
UNIT 5 SPINOZA*

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

Spinoza is among the most important of the post-Cartesian philosophers who contributed to philosophy in the second half of the 17th century Europe. He made significant contributions in almost every area of philosophy and especially Metaphysics. Spinoza is generally regarded as a monist, pantheist, rationalist and advocator of hard determinism. He is one of the system building philosophers who has setup an entire philosophical system in his magnum opus “*Ethics*”, capturing the notion of God/Nature/Universe as an infinite immanent substance and its infinite attributes along with human’s position within it. With rationalistic epistemology and wisdom, Spinoza takes great amount of interest in how humans can be happy and how much this happiness in them could be achieved by realising their place in conformity with nature. Thus, it becomes relevant to see how Spinoza answers the fundamental riddles concerning humans and Self or their understanding as how and what they are. It is interesting

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to trace Spinoza's development of thought from its early origin, from the criticism of Descartes to the most mature form that we see in his last works. In this Unit you are going to learn about his views on:

- God
- Nature or the World
- Human Beings
- Knowledge and Reason
- Ethics
- Political Philosophy

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Baruch (or Benedict) Spinoza was born in Amsterdam, Netherlands on 24th November in the year 1632. Spinoza from his early age studied in a Jewish High school where later he studied Kabbalah, Talmud, Jewish philosophy and other religious texts. Dutch theologian Gerardus Vossius (1577-1649) et al, admired and influenced Spinoza and wanted him to become a Rabbi. But Spinoza was an unhappy and critical student. The scriptures that he studied and the deductions he made from what he read made him more sceptical rather than satisfying him. It is probably during this time that he got acquainted with the philosophy of French philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes (1596-1650), which helped him to recast his own rationalistic ideas considerably.

For his livelihood around 1654, Spinoza started teaching in a school, whose founder was the Dutch philosopher Franciscus van den Enden (1602-74). As per the records it appears that Spinoza during this time also read Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) and English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Spinoza as expected then discarded the Jewish scriptures and as a consequence, in the year 1656 firstly, there was an attempt to assassinate him by a dagger outside a synagogue and finally, later Spinoza was excommunicated from Amsterdam and from Judaism by the religious community.

Spinoza then moved and started living in the country side and worked as a lens grinder of eyeglasses, microscopes and telescopes. Here he studied Optics and pondered and dictated

his fundamental principles of philosophy to his peer group. These dictations, which originally were only for private circulation were lastly published much later in 1862 and was titled “*A Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*”. To further develop his ideas, Spinoza in 1660 retired himself to a village named Rijnsberg near Leiden; where he wrote his unfinished treatise, “*On the Emendation of the Intellect*”. Spinoza while teaching Cartesian philosophy to a student from University of Leiden named Johannes Casearius (1642-77), he developed a concise geometrical version of Descartes’ 1st, 2nd and 3rd Part of his 1644 book, “*Principles of Philosophy*”. The work appeared as “*The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy, with Metaphysical Thoughts*”. This was the only writing which Spinoza published under his name during his lifetime.

Spinoza then soon shifted to Voorberg near The Hague, and began writing his *magnum opus* “*Ethics*” and treatise named as “*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*”, which appealed that in a sovereign State; Religion should be replaced by Reason and was one of the first works on biblical criticism. The work however, was published anonymously in 1670 in order to avoid controversy; the work was banned in the year 1674. After this, Spinoza shifted to the main city of The Hague where he and continued to work as a lens grinder for his living. Here for the next five years he deeply concentrated and gave a lot of time in the completion of his “*Ethics: demonstrated in geometrical order*”, He wrote “*A Political Treatise*”, “*A Compendium on Hebrew Grammar*”, which remained unfinished, and his sole treatise on physical science, “*A Short Treatise on Rainbow*”.

