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THE GOD OF SPINOZA

metaphysics and the good life

Abstract: Chapter 4

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Chapter 4

Two corresponding Friends of Spinoza

Already before Spinoza had finished the Ethics, objections were raised against his monist argument. The present chapter discusses two early correspondents who criticised it: Simon de Vries and Johannes Hudde.

Simon de Vries

As early as 1663 Simon de Vries wrote a letter to Spinoza with a persistent question: if there are many attributes that are really distinct and independent of each other, why not just say that there are many distinct substances, and leave it at that? 'You have,' wrote De Vries, 'not yet demonstrated … that the nature of substance is so constituted that it can have more than one attribute' (Ep8). Simon de Vries and Spinoza were of the same age and good friends. De Vries belonged to the 'Collegianten', liberal Christians who were annoyed with (as he chose to call it) the 'superstitiously religious' and who found in Spinoza a fresh and independent voice. In Spinoza's absence they studied an early version of the Ethics; and when once in a while a difficulty came up, they wrote to Spinoza for instruction. I mention these

circumstances, because in a serious exchange of ideas between friends one expects each to give his or her best. Spinoza does not. The tone of his answer to De Vries (Ep9) is friendly, but when it comes to the thorny problem of a substance having more than one attribute, Spinoza just copies the text which he gave them earlier: 'the more reality or being a being has the more attributes must be attributed to it' (Ep9). This is puzzling, for the copied text (later to become 1p9) prompted De Vries to ask for help in the first place.[28]

The question which De Vries posed is spot on. In chapter 5 I will argue that indeed Spinoza's argument for monism of substance is incomplete: nowhere is the preliminary question addressed whether it is possible for a substance to have more than one attribute.

Johannes Hudde

A similar critique came three years later from Johannes Hudde (1628-1704), who was a mathematician and later served as the mayor of Amsterdam for thirty years. The letters of Hudde have been lost, but the letters Spinoza wrote to him are preserved (Ep34-36). In one of these letters Spinoza actually quotes him, and so a very shrewd observation of Hudde is preserved:

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[28] Lewis Robinson 1928, 107-8 suggests that possibly the first version of the Ethics which circulated among Spinoza's friends, did *not* contain 1p9 and 1p10, and that 1p10s originally was the third scholium to 1p8. If true, my criticism here should be much attenuated.

> 'Why could there not be many beings existing through themselves, but differing in nature, just as thought and extension are different, and can subsist by their own sufficiency'. (Ep36)

Hudde was not much persuaded by Spinoza's monism. It seems that he was more thinking along pluralist lines ('many beings'). But his precise position is not known, as on this issue no other texts of his have survived. Anyway, Spinoza took Hudde's criticism to heart and came to reformulate his own view. Instead of sending an old text, as he did earlier with De Vries, Spinoza now writes three long letters in which he more fully articulates the fourth proof of the necessary existence of God as found in 1p11s. For this reason Ep34–36 are important texts to understand Spinoza's philosophy.

The proof of God's existence which we find in the letters is interesting in that the change from many substances of one attribute to one substance of many attributes, which in the Ethics occurs somewhere between 1p8 and 1p11, is wholly absent. Instead Spinoza only uses the definitions 1 and 6, and the findings in 1p1–1p8. The proof starts with 1d1. Each entity which is cause of itself, Spinoza argues, is infinite, indivisible, eternal, etc. These properties go hand in hand together, and constitute the 'perfection' of the entity. This is a new term not used in 1p1–1p14 (perfection in Spinozism has no moral or aesthetic connotations. 2d6 reads: 'By reality and perfection I understand the same thing'). We saw earlier that only God and the attributes, or substances of one attribute, are self-caused. They now are said to be perfect. God and the attributes, though, are not perfect to quite the same degree. Attributes, as we saw

earlier, are infinite IN SUO GENERE only, as they are limited to their unique nature. Spinoza now writes to Hudde, using the same terminology, that attributes are 'perfect in their own kind' (IN SUO GENERE, Ep36): one attribute is perfect in thinking, another is perfect in being extended, etc. God's infinity and God's perfection on the other hand are *not* limited, for God is absolutely infinite (1d6) and 'absolutely perfect' (Ep36).

