

Introduction to Spinoza's *Ethics*

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
Professor Geoff Pynn
Northern Illinois University

Spring 2018

The *Ethics* is a dense and difficult book. In this handout, I'll explain some of the big ideas lurking behind the scenes of Spinoza's work.¹

THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

Walking through the forest, you stumble upon a large translucent sphere.² How unusual! What a strange and surprising discovery! You wonder to yourself, "How did this get here? Who made it? Why is it here?" As if reading your mind, a booming voice comes from the sky. "There is no answer to your questions," it says. "No one at all brought the sphere here. No one at all made it. I didn't, and neither did any of your fellow human beings. Nor did it form by any natural process; nor is it the accidental byproduct of some unusual sequence of events. It simply appeared here. One day it wasn't here, and the next day, it was."

"What an intriguing mystery!" you say to the voice. "Why did that happen?"

"You do not understand," replies the voice. "I am omniscient: I know everything there is to know. And I know that there is no answer to your question. You cannot find out why or how the sphere got here, or who or what made it. This is not because of some ignorance or limitation on your part. Rather, it is because there *is no explanation* for the sphere. There is no cause or reason for why it is here in the forest. There is no account of why or how it came to exist at all. One day it didn't exist, and the next day it did, and that's simply all there is to know."

Discovering the sphere would be surprising. Hearing the booming voice coming from the sky would be even more surprising. But most surprising of all is the thought that the voice might be correct. The suggestion that something exists without a cause, reason, or explanation seems like something we can simply dismiss out of hand. We often accept that we do not *know* or *understand* why something is the way that it is. But we never entertain the possibility that there *is no explanation* for why something is. Why should this be? Why do we feel entitled to reject the thought that something can be the case without having any explanation or cause whatsoever?

The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) is the claim that there is a "sufficient reason" for everything. Put another way, the idea is that there is a complete explanation for everything. As the example of the sphere in the forest shows, we generally take it for granted that for everything

¹My reading of Spinoza is deeply indebted to Michael Della Rocca, a contemporary scholar and interpreter of Spinoza. See especially his wonderfully clear and helpful book, *Spinoza* (Routledge, 2008).

²This example is borrowed from Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, (Prentice Hall, 1992).

that exists, there is an explanation for why it exists. So it is fair to say that we ordinarily presuppose something like the PSR. But as we'll see as we explore Spinoza's thought, a full-throated endorsement of the PSR can also lead us to some very surprising philosophical conclusions.

SPINOZA'S STRONG VERSION OF THE PSR

Spinoza holds that everything can be fully "conceived" or "understood"; though this ignores some subtleties, for now we can regard these terms as being synonymous with "explained". Spinoza does not think that we *do* understand everything, or that we *have* explanations for everything. He thinks that everything *can be* understood, and that there *are* explanations for everything. To use another of his terms, everything is "intelligible".

Leibniz is responsible for the name of the PSR, and it is most often associated with his work. Some level of commitment to the PSR is evident in most philosophers in the early modern period. For example, consider Descartes's Causal Argument for the existence of God. In that argument, Descartes notes that given the Causal Principle for Ideas, his idea of God can only have been caused by God, and thus God must exist. But suppose someone responded to Descartes's argument by saying, "There is no explanation for how or why you have an idea of God. You just do. You didn't get it from anywhere – not from your experiences, not from God, not from anyone else. You simply have it, and there is nothing else to be said on the subject." Descartes doesn't consider such a response, because he takes it for granted that it would be unsatisfactory. Why? Because he takes for granted that there must *be* an explanation for how he came to have an idea of God. This assumption indicates his adherence to some version of the PSR.

Spinoza's version of the PSR is particularly strong. It applies not only to everything that *is*, but also to everything that *is not*:

For each thing there must be assigned a cause or reason for its existence (if it exists) and for its nonexistence (if it doesn't) (IpII / Bennett, 5).

Thinking about the example in the last section, this means that, for Spinoza, there is not only an explanation not only for why the sphere is in the forest, but if there were no sphere in the forest, there would be an explanation for why *not*.

Spinoza's adherence to the PSR is uncompromising. Spinoza always takes the fact that something is (or would be) inexplicable or inconceivable as decisive evidence that it doesn't exist or isn't the case. Most philosophers are not so uncompromising. Consider Descartes. When pressed by Elisabeth about the nature of mind-body causal interaction, he replied that it is a "primitive notion" and "cannot be understood except through itself". Thus for Descartes there is some sense in which mind-body causation is inexplicable or unintelligible. As we shall see, Spinoza agrees that mind-body causation would be inexplicable or unintelligible. But for him, this implies that there *isn't* any such causation. Spinoza denies the existence of mind-body causation *because* such interaction would be inexplicable.