He breathed his last on 21st February 1677; he died prematurely due to a pulmonary ailment, thought to be either tuberculosis or silicosis, brought on by inhaling glass dust while working as a lens grinder. Later in the same year his monumental works were published posthumously by his friends and edited by Meyer and Jelles under the title, B.D.S Opera Posthuma, which included his major work “*Ethics*”, “*A Political Treatise*”, “*On the Emendation of the Intellect*”, “*Hebrew Grammar*” and lastly his collection of “*Letters*”. His scientific treatise was published in the year 1687. However soon Church banned complete works of Spinoza and placed it under *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

5.2 EPISTEMOLOGY (GEOMETRICAL METHOD AND RATIONALISM)

5.2.1 Geometrical Method

Spinoza has written his book *Ethics* in Geometrical Method, which included definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations and corollaries etc. Why one might ask would any one attempt to write a philosophical treatise in the form of a Geometry book? One reason could be that Spinoza was deeply impressed by Euclid who deduced his conclusions logically from the explicit definitions and axioms that he made. The conclusions followed inextricably from the premises and were derived with logical elegance and clarity of thought. Spinoza's conclusions spell out what are the true implications of the definitions he presents. If you accept his premises then one must accept his conclusions, given that the deduction is valid. However, it remains debatable whether his arguments have an equal status as those in geometry. Whether Spinoza used his method of geometry to make philosophy as precise as mathematics, or whether it was just a presentational style is contested among scholars of Spinoza. The latter possibility arises because before his *Ethics*, Spinoza rewrote Descartes' *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* in the geometrical fashion. It is clear from the introduction of that treatise that the aim of geometrical version of Cartesian principles was not to show their authenticity, but to present his philosophy in a succinct and mathematical manner.

Interestingly, Spinoza's method of demonstration is deductively valid, so if you accept his definitions and axioms then you ought to accept his propositions. Whichever proposition we wish to use for demonstration, that proposition is already demonstrated before. The whole system begins with foundations (or with self-evident principles) like the way we find them in Euclid's Geometry. These foundational or axiomatic statements as Spinoza believes so, serve as the ground for the metaphysical framework. The propositions demonstrated are like geometrical theorems where every argument or proposition is logically deduced from the previous ones.

5.2.2 Rationalism

Spinoza was a rationalist. Rationalism is an epistemological theory that emerged explicitly in the 17th century Europe. The concern was about the source of knowledge and rationalism claims that knowledge is primarily acquired through intuition or rational insight and deductive reasoning, where there are certain *a priori* or innate principles which lay the foundation of knowledge. Philosophers Rene Descartes, Benedict Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who all were proficient in mathematics, are three important Continental

rationalists. In Rationalism the truth is attained by a-priori means, i.e. where the argument for its validity does not depend on reason alone, and the truth is discovered methodically in a series of definitions, theorems, their demonstrations and axioms. So if anything is asserted or denied in the conclusion, it can easily be shown to be contained in the premises listed before it.

5.2.3 Three Kinds of Knowledge

Spinoza in *Ethics* defines three kinds of knowledge in a hierarchical manner. According to him, we perceive and form our general notions, firstly from particular things represented to our intellect fragmentarily, confusedly, and without order through our senses. He calls such perceptions which comes from mere sense experience. Also From symbols, e.g., from the fact of having read or heard certain words we remember things and form certain ideas concerning them, similar to those through which we imagine things. He calls both these ways of regarding things knowledge of the first kind, *opinion, or imagination*. The next kind of knowledge from the fact that we have notions common to all men, and there are adequate ideas of the properties of things deduced by thinking; this he calls *reason* and knowledge of the second kind. Besides these two kinds of knowledge, there is, a third kind of knowledge, which we will call *intuition*. This kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things and see Nature as an interconnected whole.

