Spinoza: Immanence in The Shadows of Transcendence

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Yirmiyahu Yovel characterizes Spinoza as standing at the heart of an enlightenment in human understanding and consciousness. No, he is not talking about the Enlightenment — an enlightenment founded on the ideas of men like Copernicus, Galileo, and Brahe — but rather a “dark enlightenment,” an enlightenment delving into the murky and repressed side of human Being. Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Sartre all are component thinkers in this revealing and provocative philosophical vein. The dark enlightenment reveals to human understanding our true place in the cosmos: we are merely inhabitants of a totally immanent world. The ideas of the divine and the transcendental are annihilated; human Being must come to terms with the unsettling revelation that all our grand schemes of religious and metaphysical order are illusions (Yovel 109, 136). Revealing to us the degree and extent of our hopeful yet naive self-deceptions, the dark enlightenment — ever-entrenched in the principal Weltanschauung of the modern era — has been the seed for subsequent existential turmoil.

Ironically, Spinoza stands in this heritage as an unwavering optimist. Denying that a transcendental realm has any ontological reality does not, for Spinoza, have the consequences that one, especially in the aftermath of Existentialism, might suppose. Spinoza posits a God of immanence, a God of infinite and all-encompassing substance. A God depicted in such a manner becomes the cornerstone for Spinoza’s joyful geometry of monistic pantheism. Yes, that is right, in Spinoza’s eyes a world of total immanence does not negate the geometric logic. Rational structure can be found in an immanent world.

To examine Spinoza’s philosophy of power and life, I will focus on three central themes in his philosophy of the human condition: naturalism, the conatus principle, and the movement from bondage to freedom. Can order be found and can geometric rationality claim any hegemonic position in world devoid of transcendental reality, or does Spinoza establish his logic on transcendental residue? Borrowing from other great minds of the modern era, I will test Spinoza’s notion of amor dei — is this love of God, which I would characterize as the end of Spinoza’s Ethics, a profitable project?

**1. Naturalism.** For Spinoza, human Being and reality do not represent a “kingdom within a kingdom” (III preface 1.) Humans are, contrary to popular belief, not a special case in nature. Reflexive thinking and forms of complex communication do not allow humans to claim that they operate according to their own laws of behavior. All things in Spinoza’s world belong to the same
nature, God. The principles that govern the rocks and the birds govern people as well; those who claim that human kind stands opposed to nature are deceiving themselves. As one critic of Spinoza expresses it, “men differ only in degree and not in kind from all other parts of reality” (Bennett 36). According to Spinoza there is no escaping this nature. Indeed, we are all determined to act by the laws of God: “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” (Ip29). Spinoza takes God/nature always to be in proper working order. A “mistake in nature” has no place in the metaphysics of Spinoza. All things happen out of the necessity of God because 1. God is necessary, not contingent (Ip11), and 2. “Whatever is, is in God” (Ip15). This logical product represents the strongest affirmation of his pantheistic vision. Furthermore, Part III of the Ethics is founded on an assumption that:

In Nature nothing happens which can be attributed to its defectiveness, for nature is always the same, and its force and power of acting is everywhere one and the same; that is, the laws and rules of nature according to which all things happen and change from one form to another are everywhere and always the same (IIIpref).

This claim is a rather bold one considering the common beliefs of humans. With Spinoza’s conclusion, one can no longer assert that pain, death, or war, for example, is some aberration in the workings of the world. One would be deceiving oneself at the same time. Everything happens by necessity according to God. The perfectness of God is just as responsible for the so-called “Evil” as it is for the “Good.” (I will expand on the position of these concepts in Spinoza’s philosophy later in this essay.)

2. The Conatus Principle. Spinoza’s formulation of the essential quality and condition of being is known as the conatus principle:

Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being (IIIp7).

The conatus with which each thing endeavors to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself (IIIp8).