SPINOZA'S NATURALISM

Spinoza holds that everything that exists is part of nature, and everything in nature follows the same basic laws. Of particular importance in his view, human beings are part of nature, and hence

can be explained and understood in the same way as everything else in nature. This aspect of Spinoza's philosophy, which we'll call his *naturalism*, was radical for its time, and might still be seen as radical and even dangerous by some people today.

In the preface to Part III of the *Ethics*, which is where he turns his attention to human emotions, Spinoza writes:

Most of those who have written about the emotions and about men's way of living seem not to discuss natural things, which follow the common laws of nature; rather, they seem to discuss things that are outside nature. Indeed, they seem to conceive the place of man in nature as being like an empire within an empire. For they believe that man disturbs the order of nature rather than he follows it, that he has an absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined by himself alone. [...] But my argument is this. Nothing happens in nature which can be ascribed to any defect in it. For nature is always the same and everywhere is one, and its virtue and power of acting is the same. That is, the laws of nature and the rules in accordance with which all things happen and are changed from one form into another are everywhere and always the same; and therefore there must also be one and the same way of understanding the nature of things of any kind—namely, by the universal laws and rules of nature (*Ethics*, tr. G. H. R. Parkinson, pp. 163-164).

For Spinoza, there is no part of reality that cannot be explained in terms of natural laws. Since human beings are parts of reality, everything about them can be explained in terms of natural laws. Humans are not different in kind from the rest of the natural world; they are part of it.

Another comparison with Descartes will be useful. For Descartes, everything in the *material world* functions according to the same principles: all extended things can be understood and explained in terms of geometry and universal laws of motion. But Descartes denied that minds were part of the material world. Thinking things occupy a separate neighborhood of reality than extended things, and cannot be understood and explained in the same way as extended things. And yet, Descartes's interactionism commits him to the idea that thinking things have effects on extended things, and are affected by them. In Spinoza's terms, Descartes held that thinking things "disturb the order of nature"—they interact with the material world in a way that is not explicable in terms of the laws governing the material world. So for Descartes thinking things comprise "an empire within an empire". But Spinoza's naturalism is incompatible with such a picture; for him, everything there is follows the same laws as everything else.

Spinoza's naturalism is related to his strong commitment to the *PSR*. Suppose that thinking things do "disturb the order of nature" in the way Descartes thought. Then there are certain special relations between thinking things and the material world that cannot be understood in terms of more general principles applicable to all of nature.³ The *PSR* implies that there is some explanation for the existence of these special relations. So there must be some laws that govern these special relations. But what is the explanation for these special laws? Their existence cannot be explained in terms of the general laws governing all of nature, for then it *would* be the case that thinking things and material things can all be explained and understood through the same general principles. Hence there is no further, more general explanation available for the special

³Descartes endorses just this idea when he remarks to Elisabeth that the notion of mind-body union is a "primitive notion" that cannot be understood in terms of anything else.

laws: they simply *are*, and nothing further can be said about them. The PSR rules out everything that lacks an explanation. So no such special laws exist.

SUBSTANCE, ATTRIBUTE, MODE

Spinoza borrows the terms *substance*, *attribute*, and *mode* from Descartes. But he defines them in his own way, and his definitions are consequential.

SUBSTANCE

Ethics, Part I, Definition 3 (abbreviated '1d3'):

By 'substance' I understand: what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e. that whose concept doesn't have to be formed out of the concept of something else (1d3 / Bennett, 1).

There are two important parts to this definition. First, substance "is in itself". This means that substance exists independently; it does not require the existence of anything else in order to exist. This is equivalent to Descartes's conception of substance as something that "exists in such a way as to depend upon no other thing for its existence."⁴ Second, substance is "conceived through itself". This means that substance can be understood or explained without reference to anything else.

However, remember that Descartes distinguished between finite and infinite substances. Only an infinite substance truly depends for its existence upon *nothing* else. A finite substance is independent from all other things except one; namely, infinite substance. Spinoza does not tolerate this distinction between finite and infinite substance. For him, to be a substance is to be *completely* independent.

ATTRIBUTE

Ethics, Part I, Definition 4:

By 'attribute' I understand: what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence (1d4 / Bennett, 1).

On the surface, this definition is close to Descartes's idea of an attribute as that which "constitutes [a substance's] nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred."⁵ For Descartes, a substance's attribute is something like its basic kind: it's the answer to the question "fundamentally, what kind of thing is that?" Descartes held that there are two attributes: extension and thought; i.e., that there are two fundamental kinds of things, bodies and minds. Spinoza also treats extension and thought as attributes, though he denies that they are the only two attributes.

But while Descartes defines an attribute as a substance's nature or essence, Spinoza thinks of it as that "which the intellect perceives as constituting" a substance's essence. As with Spinoza's

⁴Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* I 51.