5.3 METAPHYSICS OF SUBSTANCE AS GOD OR NATURE

Now coming to his Metaphysics, Spinoza is regarded as a Monist and a Pantheist. A major building block of Spinoza's philosophy is the concept of Substance. The term comes from that which means which is underneath. Substance is that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself. A second basic idea is of cause-and-effect. This is the idea that causes cause effects. For Spinoza, the world is an unfathomable system of cause-and-effect relationships where a body in motion contacts another body and so on... The first body causes the movement of the second. And the second one moving is the effect of being struck by the first. If the second didn't move, then it didn't get hit by the first. The cause-and-effect relation is fundamental to Spinoza's philosophy. The word cause is debated among scholars of Spinoza, for it's very much possible that for him, cause means a logical explanation.

Spinoza argues that there was only one substance. He says that there cannot exist in the universe two or more substances having the same nature or attribute. Spinoza considered terms Nature, Universe or Cosmos and God to be synonymous. Spinoza reasoned everything in the universe is essentially one substance. In order to understand this, let us assume there is only one substance, which is the entire cosmos. If there were two distinct substances, one substance called the cosmos and a second one called God, then, because they are not same, the substance called God would be unable to affect and change things in the substance called the cosmos and vice versa. If God could reach inside the cosmos and alter it, then they are not distinct. Instead, God and the cosmos would be the same substance. God causing changes in the cosmos would mean that God is part of the cosmos, in Spinoza's view. Substance cannot be created nor destroyed.

Substance, then, is described as self-caused. It causes itself. It is not caused by anything else; otherwise it would not be a true substance. Since substance is beginning less and endless, then as a result, the universe has always been there. Nature therefore, was never created, according to Spinoza's thought, nor can it ever come to an end. Time which is a part of Nature extends forever, infinitely, backwards and forwards, so there never was a beginning moment, and there never will be a final moment. Further, the cosmos or Nature extends incessantly outwards spatially; there is no end. Spinoza said that every substance is necessarily infinite. God or Cosmos denote this one infinite reality.

5.4 ATTRIBUTES OF GOD: THOUGHT AND EXTENSION

There is the universe or God or Nature, and there is the idea of the universe. According to Spinoza, the qualities such as mass, form, energy etc. are a part of the physical universe which he called as extension; and along with this there exists the idea of extension of what Spinoza called it as Thought. Spinoza believed that extension and thought both were two attributes, of the Nature, of God, which humans are able to perceive. However, there are not just two attributes; rather, Spinoza believes that the substance God has infinitely many attributes, while humans cannot conceive what these are. Now the question arises, Are the attributes of extension and thought distinct as substances? No, wrote Spinoza; rather, extension and thought were both attributes of one single solitary infinite indivisible substance. From his reasoning, Spinoza establishes that God is the only substance. Spinoza says that whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived.

5.5 MODES

Spinoza argues that if God is all there is, then God causes everything. If a cause exists, then the effect from it must follow, and likewise for Spinoza, if there is causation, then everything is determined. It is of the nature of reason to regard things as necessary, not as contingent. Spinoza thought of specific things such as humans and other bodies as finite things or what he called Modes. Individual things exist with a finite extension and duration; modes have finite existence, they get created as things in time and cease to exist after a point in time. Finite things are born, live and die. In extension, they are bodies or things and in thought, they are minds or ideas. Particular things are part of nature or the universe or God and there are infinitely many things and ideas as well as infinite possible things and ideas. Particular things and ideas are in God, but they are not the same thing as God. Individual or particular things exist in sequences of cause and effect. Spinoza maintained that each individual thing, or anything which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence. Again, this last cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determined existence, and so on, to infinity. Hence Spinoza believed that everything in the perceived empirical world which are Modes have finite existence and dependent on something else.

Check Your Progress I

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What do you understand by Substance?

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2. Explain the two Attributes of Substance or God.