In Ep35 we find a succinct proof of God's necessary existence, where Spinoza uses this new idea of perfection. Spinoza begins by acknowledging a plurality of self-caused entities which are 'perfect in their own kind', and then moves on to prove the necessary existence of a single being which 'comprehends in itself all perfections'. This is what Spinoza writes:

> 'if we suppose that a being which does not express all perfections exists of its own nature, we must also suppose that that being also exists which comprehends in itself all perfections. For if a being endowed with a lesser power exists by its own sufficiency, how much more must another endowed with a greater power' (Ep35).

Spinoza repeats this argument in Ep36 with a text that is slightly more explicit:

> 'if we assert that something which is only unlimited in its own kind, and perfect, exists by its own sufficiency, the existence of a being absolutely unlimited and perfect will also have to be conceded. This being I call God. For

> example, if we want to maintain that extension or thought (each of which can be perfect in its own kind, that is, in a definite kind of being) exists by its own sufficiency, we will also have to concede the existence of God, who is absolutely perfect, that is, of an absolutely unlimited being'. (Ep36)

Both the argument of these letters and that of the Ethics conclude that God necessarily exists. But whereas the Ethics leads to a single substance which has infinitely many, or all, essential natures (or so 2p7s forces us to think), the result in the letters is subtly different. For one thing the word 'substance' (singular) is evaded, and Spinoza seems not much concerned with monism of substance here. But more importantly the result appears to be at variance with monism, and to point to a more pluralist metaphysics. Let me explain. Spinoza begins his proof in the letters with the many substances that are perfect in their own kind, a perfection which follows from their being self-caused. Spinoza then considers these substances all together and calls this togetherness 'a being' (ENS) which, as a result of taking them together, 'comprehends all perfections'. This being, God, 'exists by its own sufficiency' (Ep35); that is, God is a self-caused being just as each of the substances is a self-caused being. The outcome of this proof is not only that this being necessarily exists, but also that a plurality of beings necessarily exist. These are (1) the many substances, each of which is caused by itself and perfect in its own kind, and (2) God, who comprehends all perfections. The necessary existence of God, as the letters indicate, is based upon the necessary existence of the substances. And because the one is based upon the other, the necessary existence of the

substances is not abolished or renounced once God is proved to exist (Spinoza emphasises, in these letters and elsewhere, that each of the many substances is CAUSA SUI. If this were not the case, he would not be able to use this specific type of argument to prove that God is self-caused). Furthermore, it is part of the notion of CAUSA SUI that *nothing* can annul or negate or destroy what is self-caused: once you conclude that an entity is self-caused, it is part of the furniture of the world (like God) and there to stay (1p19). For these reasons I believe that the letters present a more pluralist metaphysics, one that holds that a number of entities necessarily exist.

What can we learn from these letters? It is significant that Spinoza here proves the necessary existence of God whilst wholly bypassing the thorny issue of monism of substance in any strong sense. This suggests that his monotheism (God necessarily exists, and there is but one God) does not depend on monism of substance (there is only one substance, and this substance has all essential natures). The letters show that a pluralist ontology (there is a plurality of entities that are IN SE and conceived PER SE) also can lead to monotheism which, to be sure, is one of the two pillars of Spinoza's philosophy. A pluralist ontology—and maybe this is even more important—can also give rise to the important Spinozist notion of a unique entity that encompasses *all* reality and apart from which there is nothing; and *this* notion sustains the other pillar of Spinoza's philosophy: the deep conviction that we and all things 'are in God' (QUICQUID EST, IN DEO EST, 1p15). Both basic insights thus are independent of the truth or falsity of monism of substance.