The primary impetus of anything that is, is to continue to be. All things; ideas, rocks, pains, humans, etc.; act in order to sustain themselves. Everything is constantly engaged in asserting this power to exist; the power by which one does assert one’s Being is the ontological essence of one’s Being. In short, without this power to exist inherent in the individual thing, there would be no Being — Being as the desire and power to be, the desire and power to assert one’s own existence.
This principle also rightly implies a fundamental dissonance between individuals that are within the totality of collective being, Nature. Individuals come into conflict with one another. The assertion by one individual of its conatus might be taken or felt as an attempt to check the conatus of another. The reality of the conatus is that it always finds itself to be finite and therefore sometimes in conflict with external powers (IV Axiom). God, composed of all the individual power, is the only infinite power (IVp4pr). In the perpetual conflict of the internal conatus with all those external to it, the individual acquires and expresses individuality and power.

Spinoza recognizes three fundamental states of the conatus: 1. Will: “when the conatus is related to the mind alone,” 2. Appetite: “when [the conatus] is related to mind and body together,” and 3. Desire: “appetite accompanied by the consciousness thereof” (IIIp9sch). Again, in this same passage Spinoza drives the point home that Appetite/Desire is the essence of Being in so far as an individual is engaged in asserting oneself. In finishing out this scholium and following from these depictions of the conatus, Spinoza succinctly and powerfully destroys the conventional formulations of “good” and “bad:”

We do not endeavor, will, seek after, or desire because we judge a thing to be good. On the contrary, we judge a thing to be good because we endeavor, will, seek after, or desire it (IIIp9sch).

This passage is the inversion of the traditional idealistic vision of good and bad. Good and bad have become agents for individual self-interest. And what the idealist might find even more trying is that this inversion establishes a practical moral relativism — what serves my conatus might not serve my neighbor’s (see IIIp51sch1). Spinoza, with his exquisitely keen eye to the human condition, recognizes the well-entrenched position that emotions take in our individual lives. His pathology of the emotions is, not surprisingly, founded on the conatus:

By emotion I understand the affections of the body by which the body’s power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, together with the ideas of these affections (IIIdef3).

When one feels an emotion, one is feeling the ability or inability of one’s body to act, to do, or to be. The emotions are not necessarily mental entities but rather determinative factors, imposed by external conati, on the body’s power to be. A majority of the emotions are what he calls “passive.” By this term, Spinoza means that we fail to see the genesis of our emotions; this inability leaves us subject to our emotions, unable to better quench our appetite and ontological desire.

We feel pleasure when we, usually passively, move from a state of lesser perfection to a state of greater perfection; we feel pain when we similarly move in the opposite direction (IIIp11sch). By “perfection” Spinoza denotes the increased ability and power of the body to act. On these two emotions hang all the others in Part III.

The highly favored position of the conatus in Spinoza’s philosophy only comes to light when
one realizes that this principal power, in his utopic vision, is the sole component of virtue. As far as he is concerned, no authentic ethic can be derived without the knowledge of and recognized insertion of the conatus as the first priority of Being — which obviously includes human Being.

No virtue can be conceived as prior to this one, namely, the conatus to preserve oneself (IVp22).

The conatus to preserve oneself is the primary and sole basis of virtue (IVp22cor).

The popular virtues of humility, repentance, and self-sacrifice are all symbols of impotence; one is only virtuous when one is acting on or contemplating one’s individual power.

3. From Bondage to Freedom: Human Consciousness. The Ethics is designed to chart a course in which human beings can begin to throw off their psychic bondage and embrace freedom through the dictates of reason and the love of God. Bondage is “man’s lack of power to control and check the emotions” (IV preface). Conversely, freedom is achieved in establishing the ability to understand the emotions and thereby decrease their intrusive influence. Humans will find themselves at their highest state of perfection when the emotions can be to a degree diminished and they can see the true reality of their consciousness and the external world.

In Spinoza’s philosophy there are three fundamental inclinations of the mind to deceive itself about the true nature of reality: 1. the illusion of final causes, 2. the illusion of free decrees, and 3. the theological illusion (Deleuze 20).