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5.6 ETHICS AND DETERMINISM

5.6.1 Ethics

Spinoza's *Ethics* is closely associated to his *Metaphysics*. How a person should act and whether that action is good or bad depends on what one understands about the world in which one lives. Man being a finite part of Nature constantly interacts with it, influences and gets influenced with the activities of Nature. Philosophers generally believe that Man is different and unique in Nature in the sense that it forms a kingdom within the kingdom of Nature. But Spinoza denies such a claim and on the contrary says that Man is a part of the deterministic Nature just like any object in the Nature is.

Ethics involves or begins with the evaluation of the concepts like the good and the bad. But before knowing what Spinoza understands by them, we first should understand one essential feature of Man which Spinoza talks about, and that is the principle of *Conatus*. According to Spinoza each individual persists to preserve itself, each living thing tries to preserve in its own being. And since this is the case, Man makes for himself a conception of perfection and imperfection which corresponds to his meaning of goodness and badness respectively. What is good and what is bad for Man is the extent to which an activity or a thing matches or meets up to the standard of perfection that he has himself created. There is no objective criterion on which anything can be good or bad (Broad 1930, 15).

This is extended to all natural things in Nature. Man form universal ideas and general concepts about natural things and keeps that as a parameter to judge things on the basis of those universals. And if it happens to be that a certain thing does not conform to the limited understanding of what we have formed a universal idea of, we state it to be less perfect and if it conforms then we consider it to be perfect. And in many indirect ways the meaning of perfection is derived from one's individual meaning of perfection in relation to this tendency where each Man tries to preserve in its own being. So whatever is considered to be good or bad/evil is judged on the basis of a parameter and the thing considered serves as the means to that end. This end as just said is ultimately related to conatus. Then, what is perfection and what is imperfection and what is good and what is good are all relative terms. They are relative to a Man's personal interest. Likewise what is good for me may not be good for someone else and so on... (Broad 1930, 15)

Hence, when it comes to human affairs there is nothing, which is intrinsically good or bad evaluation of moral actions are totally based on the context, norms and the interest of those individuals in terms of the means to their decided end. Spinoza explained that one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music

is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf.

Thus, for Spinoza, good and evil always will be relative and subjective to some standard, yet the standard itself is not relative to just anyone's conception of what the good life or the standard of Reality is. This is actually in conformity with the human nature itself which is objective.

5.6.2 Determinism

Spinoza said that human power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes. So we do not have an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use. Nevertheless, we shall bear calmly those things which happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage demands. The key to a better life is virtue which for Spinoza is in the sense of acting in accordance with the deterministic Nature, and having a virtue, according to Spinoza, is living according to the guidance of reason. It is about seeking what reason suggests and use that knowledge to live a peaceful blessed life. The virtuous person judges what is good and what is evil because these judgements are guided by reason. It is about choosing things that do not just help a part of one's body but rather that helps the whole body. Then one is not strayed by immediate gratification or the pursuit of temporary or partial goods.

The righteous person requires most is the insight and understanding of the relation between cause and effect about adequate ideas in the right sequences. And the supreme and best knowledge, according to Spinoza, is the knowledge of God or Nature. Spinoza says Knowledge of God is the human's greatest good; the greatest virtue is to know God. The righteous or a virtuous person is then the one who is a "free" being. It is the life of reason. The highest expression and best way to restrain the passions, in Spinoza's view, is to love God. This can be done by accepting that there is no absolute good and evil. It is the highest love of all. Thus, Spinoza in his philosophy portrays himself as a rationalist with thoughtful insights.

5.7 POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY (AND RELIGIOUS CRITICISM)

According to the orthodox view of his times, Spinoza was an atheist and therefore disreputable. However, to the others he was a gentleman, devoted to meditation and philosophical reflection, who renounced all the momentary pleasure and vanity of the world. It was a standard belief in his times that ungodly unbelievers when confronted with death always appealed to church to save their soul. It was though not the case with Spinoza. The reported serenity of his death became a testing ground for his philosophical system. It was an unassailable assumption in the early modern mind that Atheism led to immorality. The ungodly were not just damned for their beliefs but also for their conduct. The orthodox believers believed that without the direction of God given moral value, sin necessarily corrupted human conduct. It was impossible for an atheist to be a virtuous and good person. Spinoza's life and thought challenged this fundamental belief.