When monism of substance is not needed to support the two pillars of Spinoza's thought, the question comes up: what is the doctrine of monism of substance precisely to do in Spinozism? As anyone can see it plays no role in Spinoza's political theory, or in his Bible exegesis, or in his physical theory, or in his theory of the emotions; neither does it come up at the end of the Ethics where we read about blessedness, salvation, and freedom. So it doesn't appear to be very central to his philosophy. Yet, monism of substance, which is not found in earlier texts and must be a late element of Spinoza's thinking, undenyingly plays a part in his philosophy. This becomes evident in part 2 of the Ethics, where far reaching conclusions are sketched that are said to follow from this version of monism. Spinoza writes in 2p7s that the thinking substance and the extended substance (two of the many 'substances of one attribute' which Spinoza discusses in 1p1–1p8) 'are one and the same substance (UNA EADEMQUE SUBSTANTIA), which is now comprehended under (SUB) this attribute, now under that'. That is, they are not two substances (pluralism), but one substance (monism), and this one substance can be comprehended (I presume by God as well as by men) in two ways, as thinking and as being extended. The pluralist heritage, treasured in 1p1–1p8, somehow has lost its feathers, and seems dwindled to a plurality of conceptions 'under' attributes. And then, unexpectedly, Spinoza makes another move, a fairly spectacular one:

> 'whether we conceive (CONCIPERE) nature under the attribute of extension, or under the attribute of thought, or under any other attribute (SIVE SUB ALIO QUOCUNQUE), we shall find one and the same order, or one

> and the same connection of causes, that is, the same things follow one another.' (2p7s)

In these few sentences Spinoza tells us what his monist project ultimately generates: a conception of a unified universe, in which all attributes have one and the same casual structure (his famous parallelism of the attributes); that is, a universe where a single causal law governs all natural things. This certainly is a visionary and imaginative idea. In the secondary literature it is generally seen as one of the core doctrines of Spinozism. But it may turn out to have a fragile foundation. In 2p7s Spinoza presents this unified picture of a single causal law in nature as following from monism of substance (CONSEQUENTER … SIC ETIAM … &IDEO), and this suggests that the doctrine stands or falls by this version of monism. I read 2p7s as an explicit statement of Spinoza's monism of substance ('one and the same substance'), and will shortly distinguish a weaker version of monism (*monism of nature*) which, I believe, does better justice to Spinoza's intentions. In chapter 5 I criticise the strong version (*monism of substance*), and will conclude that it has an unstable place in his philosophy: Spinoza nowhere demonstrates that the plurality of unique and distinct categories of being, which in 1p1–1p8 he studies as 'substances of one attribute', are, or are best seen as, different essential natures, or 'attributes', of a single substance. The default position here is pluralism: if the many unique essential natures are not proved to belong to a single substance, they must belong to a plurality of substances. Pluralism may not easily lead to the conception of a single causal law in nature but, as I argued earlier, it leaves most of Spinoza's wider philosophy intact. It does so, because it is not monism of substance which guides his thoughts, but the subtly different notion of an entity,

God or nature, which encompasses all reality and apart from which there is nothing. This EEN, ALLEENIG EN ALWEZEN (KV1,2,17note) is Spinoza's central idea—also monist, but in a weaker sense. We find it in all of his texts, and it gets in 1d6 its definite and mathematically precise expression. From this central idea the two basic teachings of Spinozism immediately follow: there is but one God (1p11), and all things are in God (1p15). Spinoza's God, as encompassing all things (ALWEZEN) and apart from which there is nothing (ALLEENIG), is unique (EEN) in a very strong sense not easily found in other theologies.[29]

I believe that Spinoza indeed works with two versions of monism that need to be kept apart. There is a *weak* and more open monism which, as I just argued, steers most of his philosophy: a single entity, or EEN, ALLEENIG EN ALWEZEN, which encompasses all things and apart from which there is nothing. This weak version is monist in that (1) there is only one such entity, and that (2) it is the only entity that exists. It is weak and more open because no claim is made as to the internal structure of this entity: it may, for instance, well consist of a plurality of unique substances. In 1p11 and 1p14 Spinoza neatly proves that this entity necessarily exists and that apart from it there is nothing. His argumentation here is a beauty in itself. But Spinoza also works with a *strong* version of monism: God or nature as taken to be a single substance that has infinitely many, or all, essential natures. This version is strong, because it entails an additional claim about how substance and attribute are ordered: attributes, in spite of what

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[29] My pluralist reading is inspired by Joachim 1901 and Gueroult 1968. I am also indebted to Van Bunge 1995.

