Great Philosophers
Spinoza
1632 – 1677

Ben White
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Benedict de Spinoza

- Born in Amsterdam on 24 November 1632.
- Of Sephardic Jewish descent.
- Ancestors emigrated to the Netherlands from Portugal, fleeing persecution under the Portuguese Inquisition.
- Expelled from the Jewish community at age 23 for his unorthodox religious views.
- Thereafter took up career as an independent scholar and lens grinder.
- Died at age 44 from lung illness.
Philosophical Works

- René Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy, Parts I and II, Demonstrated According to the Geometric Method* (1663)
- *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670)
  Described by one critic as “a book forged in hell by the devil himself.”
- *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (posthumous)
- *Ethics* (posthumous)

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Major Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy

• Rationalism
• Naturalism
• Dual Aspect Monism

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Major Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy

Rationalism

• Principle of Sufficient Reason
  “For every thing a cause or reason must be assigned either for its existence or for its non-existence” (1p11pr2).
• Causal Rationalism
  Causal dependence = Conceptual dependence
• Geometrical Method

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Major Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy

Naturalism

“Most writers on the emotions and on human conduct seem to be treating rather of matters outside nature than of natural phenomena following nature’s general laws. They appear to conceive man to be situated in nature as a kingdom within a kingdom: for they believe that he disturbs rather than follows nature’s order, that he has absolute control over his actions, and that he is determined solely by himself... [In truth,] the laws and rules of Nature, according to which all things happen... are always and everywhere the same” (3pref).

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Major Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy

Dual Aspect Monism
There is only one substance (God/Nature). This substance has both mental and physical aspects, neither of which can be reduced to the other.

What is a substance?
• Substances as ultimate subjects of predication
• Substances as things capable of independent existence

Spinoza (1632 – 1677)
Descartes’ definition of **substance**:  
“By substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence” (*Principles* 1.51).
Strictly speaking, for Descartes, nothing fits this definition except God.

“[T]here is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God’s concurrence” (Principles 1.51).
Descartes on Substance

Descartes claims that created/finite substances exist as well.

However, since these substances depend upon God for their existence, the definition of the term “substance” as it applies to finite minds and bodies must be different from that which applies to the infinite/divine substance alone.
Descartes on Substance

“As for corporeal substance and mind (i.e. created thinking substance), they can be understood in terms of a single common concept, namely this one: things that don’t depend for their existence on anything except God” (Principles 1.52).

Descartes
(1596 – 1650)
For Descartes, then, there are 3 kinds of substances:
1. the infinite/divine substance (God)
2. created/finite thinking substances (minds)
3. created/finite extended substances (bodies)
Finite Mental Substances (Minds) Attribute: Thought

Finite Corporeal Substances (Bodies) Attribute: Extension

Descartes (1596 – 1650)

Infinite Substance (God)
Spinoza on Substance

Spinoza’s definition of **substance**: “By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing from which it must be formed” (1d3).

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Spinoza on Substance

For Spinoza, too, the only thing that satisfies this definition is God (or Nature).

Unlike Descartes, however, Spinoza does not postulate another kind of substance that depends on nothing except God for its existence.

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Spinoza’s definition of attribute:
“By attribute I mean that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence” (1d4).

Like Descartes, Spinoza believes that the only attributes that we have any comprehension of are thought and extension.
Descartes vs. Spinoza

Descartes (1596 – 1650)

Each substance has only one attribute

Different substances can share the same attribute

There are many substances

Spinoza (1632 – 1677)

Substances can have multiple attributes

No two substances can share the same attribute

There is only one substance
Finite Mental Substances (Minds)
Attribute: Thought

Finite Corporeal Substances (Bodies)
Attribute: Extension

Infinite Substance (God)

Descartes (1596 – 1650)
Finite Mental Substance (Minds)

Finite Corporeal Substances (Bodies)

Infinite Substance (God)

Spinoza (1632 – 1677)
Spinoza (1632 – 1677)

Finite Corporeal Substances (Bodies)

Infinite Substance (God)
Infinite Substance (God)

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Infinite Substance (God/Nature)

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Infinite Substance (God/Nature)

Attribute of Extension

Infinite other attributes (inaccessible to us)

Attribute of Thought

Modes of Extension (Bodies)

Modes of Thought (Minds)
Our relationship to God

Since God is the only substance, we ourselves are *not* substances.

Rather, we (along with everything else in the universe) exist *in* God as modes of God’s being.

“Particular things are nothing but affections of the attributes of God, that is, modes wherein the attributes of God find expression in a definite and determinate way” (1p25c).

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Our relationship to God

“Thought is an attribute of God; i.e., God is a thinking thing” (2p1).
Our minds are modes of God’s attribute of thought.