⁵Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* I 53.

disagreement with Descartes about the distinction between finite and infinite substance, this one will make a large difference down the line. There are a couple of intriguing questions about this definition. First: *whose* intellect? Second: what does “as” mean? Third, how should we understand “constituting its essence”? There are a number of interpretive options for answering these questions, but I’m going to stipulate answers to them.

First, the relevant intellect is God’s; i.e., the infinite intellect, which makes no errors and fully conceives of and understands absolutely everything. Second, “as” here means “as it really is”, not “as it appears to be”. And third, we’re going to read “constituting its essence” as simply meaning to “being its essence”. So Spinoza’s definition of an attribute is: everything an infinite intellect understands about a substance’s essence. Since an infinite intellect understands everything there is to be understood about a substance’s essence, this definition is equivalent to: everything about a substance’s essence. But notice that defining an attribute in terms of an intellect enables Spinoza to make explicit the link implicit in his commitment to the PSR between existence and intelligibility or explicability.

MODE

The philosophical term ‘mode’ in the early modern period referred to any particular property, quality, or state of a thing. So, for example, a table’s color, shape, size, and location are among its various ‘modes’. Spinoza intends his use of ‘mode’ to be understood in this ordinary way. His definition of the term is meant to uncover what he thinks is essential to this ordinary conception:

By ‘mode’ I understand: a state of a substance, i.e. something that exists in and is conceived through something else (1d5 / Bennett, 1).

Substance is that which is in itself and conceived through itself; modes are neither. Okay, but what does this mean, exactly? Descartes uses the term ‘mode’ to refer to the aspects of a substance that “presuppose,” or are conceived in terms of, its principle attribute. For example, we conceive of the shape of the table in terms of extension; i.e., to attribute a certain shape to the table presupposes that it has the attribute of extension. By contrast, we conceive of someone’s ideas, will, and understanding in terms of thought; i.e., to attribute to me certain ideas, desires, and so on presupposes that I have the attribute of thought. So to conceive of the modes of a thing requires conceiving that thing “through something else”; i.e., through the attribute of extension or thought. Spinoza’s definition of ‘mode’ latches on to this feature.

By saying that the shape of the table is ‘in’ the table, Spinoza means that the shape of the table depends upon the table for its existence, but not vice versa. He doesn’t mean that the table’s shape is literally inside the extended boundaries of the table; that wouldn’t make any sense. Similarly, by saying that my current ideas are ‘in’ me, we mean that they depend for their existence upon my existence, but not vice versa.

SUBSTANCE MONISM

How many individual things are there? Most people would answer that there are many, many individual things. Spinoza’s answer is that, strictly speaking, there is only one. Though there may be a loose way of talking on which it is okay to say that there are many things, all this really means

on Spinoza's view is that there are many aspects (or, specifically, modes) of the one individual thing that exists. This view is known as *substance monism*.

The argument for substance monism takes up the first 15 propositions of Book I of the *Ethics*. We will consider it carefully in the next handout. Here are a few highlights of Spinoza's monism:

- The one substance that exists is God. In Book 4 of the *Ethics* Spinoza refers to substance using the phrase 'God, or nature' (Latin: '*Deus sive natura*', 4p4), and 'nature' might be a more appropriate term, since there are several ways in which to call Spinoza's single existing substance 'God' is quite misleading. But Spinoza calls this substance God, and we'll follow him in that. The view that God is identical with everything that exists is called *pantheism*. But in his own time, Spinoza was widely thought to be an atheist. It is an interesting question whether it is more appropriate to think of him as a pantheist or an atheist. Regardless, he is not a traditional theist, for whom God exists independently from nature. Spinoza's naturalism allows for nothing super- or extra-natural.
- Everything else that exists is a mode of God. Hence everything that exists is either God or a mode of God. This latter category includes you, me, and all of what we see around us; none of us *is* God, but each of us is a mode of God.
- God has all attributes (1d6). So God has both thought and extension; i.e., the single substance that exists is both a thinking substance and an extended substance. As we will see, this is true for every mode of God as well (2p7).

Here are some other claims that Spinoza makes about God:

- God exists necessarily (1p11), as do all of God's modes; each aspect of God necessarily exists and is as it is of necessity (1p29; 1p33). Each of God's modes follows necessarily from his nature:

[F]rom God's supreme power or infinite nature infinitely many things in infinitely many ways—that is, all possible things—have necessarily flowed or do always follow, with the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows from eternity that its three angles equal two right angles (1p17s1 / Bennett, 10).

This, together with substance monism, implies *necessitarianism*: the view that every fact or truth is necessary; or put another way, that it's impossible for anything to have been any way other than the way that it actually is. Necessitarianism is an extreme view. We'll discuss this in a later handout.

- God, the one substance, is indivisible (1p13). Nothing in God could be divided from God, so nothing that exists could exist without everything else that exists.
- God, the one substance, is eternal (1p19), and thus has no beginning or end. This is not the case for all of God's modes, though; some of them are finite and hence have durations.