The illusion of final causes is human kind’s tendency to project a manufactured telos upon reality. In this action, effects are often taken for causes. “Consciousness will satisfy its ignorance by reversing the order of things” (Deleuze 20). Because something acts a certain way or serves a man-made need mankind assumes that it has found the object’s true metaphysical purpose. Spinoza denies all absolute telos (I Appendix). Things only happen out of the necessity of God.

The illusion of free decrees is established on the premise that humans become conscious of their desire and volition. They assume in this consciousness that they are somehow in control, but what people fail to recognize and remain ignorant of is “the causes that have determined them to desire and will” (I Appendix, IIIp2sch). It is in this ignorance that humans make the claim that reason can rule the body — a notion continually rejected by the parallelism of Spinoza (see IIIp2sch). The mind naively steps into the role of the first cause and begins to put forth a virtue of freewill. Through this illusion man fails to see the real first causes of Being: the infinite power of God as it exists in the finite self-interested conatus of each individual.

The theological illusion begins at the point where humans can no longer really make a claim for themselves as the first cause of actions or change (Deleuze 20). Humans upon this realization
must assume, for their own feeble sake, that God has some purpose and free will involved in all change. But as Spinoza points out, “if God acts with an end in view he must necessarily be seeking something that he lacks” (I Appendix). Yet such reasoning is to be deemed absurd because it negates God’s perfection; God, perfectly, at any moment has everything within him. Therefore, God cannot be said to have an absolute purpose. Spinoza, in the project of shaking these illusions, is pursuing the birth of the free man, a man no longer in bondage, a man who understands and has adequate ideas of the nature of change and the human emotions. The result is a man who follows the dictates of reason. The dictates of reason demand nothing counter nature: 1. self-love, 2. seeking one’s own advantage, 3. an aim towards greater perfection, and 4. to preserve one’s own being (I Vp18sch). Furthermore in this section, Spinoza lays out a blueprint for virtue according to reason: 1. happiness and virtue, again, both stem from the ability to assert oneself, 2. virtue should be sought for its own sake, 3. those who commit suicide are weak and have been overwhelmed by external circumstances, and 4. a free man can never conceive of himself in total isolation — “nothing is more advantageous to man than man” (I Vp18sch).

What, though, does all this lead to in the end? The project of freeing oneself and coming to live governed by the dictates of reason allows the mind to love God, amor dei:

The mind’s highest good is to know God, and the mind’s highest virtue is to know God (I Vp28).

When an individual has attained to this level of understanding, one will have become the ideal of Spinoza’s Ethics. One will have obtained an adequate understanding of oneself and in the process gained an adequate knowledge of God:

He who clearly and distinctly understands himself and his emotions loves God, and the more so the more he understands himself and his emotions (Vp15).

To love is to feel pleasure and have an idea of the external cause (IIIp13sch). When one has come to love God, one has acquired a state of pleasure in that one understands the order of process and change in the universe. One, through a greater knowledge of oneself, comes to a greater knowledge of God’s immanence and infinite perfection. (In short, one has come to entirely understand and “live” the Ethics.)

Criticism

Spinoza’s philosophy is compelling in many ways, most notably in its vision of power and its underlying optimism. I have few real gripes with his ideas. Yet the question that plagues my loyalties to Spinoza is grounded in a critique of systematic rational order. The certainty of Spinoza is stifling. Spinoza never acknowledges the irrational. In fact, it is as if the irrational side of life was consumed by the non-teleological nature of God. I mean, if God is the cause and effect of all of
nature, then everything somehow fits into the order of God. What I would deem as “irrational” would only refer to those acts in which I stubbornly and ignorantly deny that God has determined.

Consequently, Spinoza’s geometric idealism is the least compelling aspect of his thought. His philosophy is brilliant and insightful, but it perpetually verges on a void of life. Vicariously, through three thinkers, I will put forth my critique of Spinoza: Pascal, Nietzsche, and James. All three thinkers are authors of provocative philosophies that oppose the hegemony of reason, and to differing degrees, each poses a valid threat to the rational world order of Spinoza.

