’t change the fact that they no longer represent pure action, but are rather the result of a process that *has happened*. Hence the term “naturata” – or *natured*.

By contrast, *Natura naturans* refers to God-as-*Substance*, which in the more recent jargon of Paul Tillich refers to the Ground of Being. Literally it signifies “Nature naturing,” and note the use of the present tense. With this term, God is now seen as active – as a process, or in the words of Rabbi David Cooper, a verb. I don’t wish to erase the importance of *Natura naturata* to the notion of Spinoza’s God, for truly it has a place, but nobody can deny that when Spinoza came to define “God” in the *Ethics*, he invoked the concept of *Natura naturans* or “Substance.” Specifically, Spinoza taught that “By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and

infinite essence.”<sup>25</sup> That is the entire definition Spinoza offered – and you’ll note that it doesn’t refer even once to the word “nature.” He later went on to define *Natura naturans* as “what is itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence,” as opposed to that which follows from God’s nature or God’s attributes (which is *Natura naturata*).<sup>26</sup>

In short, God-as-Substance represents the active cause of all that was, is or will be. The counterpart of that notion, God-as-Nature, represents an effect, albeit that which follows from God’s own active essence. God-as-Substance and God-as-Nature are one and the same God seen from two different perspectives. Truly, there is nothing in Spinoza’s universe outside of God, but the name of God itself is sufficiently majestic – and abstruse – to refer both to cause and effect, Substance and Nature, verb and noun.

So, having spoken about God-as-the-*Natura naturata*, or the world of beings, let’s turn our attention to God-as-Substance, or the Ground of Being. In a 1666 letter to Johannes Hudde, Spinoza provided a somewhat extensive discussion of the “one Being which subsists by its own sufficiency or power”<sup>27</sup> – in other words, of God-as-Substance. Spinoza set forth several “properties” of this one Being, which he said “has all perfections in itself, and which I call God.”<sup>28</sup> These properties include the following:

That it is *simple*, and *not composed of parts*. For component parts must be prior in nature and knowledge to what is composed of them. In a being *eternal by its nature* this cannot be.

That it is *not limited*, but can be conceived only as *infinite*. For if the nature of that Being were limited, and also were conceived as limited, that nature would be conceived as not existing outside those limits, which would also be contrary to its definition.

That it is *indivisible*. For if it were divisible, it could be divided into parts, either of the same or of a different nature. If the latter, it could be destroyed, and so could fail to exist, which is contrary to its definition. If the former, each part would involve necessary existence through itself, and in this way one could exist, and consequently be conceived, without the other, for that reason, that Nature could be grasped as finite, which ... is contrary to the definition.<sup>29</sup> (Emphasis added.)

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ethics*, Part I, Defn. 6; Curley Volume 1 p. 409; OP II/45 at 22-24.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, Part I, Prop. 29; Curley Vol. 1 p. 434; OP II/71 at 9-14.

<sup>27</sup> Letter 35 (OP), dated April 10, 1666; Curley Vol. 2 p. 26; OP IV/181 at 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*, Curley Vol. 2 p. 27-28; OP IV/181 at 16-17 and IV/182 at 27-29.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*; OP IV/181 at 24 – IV/182 at 7.



For Spinoza, that which is eternal and infinitely self-sufficient entity must, as a matter of logic, be absolutely simple. Not composed of parts. Not susceptible of finitude. Not divisible. Spinoza's 1666 letter to Hudde is hardly the first time Spinoza chose to highlight the notion of God's simplicity. His earlier work, entitled *Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy,"* devoted an entire Chapter to the topic of God's simplicity, including a section that declared that "God is a most simple Being," as opposed to "something composite."<sup>30</sup> Yet what made the letter to Hudde even more significant is that this time Spinoza wasn't purporting to speak for another philosopher, but rather for himself.

