

Philosophy 203
History of Modern Western Philosophy

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Spring 2010



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
 - parallelism
 - dual aspect theory
3. Freedom of the will and the problem of error
 - no falsity
 - strict determinism

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.
- Atheism? Pantheism?
- Spinoza’s reactionary belief in explanation

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 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?

Substance and Limitation

- “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.

Self-Caused and Self-Explained

- 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’.

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.

Mental Properties and Physical Stuff

- Recall Descartes's argument that bodies or machines, like animals, can not think.
- He appeals to two characteristics of people:
 - language use
 - behavioral plasticity
- Our bodies are essentially similar to those of animals, yet we can think.
- “For while reason is a universal instrument that can be of help in all sorts of circumstances, these organs require some particular disposition for each particular action; consequently, it is for all practical purposes impossible for there to be enough different organs in a machine to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the same ways as our reason makes us act” (*Discourse* Part Five, AW 33a).
- The number of thoughts that we have could not be instantiated in a physical body.
 - It would be like trying to run Windows 7 on a 1960s mainframe computer.
- Spinoza, like the contemporary substance monist/property dualist, rejects Descartes's claim that there is an incompatibility between minds and bodies.
 - 2P7: “The order and connection of ideas is the order and connection of things.”

Parallelism and the Revenge of Interaction

- “The body cannot determine the mind to thinking, and the mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest, or to anything else (if there is anything else). Proof: All modes of thinking have God for a cause, insofar as he is a thinking thing, and not insofar as he is explained by another attribute (by 2P6). So what determines the mind to thinking is a mode of thinking and not of extension, that is (by 2D1), it is not the body. This was the first thing. Next, the motion and rest of a body must arise from another body... whatever arises in the body must have arisen from God insofar as he is considered to be affected by some mode of extension, and not insofar as he is considered to be affected by some mode of thinking (also 2P6), that is, it cannot arise from the mind, which (by 2P11) is a mode of thinking. This was the second point. Therefore, the body cannot determine the mind, and so on” (*Ethics* 3P2).
- Given that a monist metaphysics might be motivated by the problem of interaction, it is disappointing that the problem reappears for Spinoza at the level of properties.
- Spinoza claims that though the mind and body do not interact, they move parallel to each other in such a way as to give the appearance of interaction.

The Costs of Parallelism

- Spinoza's parallelism solves the problem of interaction by explaining how the appearance of interaction can arise from a system in which there is no interaction.
- That solution comes at a cost of positing extra mental and physical states.
- There must be a mental state corresponding to every physical state, and a physical state corresponding to every mental state.
- The contemporary defender of supervenience might subscribe to the latter claim.
- The former claim is more difficult to understand.
- There seem to be lots of physical states with no corresponding mental state.
- What mental state is the correlate of, say, the tree falling in the forest with no one to hear it?
- Still, the cost of his profligacy is small, since Spinoza is already committed to the broadest possible infinity (completeness) of states, in God.

Monism and Parallelism

- Talk of interaction between the body and mind should, strictly speaking, be understood more like talk about different properties of the same substance.
- Perhaps the difference between the mind and the body is more like the difference between perceiving an object with two different sense modalities.
 - ▶ the taste and the look of the apple, say
 - ▶ Just as we can perceive the wax with our different senses, so we have mental and physical aspects of ourselves.
- The mind is always thinking about the body.
 - ▶ “That which constitutes the actual being of the human mind is basically nothing else but the idea of an individual actually existing thing” (*Ethics* 2P11, AW 168b).
 - ▶ “Whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human mind is bound to be perceived by the human mind; i.e., the idea of that thing will necessarily be in the human mind. That is to say, if the object of the idea constituting the human mind is a body, nothing can happen in that body without its being perceived by the mind” (*Ethics* 2P12, AW 169a).
 - ▶ “The object of the idea constituting the human mind is a body - i.e., a definite mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else” (*Ethics* 2P13, AW 169b).