1. Pascal.

We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro; whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away, and flees eternally before us. Nothing stands still for us. This is our natural state, yet the state most contrary to our inclinations. We burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens up into the depth of the abyss... Let us then seek neither assurance nor stability; our reason is always deceived by the inconsistency of appearances... (Pascal 92).

Put simply, Spinoza disagrees with all of the preceding passage. Yet the magnificent system of Spinoza’s fails to satiate our desire for meaning and vitality. The world it unknowingly depicts is a fleeting world. The immediate world, the immanent world is forever new — a Heraclitean flux. It is as if the Ethics somehow stops this spontaneity and refines it into stale first principles and essences. Spinoza extracts from the flowing of existence things called substance and conatus, but from where did he get them? Indeed the conatus is a principle of power and movement, but in its determination it is vulgarized, condensed, and distorted.

Proposition 6, part III of Spinoza’s Ethics: the conatus principle. No, a misleading and dead vision imposed upon us through an entwining self-referential construction of meaning and truth: the conatus as it is presented is stale. Only when the individual intuitively acknowledges it into the flux of one’s own existence does it resonate with the immediacy of human life. My contention against Spinoza is that he fails to realize, or admit at any rate, the fundamental transience of Being. And even if he was to do so, his method prevents it: his whole system rests on his fixed, immutable logic — which according to Pascal is going to crack.
2. Nietzsche. The relationship of Nietzsche and Spinoza is intriguing; both derive very similar conclusions, but through very different methods that result in very different consequences. The thinkers agreed on many issues. They both deny: freewill, metaphysical teleology, absolute moral order, unegoistic action, "Evil," and a transcendent God. They both affirm a naturalistic monism and both posit fundamental principles of self-interested desire (Yovel 105). The dissonance of the two thinkers chiefly stems from their positions on knowledge. While they both think that knowledge is "the most powerful affect" (Yovel 106), they disagree on the nature of knowledge. Nietzsche thinks that knowledge always carries with it a degree of pain; he "measures the power (and worth) of a person by 'how much truth he can bear'" (Yovel 106). Spinoza finds true knowledge to be joyful (Yovel 106).

This point concerning knowledge is generally where the worlds of immanence of Spinoza and the Existentialists part ways (Lessing 460). The Existentialists, represented here by Nietzsche, like Pascal, opt for the Heraclitean model of existence. They obviously see a large problem in Spinoza's world where nothing is contingent, where everything is justified by God's nature. This perspective also replaces Spinoza's amor dei with the amor fati; the love of God's order is replaced by the loving acceptance of one's meaningless and arbitrary fate. In short, Spinoza's universal metaphysical consonance is rejected for metaphysical dissonance (Yovel 108).

Spinoza's conatus could be compared to a toned-down will to power; the conatus is in a sense too rational. Nietzsche thinks that the power of the individual in actuality seeks not just to preserve itself but to expand as well. The will to power, in hopes of encompassing more, will even put itself in existential jeopardy. Spinoza thinks that such action is contrary to nature (Yovel 111).

Nietzsche's final bone of contention is the place of reason in Spinoza's thought. Nietzsche takes rational logic to be an arbitrary hermeneutical device; it is a man-made system (Yovel 118). Rationality has no lock on the interpretation of existence. Yes, "interpretation" is how Nietzsche would categorize Spinoza's philosophy (or anybody else's for that matter). For Nietzsche, we ultimately view the world in a manner of aesthetic interpretation. The world "is a work of art that gives birth to itself" — a world that is "eternally self-creating, eternally self-destroying" (Yovel 123). Here, Nietzsche echoes Pascal: It is self-deception to find anything fixed in nature.