Years later, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza continued to support the notion that God-as-Substance is as absolutely simple as God-as-Nature is absolutely complex. Early in Part I of that work, Spinoza addressed the meaning of what it means to be "a substance." In Proposition 12, he stated that "No attribute of a substance can be truly conceived from which it follows that the substance can be divided," and then went on to assert that a substance could not be divided into equal parts without losing its claim to be a substance.<sup>31</sup> In Proposition 13, Spinoza further contended that "a substance which is absolutely infinite is indivisible."<sup>32</sup> This notion of Substance's indivisibility became central to Spinoza's metaphysics and even his epistemology. In Proposition 14, Spinoza concluded that there can exist only one substance – namely, God. He proceeded to argue that God's attributes are immutable and that because "eternity pertains to the nature of substance" it must follow logically that each of God's attributes is eternal.<sup>33</sup> In other words, God's attributes are as absolutely complete, unlimited, eternal and infinite as is God, and therefore cannot ultimately be viewed as somehow inferior to God-as-Substance.

This view of God-as-Substance and the divine attributes may also explain Spinoza's approach to resolving the great monism/dualism debate. After positing that we can perceive exactly two divine attributes, extension and thought, Spinoza contended that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" and that a mode of thought and a mode of extension are actually "one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways."<sup>34</sup> So there you have two divine attributes, but they are really just the same thing – meaning that they are what our intellect seizes upon as the essence of the single, indivisible, simple Substance in all of

---

<sup>30</sup> *Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy,"* Appendix, Part II, Chapter 5; Curley Vol.1 p. 324; OP I/258 at 12-15.

<sup>31</sup> *Ethics*, Part I, Prop. 12 and Dem. to Prop 12; Curley Vol. 1 p. 419; OP II/55 at 3-18.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*, Part I, Prop. 13; Curley Vol. 1 p. 420; OP II/55 at 20.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*, Part I, Prop. 20, Corollary 2; Curley Vol. 1 pp. 428-29; OP II/65 6-7; *id.*, Part I, Prop. 19; Curley Vol. 1 p. 428; OP II/64 at 17-20.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*, Part II, Prop. 7 and Sch. to Prop 7; Curley Vol. 1 p. 451; OP II/89 at 20-21, OP II/90 at 1-12.

reality.<sup>35</sup> For Spinoza, monism was an inevitable consequence of refusing to compromise with divine simplicity.

In short, whenever we consider Substance, we will find neither distinct parts nor any other inner plurality. We are now in a realm with no before, no after, and not even attributes that truly differ from one another. Instead, we will merely find one active process – eternal, infinite, simple, indivisible and, yes, perfect. Commentators such as Deleuze have described this process as “univocal” because this Substance expresses itself with one voice throughout reality – generating objects, ideas, and countless additional forms that we as human beings are incapable of conceiving or perceiving. This God isn’t just *a* verb, it is *the* verb that powers all of existence in both the most unlimited sense possible and in the simplest sense possible.

To put it mildly, Spinoza has created quite a paradox. How can a world characterized by supreme complexity spring from a cause that is supremely simple? How can God be equated to Nature, which is supremely complex, and to Substance, which is supremely simple? And how, in light of all this, can students of philosophy rave about Spinoza for creating such a logically coherent system of ideas? What gives?

### III. Synthesis – Beyond the Paradox and Toward the Practical

To unpack this paradox, I suggest returning to a statement we’ve considered before, but now in a slightly different form. It can be found in Part I, Proposition 16, of Spinoza’s *Ethics*: “From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect).”<sup>36</sup> Spinoza considered that point so critical that he made it multiple times – both to explain what he meant by God as well as to reply to the so-called problem of evil.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, you can find in this statement the roots of his view that the world we live in is infinitely complex. The world’s author, represented in this case by “the divine nature,” is constituted so as to generate literally everything an infinite intellect can generate – the good, the bad and the ugly. But *why* did Spinoza feel the need to posit the existence of such an unlimited, transmoral power generator? And why did Spinoza posit divine *simplicity* at the root of this activity?