we learned in 1p1-1p8, do not constitute the essential natures of 'unique' (1p8d) substances to which they belong; instead, all attributes are claimed to belong to a *single* substance. This strong position is monist in the further sense that (3) there is in nature but a single substance. We see the strong variant hinted at in 1p10s and explicitly stated in 2p7s ('one and the same substance'), where it undergirds his parallelism of causal structures and the idea that the whole of nature is governed by a single law. So both versions are monist, but with a difference. Weak monism, or as I like to call it *monism of nature*, presents a single and sole entity which encompasses all things of all kinds, a notion which has a venerable pedigree in the history of philosophy.[30] Spinoza's contribution to this school of thought is a precise articulation of the notion (1d6), an elegant and to my judgment faultless proof that such an entity necessarily exists (1p1-1p14), and thinking out a few things that logically follow (1p15-1p18). Strong monism, or *monism of substance*, on the other hand presents itself in the Ethics as something new and not connected to the wider structure of arguments. It raises the question: on what precisely is the third monist claim based that it is a *single* substance that has all essential natures? Where is his proof that they are not the natures of a plurality of unique substances? In my next chapter I argue that in the text there is no argument whatsoever to be found. And if strong monism of substance is not satisfactorily argued for, it cannot be more than a rather loose and minor doctrine in Spinoza's metaphysics. There are, frustratingly, more doctrines in Spinozism that lack proper arguments, and to my feeling we cannot treat them fully on a par with doctrines that are firmly entrenched in the

30 E.g. Cicero *De natura deorum* 2.3-47.

argumentative structure of the text. And so I choose to read the Ethics with Spinoza's weak monist thesis in mind: a single all-encompassing entity apart from which there exists nothing. This is what indeed he argues for. This weaker notion, I further believe, is more in line with the rather Stoic answers which Spinoza later in the text gives to life's deepest questions.

To bring all this together, I distinguish three theses:

Thesis I	*God necessarily exists and there is only one God.*
Thesis II	*God is a being which encompasses all reality and perfection, and outside God there is nothing.*
Thesis III	*God is a single substance that has infinitely many, or all, essential natures.*

Thesis I is monotheism. We find it in all works of Spinoza.

Thesis II entails monotheism, but goes farther. It asserts that God is unique in the strong sense that apart from this God there is nothing at all. For this reason Thesis II is rightly taken as embodying monism. I label Thesis II 'weak monism', or 'monism of nature'; but it is not the same as substance monism (Thesis III). Thesis II has Stoic affinities[31] and permeates Spinoza's philosophy from beginning to end.

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31 Diogenes Laertius VII, 143-8 reports that 'the substance of God is declared, by Zeno as well as by Chrysippus, to be the whole world and the heaven', referring to 'the totality of things' (**TÒ PAN**) and 'the entire universe' (**TÒ ÓLON**). DeBrabanter 2007, 10 writes that for the Stoic 'there are no things that exist in the universe apart from God, or which are not wholly infused with God'.

Thesis III is monism of substance. When Thesis II is weak monism, Thesis III is strong monism. Thesis III may well entail Thesis II, as it is plausible to hold that the substance which has all essential natures also, given 1p5, is unique in the sense of that thesis. But the reverse is not true. Thesis II does not entail Thesis III: when there is an entity apart from which there is nothing, this entity need not be a single substance that has infinitely many essential natures. Thesis II after all largely is a negative, exclusionary claim, while Thesis III makes a positive and additional claim about how substance is related to the infinitely many essential natures. I don't see Thesis III in Spinoza's earlier texts. It seems to belong to the final period when he was composing the Ethics.

My criticism in the next chapter intends to show that Thesis III is an untenable part of Spinozism. I believe that only Thesis I and Thesis II underlie and guide this philosophy, as they express the two basic theological truths at work: God necessarily exists (1p11), and all thing are in God (1p15). I thus opt for a leaner metaphysics, and I do so because a leaner metaphysics (discarding Thesis III) gives us a sharper focus on the ethical issues that Spinoza discusses in parts 4 and 5 of the Ethics (see chapter 8).