Motion and Physics

- Bodies are not independent, and self-subsisting, of course.
- The very notion of motion has to be altered.
- We ordinarily think of motion in terms of objects changing their places.
- It is hard to see how attributes could move.
 - The relations among attributes does not seem to follow directly from our ordinary conception of the relations among bodies.
 - That is, bodies can move relative to one another, but the relative motion of attributes is less clear.
- “We have conceived an individual thing composed solely of bodies distinguished from one another only by motion-and-rest and speed of movement; that is, an individual thing composed of the simplest bodies. If we now conceive another individual thing composed of several individual things of different natures, we shall find that this can be affected in many other ways while still preserving its nature. For since each one of its parts is composed of several bodies, each single part can...without any change in its nature, move with varying degrees of speed and consequently communicate its own motion to other parts with varying degrees of speed. Now if we go on to conceive a third kind of individual thing composed of this second kind, we shall find that it can be affected in many other ways without any change in its form. If we thus continue to infinity, we shall readily conceive the whole of Nature as one individual whose parts - that is, all the constituent bodies - vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual whole” (*Ethics* 2P13 Lemma 7 Scholium, AW 171-2).
- Bennett: consider how a thaw might, in a sense, move across a region.

Determinism

- The interactions of bodies, however conceived, are governed by laws, and appeals to final causes and purposes are banished.
- These laws govern the behavior of both bodies and mind, making all of our decisions determined.
- “Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and to act in a definite way” (*Ethics* 1P29, AW 156).

Freedom and Error

- Descartes confronted a serious puzzle in the problem of error.
 - Once he had established that we are both created and preserved by an infinitely good God, the possibility of error, despite appearances, seemed unlikely.
 - Descartes's solution was constrained by the need to avoid ascribing imperfections to God, while admitting that God's creation was imperfect and prone to error.
 - Descartes solved that problem by showing how we could act independently of God.
- For Spinoza, the problem of error appears even more intractable.
 - Not only are we created and preserved by God, for Spinoza; we are God.
 - Descartes availed himself of our independence, at some level, from God: our free will.
 - But, Spinoza denies that we have such freedom, as we have seen.
- Descartes can sneak out the window to go to the party; Spinoza is stuck inside the house.

All Ideas are True

- Since we are, in substance, God, it seems that there can be no false ideas; all ideas are true.
 - All ideas are true insofar as they are related to God (*Ethics* 2P32, AW 178a).
 - There is nothing positive in ideas whereby they can be said to be false (*Ethics* 2P33, AW 178a).
 - Every idea which in us is absolute, that is adequate and perfect, is true (*Ethics* 2P34, AW 178a).
- There are clearer ideas and more confused ideas, and the clearer ones are closest to the truth.
- At a limit, there are even adequate ideas.
- But, since we are just one attribute of God, we only have ideas from a particular perspective, and this limitation prevents full apprehension of truth, generally.

Spinoza's Built-In Beliefs

- “I deny that a man makes no affirmation insofar as he has a perception. For what else is perceiving a winged horse than affirming wings of a horse? For if the mind should perceive nothing apart from the winged horse, it would regard the horse as present to it, and would have no cause to doubt its existence nor any faculty of dissenting, unless the imagining of the winged horse were to be connected to an idea which annuls the existence of the said horse, or he perceives that the idea which he has of the winged horse is inadequate” (*Ethics* 2P49 Scholium, AW 186b-187a).
- The default belief attached to any idea is an affirmation.
- To deny that there is a winged horse, there must be another positive idea which crowds it out, which overrides our initial affirmation.
- Even the most confused and inadequate idea has some measure of truth in it.
 - A chimera or a hallucination at least reflects a change in a mode of the one true substance.
- Truth comes in degrees.
- Our less-true ideas are, ideally, over-ridden by the more-true ones.
 - “To begin my analysis of error, I should like you to note that the imaginations of the mind, looked at in themselves, contain no error; i.e., the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack the idea which excludes the existence of those things which it imagines to be present to itself” (*Ethics* 2P17 Scholium, AW 173b).
- Spinoza has recast the problem from one of accounting for how we make mistakes to one of describing why some ideas are more true than others.