Spinoza's understanding of the nature of universe, and of matter and motion destroyed Judaic-Christian doctrines of a transcendent and separate existing God. His critique of revelation, scripture explained superstitions clearly. For him miracles were born out of human ignorance. The Old Testament is nothing more than a historical document for the Hebrew nation. Christ's resurrection was an allegory, the immortal soul a myth. And beliefs of ghosts, devils and spirits were delusions, which were imposed on by ignorant and fearful people. While young Spinoza with a detailed reading of the scripture developed a critical approach towards the Old Testament. This was a problem with both Jews and the Protestants, who shared common convictions in the inherent and the revealed nature of the Holy Scripture. Later in the year 1670, with the anonymous publication of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the very title of which antagonised the orthodox where he brought together Theology and Politics in the guidance of Reason. For Spinoza freedom of thought is more effective root to moral virtue than unthinking obedience to religious institutions. For all the metaphysical complexity of his writings, he wanted to make a good society. So the pursuit of virtue without reference to God, scripture or priests was one of the driving ambitions of Spinoza. Again virtue as he puts it is nothing else but an act according to the Laws of one's own nature, but we act only in so far as we understand. For him the true aim of the government is liberty. Spinoza aimed to show how it was possible to live a good virtuous and moral life guided by reason without recourse to the rigid and ignorant claims about God. This claim to enlightenment laid the foundations for a shift in the dominant metaphysical underpinnings of politics. No longer have religious truth determined politics, rationality is

essential for the proper development of the human identity and freedom. Priests and magistrates, monarchs and kings could not simply assert their authority, they had to justify it.

Building on an established republican conception of what it takes to guarantee political liberty, Spinoza argues that the democratic constitution provides individual with more freedom than constitution of any other kind, because it gives them the power to ensure that the law takes their interest into account. Only a democratic state can guarantee that everyone in this way is free. But he remarks that citizens may have to obey laws which personally they may not approve. Since legislative decisions are reached by the majority vote, one may sometimes end up in minority. Now those who always somehow end up in minority must be taken as an exception to the rule. If democracy delivers a uniquely high level of freedom then it may seem to follow that we should do our best to live in a democratic state. But interestingly Spinoza does not arrive at this conclusion. Whether or not a specific community is capable of flourishing under a democratic government depends on all sorts of historical and psychological factors which need to be taken into account. So in reality no form of constitution that delivers freedom to all communities can deliver it completely. The best way to live for Spinoza is in a republic. Though it is important to strive for freedom, but at the same time it's important not to destroy peace. Thus, for him Democracy is the best form of government possible as then everyone has the liberty to live in a freer way.

5.8 LET US SUM UP

Spinoza begins with God and describes it as One with Nature. It is the eternal and uncaused Substance conceivable in and through itself, self-complete. Nature is a gigantic series of causal sequences and there is always a reason for all its phenomena. According to Spinoza, the rational purposiveness of Nature is viewed as causal chains or logical entailments in the physical and mental realm. This way, reason, consistent with rational causality, determines the act of God or Nature and the act determines reason. Only this kind of determination is capable of being beginningless and endless.

Spinoza conceives God as a substance. Further, the Supreme reality is free as well as self-determined. As such, God has innumerable Attributes out of which, we, through our reasoning power are able to recognize only two, viz., Thought and Extension. In other words, for Spinoza all that we can possibly perceive is that there is a universe, or Nature, and that there is the idea of the universe. The physical universe consists of mass, form, shape, and

energy, that is existence in Extension; and, in addition there is the idea of extension called Thought. The physical and mental are therefore the two attributes of one and the same thing. And these attributes are open to human interpretation, or else to the human imposition of any needed version of thought and extension. All other attributes cannot be discovered or known.