“Extension is an attribute of God; i.e., God is an extended thing” (2p2).
Our bodies (along with all other physical objects) are modes of God’s attribute of extension.

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Pantheism

“Whatever is, is in God” (1p15).

God is not distinct from the created world.

Rather, God is immanent in (indeed, identical to) Nature.

Spinoza thus sometimes refers to God as “Nature.”
Spinoza’s God

Despite the central role that God plays in Spinoza’s philosophy, he was nevertheless frequently accused of being an atheist due to the stark contrast between his conception of God and God as typically conceived in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

God
$(\infty - \infty)$
Spinoza’s God

In contrast to the traditional conception of God, Spinoza denies that God has any desires or goals whatsoever, or acts with any end or purpose in mind.

He is particularly critical of the view that God has specially arranged things for the benefit of humanity.
Spinoza’s God

According to Spinoza, “God does not produce any effect by freedom of the will” (1p32c1). Instead, everything that happens follows necessarily from God’s nature.

“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” (1p29).

“Things could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case” (1p33).
Determinism

The necessity that governs everything that happens in Nature applies also to human actions.

According to Spinoza, people believe that they are free only because they don’t know the causes of their actions.
Spinoza’s Theory of Mind

Like Descartes, Spinoza saw the attributes of thought and extension as conceptually distinct, in that no set of statements about the physical events taking place in a person’s body could entail anything about the events taking place in their mind, and vice versa.

Entailment

Ideas
(Modes of Thought)

Physical events
(Modes of Extension)
Spinoza’s Theory of Mind

Unlike Descartes, however, Spinoza took this to show that there could be no *causal* interaction between mental and physical events either (i.e. modes of thought and modes of extension).

This follows from Spinoza’s view that causal dependence = conceptual dependence.
Spinoza’s Theory of Mind

While there are no causal or conceptual connections between the attributes of thought and extension, each physical event (mode of extension) is nevertheless represented by some idea (mode of thought) in the mind of God.
Spinoza’s Theory of Mind

According to Spinoza, an individual’s mind consists of the collection of ideas that represent the physical events taking place in their body.

My mind is God’s idea of my body!
Panpsychism

Since God has an idea of every physical event, and a mind is God’s idea of a body, every physical object has a mind.

Your toaster has a mind (consisting of God’s idea of your toaster).
Panpsychism

“Yet we cannot deny, too, that ideas differ among themselves as do their objects, and that one is more excellent... than another, just as the object of one idea is more excellent than that of another... [I]n proportion as a body is more apt than other bodies to act or be acted upon simultaneously in many ways, so is its mind more apt than other minds to perceive many things simultaneously; and in proportion as the actions of one body depend on itself alone..., the more apt is its mind to understand distinctly. From this we can realize the superiority of one mind over others” (2p13s).
Parallelism

According to Spinoza, every idea (mode of thought) is caused by and in turn causes some other mode of thought.

Likewise, every physical event (mode of extension) is caused by and in turn causes some other mode of extension.
Parallelism

The series of ideas runs parallel to the series of physical events, in that if one physical event causes another, the idea of the former physical event causes the idea of the latter.

“The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (2p7).
Parallelism

“Whether we conceive Nature under the attribute of Extension or under the attribute of Thought... we find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes – that is, the same things following one another” (2p7s).
Interactionist Dualism

Mind

- Feeling of hunger
- Desire for food
- Belief that there is food in the kitchen

Body

- Empty stomach
- I stand up and walk to the kitchen

Empty stomach leads to feeling of hunger, which leads to desire for food, which leads to belief that there is food in the kitchen, leading to the action of standing up and walking to the kitchen.
Parallelism

Mind

Feeling of hunger → Desire for food → Belief that there is food in the kitchen → Perception of my body moving

Body

Empty stomach → Physical event in brain 1 → Physical event in brain 2 → I stand up and walk to the kitchen
“[T]hinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that. So, too, a mode of Extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, expressed in two ways” (2p7s).
Spinoza’s Ethical Theory

Spinoza sees human beings as by and large slaves to their emotions or *passions* (e.g. hatred, envy, fear, ambition, lust, greed, etc.)

These passions are produced in us by external causes over which we have no control, and often cause us to act in ways that are contrary to our best interest.

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Spinoza’s Ethical Theory

The overarching aim of Spinoza’s ethical theory is to liberate us from the control that our passions have over our lives and well-being.

We achieve this by becoming more active and self-determining in our thoughts and actions, and thereby less subject to external influences.

(For Spinoza, however, this self-determination will always fall short of absolute freedom of will.)

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Spinoza’s Ethical Theory

To become more self-determining, we must become more *rational*.