Yovel calls the Nietzsche-Spinoza relationship an "enemy-brother" relationship (Yovel 134). While Nietzsche finds Spinoza's rational systematizing to be weakness in the form of ressentiment, to be the product of a man "fearful of the Dionysian truth," while he cannot deny the preponderance of similarities in their philosophies. He unquestionably feels the "shadows" of a transcendent God in Spinoza (Yovel 117) — an appeal to a higher order that Nietzsche does not find in a completely immanent world.

Spinoza was the first great absolutist, and the impossibility of being intimate with his God is universally recognized (James Flur. 650).

James, in his Varieties of Religious Experience, categorically denies all theologies founded solely on reason. The end of Spinoza's philosophy/theology, amor dei intellectualis, is religiously bankrupt; religious experience stems from empirical experience, not a priori reasoning (James Var. 388). The Jamesian critique of Spinoza's rational universal order would speak of it as an "ideal refuge...[for those persons] vexed by the muddiness and accidentality of the world of sensible things" (James Var. 390).

The determinism of Spinoza is a trying position for James. For a Jamesian pragmatist, we only deem something to be "true" because we can utilize it in our daily actions and contemplations. Determinism can lead to a fatalism in which people give up hope. Therefore, a belief in freewill at least provides hope and a means to give power and responsibility to the individual's actions (James Prag. 538).

Finally, life has in it a "movement, [a] vital element" (James 449), that Spinoza just cannot capture in his philosophy:

Philosophy lives in words, but truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation. There is in the living act of perception always something that glimmers and twinkles and will not be caught, and for which reflection comes too late (James Var. 409)

Spinoza's philosophy is missing something, yet as James asserts, this will always be the case in philosophy. The flux of life overwhelms our understanding and conceptualizing. The philosopher who does not accept this fact, but instead tries to justify everything absolutely is doomed to miss a big part of that which he aims to explicate, a big ineffable part of life.

Conclusion

I have chosen these preceding philosophers because they all focus on at least two important concepts missing in Spinoza's philosophy: ambiguity and flux. All three philosophers use a style that implicitly appeals to the individual experience, intuition, and position of the reader. Take Pascal for instance: his poetic tone does not set out to prove geometrically that "Nothing stands still for us...." He instead is intimately speaking to the reader, the sympathetic reader who already passionately knows/feels/understands this rendering of our condition. Spinoza's approach is lifeless and as James affirms, the Spinozistic end does not intimately unite one with the world/God about oneself. I would therefore claim that Spinoza's amor dei is not comprehensively profitable. Spinoza can perhaps describe the roots of the human condition, but where is the rest of it? Where
is the perpetual strange and overwhelming presence of the now? Has he conveyed the whole package to the studious reader?

No. He has refined the human condition into a certainty—a certainty that I find to be, borrowing James' term, “thin” (James Plur. 691). Spinoza’s geometric interpretation lacks the “thickness” of experiential reality. Conversely, Pascal’s, Nietzsche’s, and James’s statements, at times refreshingly and simply ambiguous, dig to the heart of this thick individual reality, likewise ambiguous. The intricate and fragile logic of the Ethics seems thus out of place in describing the overwhelming and robust reality that we are in.

But wait, what about Spinoza’s objectivity? Spinoza's geometric objectivity is impressive (I suppose), but what calls for and grounds such a methodology? And if we are all selfishly motivated by our conatus, is it even attainable? Just by the individual nature of consciousness, the subjective position we hold will always precede the objective. Spinoza, in championing “rational objectivity,” fails to acknowledge this constituent of the human condition.

At the existential level, our individual and collective positions in the immanent world are perpetually justified, confirmed, and fixed solidly by nothing that we can rationally possess. A priori deductions can be made, but what fixes the rules of logic? Does not the elusive foundation of logic begin to crack when we rest all of our weight on it? We are blind if we do not see the depth of the abyss. Spinoza cannot really affix the hegemony of rationality without an appeal to an order not found in the immanent world. The whole project of Spinoza would have come closer to penetrating the nature of existence if he had not compromised ambiguity and flux for certainty, established only, and I go back to Nietzsche, with a sublime transfusion, “shadows,” of transcendental order.

Works Cited

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