The answer, I believe, is that his philosophy is a response to two impulses. First, we have Spinoza the Social and Natural Scientist. It was that Spinoza who taught us a formula for marshaling facts and patterns discerned from those facts to better understand the world and gain

---

<sup>35</sup> See Spinoza’s definition of “attribute” at *id.*, Part 1, Defn. 4; Curley Vol. 1, p. 408; OP II/45 at 18-19.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*, Part I Prop. 16; Curley Vol. 1 p. 424; OP II/60 at 17-19.

<sup>37</sup> See the multiple references to this concept in Part I Prop. 17 of the *Ethics*, as well as in Part I, Appendix; Curley Vol. 1 p. 425, OP II/61 at 8-10, p. 426, OP II/62 at 15-18, p. 446; OP II/83 at 27-33.

inner peace. More specifically, as a believer in enlightenment through science, Spinoza taught us to engage in such activities as: (a) analyzing the specific things and thoughts we find in this world, (b) identifying the so-called “common notions” that help form the foundation of our ability to reason about the world, (c) recognizing those baser passions that threaten our freedom, and (d) analyzing the causes of those passions and how they threaten us. In many respects, the knowledge gained from such activities will set us free, taught Spinoza the Scientist.

Those of a scientific bent may have us believe Spinoza was an inductive and deductive reasoner and nothing more. But, as Lewis Feuer pointed out in his 1958 work, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, Spinoza wasn't merely a scientist; he also had his mystical side. He taught us to ground our science and our ethics in an appreciation for an overarching cosmic unity. Spinoza *purported* to prove the existence of this overarching unity based on pure logic, but in truth he simply posited it as what he would surely recognize as an intellectual intuition (and what I would call an article of faith, since he largely built his entire system of thought on this assumption). He taught us that the source of this unity, the divine Substance, or “God,” wasn't simply passive but was, at its root, pure activity – the ultimate cause of all that is. That is one more intellectual intuition, or if you prefer, one more article of faith. As a third, he taught us to never, ever place limits on God's greatness or perfection, which in Spinoza's philosophy refers not so much to the extent of God's benevolence but rather God's power of action, which extends to all of reality.<sup>38</sup>

Keep in mind that the Spinoza who completed the *Ethics* was hardly a court philosopher, a creator of a great academy, or even a tenured professor. Rather, he was a poor lens grinder, who toiled away with a weak respiratory system in the middle of the wee hours in a humble abode in the Hague. I suspect that such a man could not summon the chutzpah to limit in power the God of all reality. Similarly, I don't see a man like this, who so resisted anthropomorphism in matters of God, suggesting that human beings could understand what lies at the heart of the Ultimate Ground of all reality. Clearly, Spinoza recognized the limitations on our knowledge. Why else posit that God has infinite attributes of which we know only two? So when it came to speak of God-as-Substance -- of the indivisible unity that underlies all of our sense experiences but is itself ontologically prior to every earthly form -- Spinoza the Mystic could offer few words. And the only words he felt comfortable offering are those that imply ultimacy and limitlessness.

Words like “eternal” and “infinite” work. So do “absolute” and “indivisible.” Accordingly, so does “simple.” When we speak of God as the cause of all that is, nothing less than what is truly

---

<sup>38</sup> The importance of the concept of power in Spinoza's philosophy is difficult to exaggerate. Early in his career as a writer, Spinoza said that “by perfection I understand only reality, or being,” suggesting that the one who is absolutely perfect is the one whose existence subsumes all of reality. *Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy,"* Part I, Prop. 7, Lemma 1, Note 2; Curley Vol. 1 p. 252; OP I/165 at 5. Later, as a psychologist, Spinoza spoke about a human being's power of acting as the key to that person's joy or sadness. See, e.g., *Ethics*. Part III, Propositions 53-55.