Passive and Active Ideas

- As long as we are passive, we are receiving ideas from outside of us.
- Those ideas are of bodies.
- Ideas of bodies are inadequate, or mutilated, or confused.
 - They are caused by the interaction of my body and other bodies.
 - Recall Descartes's claim that the wax brought him more knowledge about himself than it did about the wax.
- The inadequacy of our understanding of wax and other objects outside of ourselves prevents us from excluding those overriding ideas which block them out.
 - The inadequate ideas are not false, exactly; how could they be?
 - But, they are less true than the adequate ones.
 - They are governed by psychological associations, rather than by logical ones.

Natura naturans* and *natura naturata

- *Natura naturans* is active nature, as God conceives himself.
- *Natura naturata* is passive or generated nature, God as conceived through modes.
- Spinoza has removed as much of the anthropocentric view of God as he could from Descartes's metaphysics.
- But, there are limits.
- We are finite, and any account of the world and its structure will have to include us.
- Spinoza includes us by making us part of God, considered in a finite mode.

Inadequacy or Falsity?

- Descartes considered two ideas we have of the sun: a sense idea and one derived from reason.
 - He determined that the former is false, and the latter is true.
- Spinoza thinks that both are true, to different degrees.
 - We do make an error, when we affirm that the sun is small, or not so far away, as it appears.
 - But that error is, properly speaking, just inadequacy, not falsity.
- “When we gaze at the sun, we see it as some two hundred feet distant from us. The error does not consist in simply seeing the sun in this way but in the fact that while we do so we are not aware of the true distance and the cause of our seeing it so. For although we may later become aware that the sun is more than six hundred times the diameter of the earth distant from us, we shall nevertheless continue to see it as close at hand. For it is not our ignorance of its true distance that causes us to see the sun to be so near; it is that the affection of our body involves the essence of the sun only to the extent that the body is affected by it” (*Ethics* 2P35 Scholium, AW 178b).

Adequate Ideas

- “Those things that are common to all things and are equally in the part as in the whole can be conceived only adequately” (*Ethics* 2P38, AW 179a).
- Common ideas are those that come from the use of reason, which is one of three kinds of knowledge Spinoza describes in 2P40 Scholium 2.
- The other kinds are sensory, which Spinoza calls opinion or imagination, and intuition, which Spinoza says is the highest kind of knowledge.
- The common ideas are the result of reasoning, which does not rely on inadequate ideas received passively from outside of us but, rather, on active ideas we discover ourselves.
- Those active ideas are the ones that are most secure.
- They are governed by logical necessity, and they allow us to engage God.
- “The human mind, insofar as it perceives things truly, is part of the infinite intellect of God...and thus it is as inevitable that the clear and distinct ideas of the mind are true as that God’s ideas are true” (*Ethics* 2P43 Scholium, AW 182).
- Primarily, the common notions concern pure geometry and philosophy, and knowledge of God.

Is There a Counsel Here?

- We should spend our time focusing on the adequate ideas?
- The situation can not be quite that simple.
- We lack the freedom to choose other than the way in which one chooses.
 - Everything is determined.
 - Descartes's doubt is impossible.
 - No counsel against it could be effective or even appropriate.
- Still, Spinoza defends a kind of freedom which arises from focusing on the active ideas.

Freedom

- Freedom is having a greater proportion of adequate ideas, so that one is more fully self-determining.
- Since we can never have only active ideas, purely adequate, freedom, like truth, is a matter of degrees.
- Even though our actions are determined, we can still strive (in some sense) to be free of our passions, our base desires.
- Such striving leads us to a kind of eternity.
- We can strive to be free by contemplating ourselves as finite modes in Nature.
- “The mind’s intellectual love towards God is the love of God wherewith God loves himself not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explicated through the essence of the human mind considered under a form of eternity. That is, the mind’s intellectual love towards God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself... From this we clearly understand in what our salvation or blessedness or freedom consists, namely, in the constant and eternal love towards God “(*Ethics* 5P36, and Scholium, AW 191-2).