No matter what, Spinoza maintains that God's freedom or self-determination remains unaffected by human thinking, God or Nature is not anthropomorphic. After all, God or Nature acts from its own nature essentially from within rational harmony. Hence, God is not compelled by anyone to act. For Spinoza, God is free only in so far as it unfolds its own nature, an order based on mathematical and fixed laws. In and by itself, this rules out the possibility of all supernatural phenomena like miracles, divine intervention, even grace.

God or Nature is distinguished into the self-caused '*Natura naturans*'; and as an effect of an infinite chain of cause and effects of finite things determines '*Natura naturata*'. Hence, Spinoza's God is at once 'one' and the 'all'. Causality is intrinsic in Nature because of its rational necessity. But the ultimate reality does not only constitute a set of an infinite number of finite things involving internal distinctions and diversities. It is rather constituted through and through in accordance to the law of causation

God alone is a substance, the substance determining through itself the identity of all things. Human power is at all times extremely limited and infinitely surpassed by that of Nature. We humans think ourselves to be free because we are conscious of our acts. But in truth we are ignorant of the ultimate causes behind those actions. Accordingly, a human being is a part of Nature just like plants and animals are.

Further, Spinoza makes clear that the human will is not free. But there is a catch, to the degree we understand this we are closer to reality and freedom. Human freedom therefore lies in self-determination. Spinoza further clarifies that the affections (*affectus*) of joy and sorrow determine the passage from lower to higher perfection and from higher to lower perfection, respectively. Needless to say, these affections would not have existed if humans were already perfect or free. But be that as it may, Spinoza determines that under the guidance of reason and against ignorance, human beings can be free even from passions like those of joy and sorrow. Humans can thus love and accept freely whatever they experience in their lives.

By the same token, God or Nature is perfect and free; especially as nothing interferes in it from the outside. The ultimate reality is in and through itself unconditionally free from any emotions of joy and sorrow. Spinoza ascertains that true love is ‘the intellectual love of God’ (*amor dei intellectualis*), that is based not on emotions of bondage or on the passions, but rather on the logical understanding of the self and of Nature. God is free from emotions and neither loves nor hates anyone.

Spinoza finds that anyone who truly loves God cannot expect God to love him/her in return. True love is the love which is totally free and disinterested. It expects nothing in return.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is concept of God in Spinoza’s philosophy?

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2. What do you understand by *Natura Naturans* and *Natura Naturata*?

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5.9 KEYWORDS

Attributes of God: Thought and Extension.

Modes: Individual things exist with a finite extension and duration.

Natura Naturans: Self-caused activity of Nature.

Natura Naturata: an effect of an infinite chain of cause and effects of finite things.

Substance: Self-caused.

The Intellectual Love of God: rationalist insight that we are inseparable from God.

5.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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5.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. Substance is something which is in and is by itself, in other words it is a concept which is self-caused, one, infinite and existent. It is neither created nor can it be destroyed. It is God or Nature determined by its own laws.

2. A Substance has infinite manifestations in the form of Attributes, out of them humans can know only two Attributes, viz. Thought and Extension (Matter). In terms of Substance they both are one and the same thing, only appearing to be two separate concepts. Mind represents thought and matter represents extension.

Check Your Progress II

1. Spinoza is a pantheist, he believes in the identity between Nature and God. Spinoza's God is impersonal and is identified with Nature. Spinoza's God is not anthropomorphic or like a king who rules and dictates as a transcendence being, but an immanent concept pervading through the Nature and its laws. Spinoza's God neither loves nor hates anyone, for it is not a religious God deciding people's fate rather a God of Reason which displays the harmony in Nature and makes a person a part of it.

2. God or Nature is distinguished into the self-caused '*Natura naturans*'; and as an effect of an infinite chain of cause and effects of finite things determines '*Natura naturata*'. Hence, Spinoza's God is at once 'one' and the 'all'.