*ultimate* satisfies the call for Spinoza the Mystic. And what is truly ultimate, Spinoza suggests, is absolutely simple at its core. I suspect that what he is pointing to at the heart of Being, or at least as the cause of all beings, is the ultimate mystery – a unity that we can wave at with a name, but can only begin to conceive. We see it as active, as causative, but not as a “thing” like other things – in other words, this infinite Substance is not a form among forms, interacting with others outside itself, and either growing or weakening in power depending on the nature of the interaction. Nor is it a mere state-of-being in the same way that, say, Dan Spiro-depressed or Dan Spiro-happy are mere states of Dan Spiro’s being. Literally, this mysterious unity from which all reality flows is *no-thing* at all; that is why a mystic cannot help but perceive it to be absolutely simple. For when we’re talking about the mysterious, imperceptible wellspring of all existence, where is the complexity to which we can point?

If I am correct, Spinoza’s sense of, and respect for, the unknown is every bit as important to his philosophy as is his analysis of the known. In fact, his “intellectual love of God” concept, I would argue, doesn’t simply refer to a scientist’s love of nature, but also to a mystic’s embrace of the mystery that lies within and beyond nature as we understand it. What’s more, I would suggest that Spinoza’s appreciation for the unity of God-as-Substance, with all the mystery this unity entails, grounds not only his metaphysics but his social philosophy as well. It is to that social philosophy that we must now turn in concluding this presentation.

In my earlier talk entitled “Spinoza on Love and Hate,” I discussed how Spinoza, the ethicist, used the concept of “God” as a tool to free the individual from those passions that threaten to sap our power and our contentment. It would seem equally clear that if Spinoza had lived past the ripe old age of 44 and further developed his political philosophy, he would have tried to further demonstrate how the concept of “God” can be used to free societies from their tendency to fracture into tribalism, a scourge that is threatening to consume our own republic in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

The religious tribalism to which Spinoza was exposed throughout his life, whether manifested in a Jewish, Catholic or Calvinist form, threatened him to such a degree that this champion of free-expression advocated promoting a single, homogenized state-supported religion. To quote Spinoza, from his discussion of aristocracies, “all the Patricians ought to be of the same Religion, a very simple and most Universal Religion ... for it is very necessary to make sure that the Patricians aren’t divided into sects, some favoring one group, others favoring others.”<sup>39</sup>

Now imagine as a thought experiment that instead of having clergy and princes fighting for their own faith communities at the expense of others, our leaders came together as part of an interfaith movement to *defeat* tribalism in the name of a universal God and a universalist set of values. In theory, at least, the idea of “God” would thus become a symbol of social unification.

---

<sup>39</sup> *Political Treatise*, Chapter VIII [46]; Curley Vol. 2 p. 586; OP III/345 at 10-13.

Representatives of all faiths could join together not only in recognizing the divine Unity, but also in identifying one set of basic values on which we all can agree – such as truth, peace, justice, liberty and love. Yes, I recall John Lennon imagining his own utopia, but his was rid of religion. That was never Spinoza’s goal. Spinoza saw too many benefits in religion’s ability to inspire justice and charity. It was the tribalism and the fear-based superstitions that he sought to do away with. He appreciated the baby, just not the bathwater.

Spinoza the Scientist would easily have echoed Rabbi Hannah’s call for us to appreciate complexity – as individuals, as citizens, and as statesmen. Spinoza the Mystic would have equally appreciated Rabbi Hannah’s call to the rabbinate via the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), a place where free-thinkers train to praise the name of God as a unifying symbol – a symbol of an overarching, undergirding and all-enveloping unity. At RRC, people take seriously the notion that regardless of our political or religious ideologies, we are all made in God’s image. Yes, it sounds anthropomorphic. But it also sounds politically progressive, which I think would have pleased Spinoza, as long as this progressivism stopped short of threatening a society’s stability and the security of its members.

If Spinoza was correct that the whole of nature is one Individual, how can we justify tribalism? It would make no more sense that using our right hand to burn our left, or using our right foot to kick the hell out of our left. So far, unfortunately, such self-destructive tendencies have been the way of our species. We have already mentioned the power of the passions among the “multitude” and the “madness” of crude ambition among those who seek to lead. It is no wonder that Spinoza would write that “we’ve never reached the point where a state is not in more danger from its own citizens than from its enemies, and where the rulers don’t fear their citizens more than their enemies.”<sup>40</sup> That danger can be laid at the feet of tribalism – at the fact that past societies have devolved into internal factions that seek power for their own tribe at the expense of others. It is exactly what we Americans are seeing now, only with political parties taking the places of economic classes, racial groups or religious communities.

