

2013 World Congress Proceedings

Vol. 61, Philosophy of Religion

Anish Chakravarty

God neither Loves nor Hates Anyone

ABSTRACT: The title seems to suggest that God is neutral or indifferent to the universe that it permeates. Its neutrality being necessary for its immanence is acceptable but not its indifference. Following Spinoza's monistic thinking we explore here the question as to how the ultimate reality, can or cannot be indifferent to its own self (the universe). Permeating the universe, God becomes a universal form or concept into which the human can imagine any version of thought-extension in accordance with the nature of his/her need. Indeed, Spinoza finds God formal it is the supreme substance which can and does inspire man's polytheistic practices, as sustained by pantheistic faith. Moreover, for Spinoza relation between God and the universe is one of rational causality - God permeates the manifest universe, and the universe through its intelligibility illustrates God. The phrase in the title is not a denial of God's desirability for man. Rather, it is a reaffirmation of God's openness to the whole universe, by virtue of which it is one with Nature and vice versa. Each becomes explicable in terms of the other as both seep in rationality validating Spinoza's '*deus sive natura*'.

KEYWORDS: Spinoza, impersonal God, rationalism, Human freedom/happiness, emotion and reason, pantheism, neutral monism

Most versions of classical theism hold God, to be an omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent being that assesses our actions and exercise providential care. Occasionally, however, a disjunction between virtue and happiness becomes apparent – the wicked seem to prosper, and the virtuous suffer. Then the question: 'does God love or hate us at all?', becomes bothersome. Inquiring into this puzzling question we set out to analyze that which we expect from God to be. Necessarily such analysis leads to the question: 'how do we perceive this all-pervading Being, God?' Albert Einstein, responds to this latter question by adopting Spinoza's impersonal God, that reveals itself in and through the orderly harmony of the natural world; and indeed, is not concerned with

human destiny.¹ For Einstein, Spinoza's '*Deus sive Natura*,² reflects the most appropriate description for God.

As for Spinoza himself, God is One with Nature it is the eternal and uncaused *Substance* conceivable in and through itself, self-complete.³ As for Nature, a gigantic series of causal sequences it always has a reason for all its phenomena. According to Spinoza, the rational purposiveness of Nature is viewed as causal chains or logical entailments. This way, reason, consistent with rational causality, determines the act of God or Nature and vice versa the act determines reason. Only this kind of determination is capable of being beginningless and endless.⁴

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.⁵ 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-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. After all, God acts from its own nature essentially from within rational harmony. Hence, God is not compelled by anyone to act. Of course, God is free but this freedom does not imply that the Ultimate can act in whatever way it wants. 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 grace⁶. As such, following Spinoza we may wonder about the nature of the 'divine order'. And of course, wondering as such, naturally issues forth the question: 'does God love us or not?'

Accordingly, human 'wonder' bears its justification in rational thinking. Logically, if God can love us then God can hate us too. But for Spinoza

¹ Ronald W. Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times*. New York: World Publishing, 1971, pp. 19-20.

² Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 52.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 53.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 59.

⁵ W.H. White, trans. *Spinoza Ethics*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2001, pp. 45.

⁶ Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 111.

hatred like love becomes a hindrance in understanding God's sense of justice. He ascertains that no attribute like love or hate can be predicated of God. The ultimate reality is rational devoid of emotions and thus stands alone: objective, just, and fair. Accordingly, God or Nature is distinguished into the self-caused '*natura naturans*'; and as a product of an infinite causal chain determines '*natura naturata*'.⁷ 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.⁸ It is rather constituted through and through in accordance to the law of causation: 'if a cause happens by necessity the effect must follow'. By this logic Spinoza comes to the conclusion that everything is determined. Reason requires things to be necessary, not contingent.

Further, Spinoza perceives specific things such as humans and other bodies as finite or modal; he calls them *Modes*.⁹ Thus, a human being is simply a collection of certain modes under the attributes of Extension and Thought.¹⁰ Moreover, Spinoza presents his fundamental principle of identity which states that a thing pertains to be itself through itself; hence, without identity that thing can neither be, nor can it be understood. However, identity cannot exist or be conceived without God or Nature, in effect nothing can be conceived without the ultimate reality which guarantees the identity of all finite things. In other words, anything which has a finite existence can neither exist nor produce an effect unless determined by another cause and so on...¹¹ Hence 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 finds that emotions constitute the essence of the human being. However, excessive emotions or else the passions are responsible for keeping humans in a form of slavery or bondage. The key to unshackle these bonds lies in the understanding of our emotions.¹² However, Spinoza ascertains that knowledge of truth in and by itself cannot control an intense emotion. This

⁷ Ibid. 89.

⁸ Ibid. 119.

⁹ Ibid. 89.

¹⁰ Ibid. 122.

¹¹ W. H. White, trans. *Spinoza Ethics*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2001, pp. 26.

¹² Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: The Rationalists*. New York: Continuum, 2003, pp. 244.

explains why people cannot put to practice what they already know to be good. Oftentimes, unruly emotions become stronger than reason. Or put otherwise, reason is poorly suited to take on the powerful forces of certain emotions.

Notwithstanding, Spinoza claims that if we separate emotions from the thought of an external cause by joining them to other thoughts, then emotions such as love or hate are in effect annulled or destroyed. In other words, an emotion which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it. In the final analysis, he finds that to understand an emotion is important as this helps us to realize our harmony with Nature. But to overcome a particular emotion, that is to get a clear and distinct idea about it, involves perceiving all determinations and necessary logical connections related to that emotion. Further, Spinoza claims that when things happen to us we should not get agitated about it; we simply have to acknowledge that things needed to happen this way. Thus, a human understands his own self as well as knows his position within Nature; therefore, s/he can love as a free being rather than being compelled to love on account of his/her emotions and desires, mostly out of ignorance.¹³

Spinoza consistently finds that we should not be restricted to act according to a particular way; we must remember the greater action that shows a way of freedom, happiness and love. But just like the freedom of God, human freedom does not imply being free to act in any way we wish; it rather implies understanding the nature of the interconnected whole, of which we are but an inseparable part. Accordingly, becoming aware of our actions as part of a greater rational whole enables us to better understand the fact that we are determined *sub specie aeternitatis*, ‘under the species of eternity’. Henceforth, for Spinoza freedom is realized when we are able to control our passions and live in accordance to reason. This way, we are enabled to live in harmony with the rational fullness of Nature.

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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

¹³ Ibid. pp. 243-244.

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 243-244

¹⁵ W. H. White, trans. *Spinoza Ethics*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2001, pp. 147.

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 ever-more so; 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.¹⁶ 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. In this respect, the better we understand ourselves the more we understand God. Accordingly, we may indeed love God freely with an infinite intellectual love through all our adequate ideas that is through our passionless understanding. Henceforth, we may properly approach God or Nature in freedom. For after all, God is already *free from emotions and neither loves nor hates anyone*.¹⁷

In conclusion, 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. Accordingly, such dispassionate love is pervaded by the clear light of reason and can only be felt for God. Spinoza’s claim is that we can only love in freedom—never hate—the true nature of God. This way, we humans may come to realize that we are a part of God or Nature, ever-more our mind begins to truly reflect that something which is eternal. For Spinoza, the highest and best knowledge is knowledge of God; and the mind’s greatest freedom and virtue is to know God.¹⁸

Professor Anish Chakravarty
Daulat Ram College
University of Delhi
Delhi
India
anishchak@gmail.com

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 239.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp 240.

¹⁸ Steven Nadler, *Spinoza’s Ethics: An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 259.