We must acquire a rational understanding of the causes of our passions, the effects they have on our lives, and where our best interest lies.

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Spinoza’s Ethical Theory

Egoism

“Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being” (3p6).

Value relativism

There is no objective **good** or **bad** in Nature. We judge things to be good or bad only insofar as they help or hinder us in our attempt to increase our power and maintain our own existence.

Spinoza

(1632 – 1677)
Spinoza’s Ethical Theory

While Spinoza’s ethics is egoistic, he nevertheless thinks that rational pursuit of our own self-interest requires that we assist others as well.

This is partly because cooperation with others is extremely useful in helping us stay alive, but also because the perception of another’s joy or sadness typically produces similar passions in us.
Spinoza’s Ethical Theory

“When each man most seeks his own advantage for himself, then men are most useful to one another” (4p35c2).

“There is no singular thing in Nature which is more useful to man than a man who lives according to the guidance of reason” (4p35c1).

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Spinoza’s Ethical Theory

The Three Basic Passions:

Desire – consciousness of one’s striving to preserve one’s existence.

Pleasure – increase in one’s power.

Unpleasure – decrease in one’s power.

All other passions are definable in terms of these three.

Love is thus pleasure combined with the idea of something as the cause of one’s pleasure.

Hate is unpleasure combined with the idea of something as the cause of one’s unpleasure.

Spinoza (1632 – 1677)
Spinoza proposes various therapeutic techniques designed to limit the harmful effects that the passions have on our well-being. These include:

• Separating a harmful passion from the idea of its external cause.
• Understanding that the passion was produced by a sequence of causes extending back endlessly into the past.
• Focusing on our internally caused ideas and rational sources of pleasure, which enable us to increase our self-sufficiency and become less dependent on external events.
Spinoza’s Ethical Theory

By applying these techniques, we can (Spinoza thinks) eliminate harmful desires and sources of displeasure, and replace passive pleasures with active ones.

Once liberated from our passions, we can live a life devoted to the greatest pleasures, which consist in the pursuit of understanding and love of God.

Spinoza (1632 – 1677)
The End
Argument for Substance Monism

1. “In the universe there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute” (1p5).

2. “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes,...exists” (1p11).

3. Therefore, “there can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God” (1p14).

Spinoza (1632 – 1677)
Argument for Substance Monism

1. “In the universe there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute” (1p5).

Why not?

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Argument for Substance Monism

If there were two substances, then there would have to be some difference between them. They’d have to differ either in their *attributes* or their *modes*.

They couldn’t be distinguished by their *modes*, because the modes of a substance aren’t essential to it, and (according to Spinoza) we cannot distinguish two things by features that are inessential to them.

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Argument for Substance Monism

The two substances would therefore have to have different attributes.

Thus, there can be no two substances with the same attributes!

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Argument for Substance Monism

1. “In the universe there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute” (1p5).
2. “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes,…exists” (1p11).
3. Therefore, “there can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God” (1p14).

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Argument for Substance Monism

2. “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes,...exists” (1p11).

Why think that?

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Argument for Substance Monism

The existence of a substance with less than all the attributes would constitute a violation of the **Principle of Sufficient Reason**, for there could be no explanation of why such a substance had certain attributes, but lacked others.

“For every thing a cause or reason must be assigned either for its existence or for its non-existence” (1p11proof2).

Spinoza (1632 – 1677)
Argument for Substance Monism

As something that is conceived solely through itself, there is likewise nothing that could prevent such a substance from existing, since it doesn’t depend on anything outside of itself.

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Argument for Substance Monism

1. “In the universe there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute” (1p5).

2. “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes,...exists” (1p11).

3. Therefore, “there can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God” (1p14).

Spinoza
(1632 – 1677)
Spinoza’s Theory of Perception

Since we only have ideas of our own bodily states, we perceive other objects only by way of the effects that they have on our bodies.

This means, however, that “the ideas we have of external bodies indicate the constitution of our own body more than the nature of external bodies” (2p16c2).
Spinoza’s Theory of Perception

Our ideas of external objects, to the extent that they are derived from sense perception, are consequently often *confused* and *inadequate*.

They are “like conclusions without premises” (2p28s).
Spinoza’s Theory of Perception

To form a clear and adequate idea of something, we must have more than just an idea of its effects on us. We must have an idea of the thing itself and of its causes as well.

“The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of the cause” (1a4).
Spinoza’s Theory of Perception

The only way we can form **adequate** ideas is thus to produce them in ourselves, through our own mental activity.

Insofar as our body resembles other physical objects in certain respects that are common to all extended objects, we can acquire knowledge of the external world through reflection on our own ideas (even though our ideas only **directly** represent states of our own bodies).