Political scientists are writing many books on this topic. No doubt, these books marshal all sorts of facts, analyze causes and effects, assign blame in various directions, and satisfy the ever-broadening thirst for information that drives our computer-based society. I am not one to devalue the wisdom in those books or question the complexity of this problem. But sometimes, the deeper answer, the better solution, is the simplest one. And it comes down to recognizing that while multiplicity might be the coin of this realm, we also need to make an especially honored place for *unity*.

Those who speak of America as a melting pot disrespect the value of diversity. The proper metaphor is a salad bowl – a place where different groups can thrive without losing their separate

---

<sup>40</sup> *TTP*, Chapter XVII [17]; Curley Vol. 2 p. 299; OP III/203 at 33 – III/204 at 2.

identities. But the salad cannot be toxic. It needs to be pleasant and wholesome. All the ingredients must ultimately work together in support of the entire plate and not only some fraction of it. To borrow a concept from the interfaith movement, before we can purport to be sons or daughters of Jacob or Ishmael, we must first know what it means to be sons or daughters of Adam and Eve. Or, if you prefer a Spinozist formulation to the Abrahamic, our well being requires us to recognize where we come from and who we are: we are all expressions of the same simple God (Substance), and parts of the same complex Individual (Nature).

In short, true mystics are impelled by their mysticism to be humble, loving people. This is because they recognize that the “other” and the “self” are simply two modes of the same majestic God. Scientists can use their knowledge to build AR-15s and H-Bombs. But mystics? How can they possibly apply their spirituality toward instigating tribal warfare? To be sure, many so-called “religious” people engage in tribal warfare – the more fundamentalist they are, they more tribal they tend to be. But as for those who are steeped in the interfaith movement and who strive to be in touch with the source of all unity, I suspect they will generally recognize the folly of the violence, hatred and piggishness that have come to characterize tribalism.

That is well and good, you might say. But on the Hill where Rabbi Hannah works, you can find plenty of ambitious leaders who are tearing apart this country, forgetting any semblance of principled governance and practicing an “everything goes” ethic. When they go low, are we really supposed to go high? Would that not seal our doom in a battle worth fighting over the fate of our society? I will leave you with two answers to these questions (though I don’t doubt that an infinity of good answers exist).

One comes from Spinoza. “Peace isn’t the privation of war, but a virtue which arises from strength of mind. For it’s obedience, a constant will to do what must be done in accordance with the common decree of the Commonwealth.”<sup>41</sup> So fight if you must, but fight with compassion. With high-mindedness. With respect for the will of the majority and for the rule of law. And with a recognition that all people, even your enemies, are expressions of God. In sum, fight the over-ambitious schmucks, and fight hard, but fight with the virtues of Spinoza, who Bertrand Russell famously referred to as the “noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers.”<sup>42</sup>

My second answer comes from Melvin Orlans, an attorney who I worked with at the Federal Trade Commission back in the 1980s and ‘90s. One day, he told me that “as litigators who work for the federal government, unlike some of the litigators who work for private firms, we must tie one hand behind our back because of ethics. Just don’t tie both.” In other words, fight ethically

---

<sup>41</sup> *Political Treatise*, Chapter V [4]; Curley Vol. 2 p. 530; OP III/296 at 4-7.

<sup>42</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A History of A Western Philosophy* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1972), p. 569.

– more ethically than most -- but also fight effectively and with a commitment to winning real-world battles, not simply self-respect.

So, you may ask, what does it mean to fight ethically and yet *effectively* with one hand tied behind your back when your opponent is swinging away with both? I will leave that question for you to ponder. Suffice it to say that to focus on this noble task is to remind yourselves that all things excellent are indeed as difficult as they are rare. That is the note on which Spinoza ended his *Ethics*, and that is the note on which I will end this talk.