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FREEDOM IN A DETERMINISTIC UNIVERSE

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My recently completed book, *The Nondual Mind*, compares Hindu nondual philosophy to that of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.), demonstrating the similarity of Spinoza’s ideas to Kashmiri *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism. In previous editions of *Dogma*, I published three excerpts from that book. I will not now try to summarize those articles in detail, although they provide the foundation for the present article. In those articles, I elaborated two main points: All things are conscious, and all consciousness is consciousness of self. As those articles explain, one cannot be conscious of a thing without *being* that thing. Hence, subject-object consciousness is an illusion; one knows an outside world only because one is conscious of its reflection and representation inside one’s own being. When the realization becomes firm that all consciousness is really nondual consciousness of self, the mind-body problem disappears, and the riddle of consciousness is solved.

Significantly, the philosophy presented in my previous articles does not characterize the world as a mere illusion or dream image. Rather, the world is real in every significant sense, adhering to immutable physical laws that can be inventively applied to predict real events and to devise real

answers to real problems. But if everything is governed by immutable physical laws, with each event having a physical cause fully sufficient to explain its occurrence, then it seems to follow that everything in the dimension of time is fixed, merely waiting for its moment to occur. In other words, the laws of physics imply a world that is deterministic in every detail.

The present article constitutes a fourth excerpt from my book. In it, I address the difficult problem of what it means to be free in a deterministic universe.

1. Fables and Fantasies

But if you believe that God speaks more clearly and effectively through sacred Scripture than through the light of the natural intellect, which he has also granted us, and which, with his Divine Wisdom, he continually preserves, strong and uncorrupted, then you have powerful reasons for bending your intellect to the opinions you attribute to sacred Scripture.¹

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

1 Letter 21 [Gebhardt, Carl (ed.), *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), IV/126/15–25]. The translations of Spinoza’s writings that appear in this article are from Curley, Edwin (ed. and transl.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I & II* (Princeton Univ. Press 1988 and 2016), sometimes with minor edits.

As philosophies go, determinism doesn't win many popularity contests. No one wants to be controlled. It cuts us to the core, for if we are controlled, then we have no agency, and if we have no agency, then we do not really exist, at least not in the individual sense that we find meaningful. And if we have no agency *even as to our thoughts*, then we have no agency at all. Determinism implies ego death, and the ego doesn't want to die. If one examines the question closely, one realizes that it is the ego (the constructed "I") that most resists determinism.

But as Spinoza points out, "it is no obstacle to the truth of a thing that it is not accepted by many."² We don't decide philosophical questions by majority vote. Rather, we need to realign our conception of self to make the truth less unappealing. The famous 20th century nondualist Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981 C.E.) taught that enlightenment is as simple as "That art thou" (*tat tvam asi*); the difficult part is *believing* it. Significantly, many people who reject determinism, insisting vehemently that they have absolute freedom to choose any course of action at any moment, are quite comfortable with the idea of divine foreknowledge. They are quite comfortable, that is, with the idea that God knows in advance *what* course of action they will choose.

The laws of physics imply a fully deterministic universe, and both Vedānta and *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism embrace that principle, albeit with some nuance, as we shall see. Spinoza, however, is particularly explicit and unambiguous on the point. He asserts, for example: "In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have

been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way." (*Ethics*, IP29.) And he adds: "Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced." (*Id.*, IP33.) But Spinoza — for whom thought and matter are the same thing — goes even further. He argues that determinism applies even in regard to the psyche's flow of thoughts and desires: "In the Mind there is no absolute, or free, will, but the Mind is determined [(i.e., caused)] to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity." (*Id.*, IIP48; accord, *id.*, IP32, with Dem. and Cor. 2.)

Few people are ready to accept Spinoza's uncompromising determinism, a determinism that makes one's thoughts and desires as rule-bound and inevitable as $E = mc^2$. For most people, free will undergirds and defines the very thing they imagine themselves to be. Teachers of moral philosophy often urge their followers to be less egotistic, and many people readily accept the validity of that advice, but few consider what relinquishing the ego really implies. It implies a loss of personal agency. Not many people are willing to take moral philosophy that far. So, unless Spinoza can replace the self he takes away from us with one more magnificent, most people prefer the lie of free will over the truth of determinism. And, you might ask, why do I say that free will is the "lie" and determinism is the "truth"? Because the laws of physics govern the neurons of the human brain just as surely as they do the planets in the sky.

Here, however, a clarification is necessary. Some philosophers argue that free will on the one hand and determinism

² *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, part II, ch. xxvi, para. 10.

on the other represent a false dichotomy. They argue that the opposite of free will is external compulsion, and the opposite of determinism is indeterminism (i.e., uncaused randomness), and therefore free will and determinism are not actually opposed to one another. According to these philosophers, a person's will manifests his or her own essential nature, and a person whose thoughts and actions are determined solely by that inner essential nature, not by some external compulsion, is "free" despite the fact that the person's thoughts and actions could not possibly have been different. I embrace this limited version of free will below, albeit with the qualification that this so-called "freedom" is necessarily a matter of degree, and it continually changes based on circumstances beyond a person's control. For present purposes, however, I think it is most useful to define the term "free will" in an absolute sense, that is, as the state of being free to choose any course of action at any moment, determined by nothing at all, whether external or internal. By focusing on that stronger definition of "free will," we will see that free will is not something we really want, but more importantly, we will see that determinism isn't such a bad philosophy after all.

The sense we have of unconstrained personal agency is directly related to the Cartesian paradigm of a soul piloting a body. But if we consider that the observable universe is a single interdependent unity that cannot logically be divided into parts, then our resistance to determinism slowly dissolves in favor of a much nobler conception of who we are and what it means to be free. In short, the separate individual that we imagine ourselves to be doesn't actually exist, and therefore the

question of its freedom is simply irrelevant. Ramana Maharshi, the South Indian sage who attracted many people to nondual philosophy, taught about "destiny" (i.e., determinism) that one should "enquire for whom is this destiny and [one should thus] discover that *only the ego is bound by destiny* . . . and that *the ego is non-existent*."³

There is no point in arguing about whether the wings on a pig are covered with hair or feathers, because pigs don't really have wings. Similarly, there is no point in arguing about whether the individual soul of a person is free or bound, because people don't really have individual souls, at least not in the Cartesian sense of something independent that can act as an uncaused cause of future events. And even if one defines "individual soul" in terms of one's unique essential nature, it is still not the independent, fully autonomous thing that absolute free will implies. Rather, as explained, it is an interdependent part of a universal physical system, and its ability to express itself is limited and changing based on shifting external circumstances. It is a cog in a machine — a very sophisticated cog, but a cog nonetheless. And as for one's true self, which is universal nondual consciousness, it alone is supremely independent and free, much more so than any individual soul could ever be. But to arrive at that new construction of self, the illusory ego-self must die, and the ego-self doesn't want to die, so people resist determinism, and they cling to fables and fantasies that reinforce their false (i.e., Cartesian) construction of who they are. And some of those fables and fantasies have even become the daily fare of religion.

3 Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan* (Sri Ramanasramam 2002), p. 266, italics added.

Spinoza was not opposed to religion or to religious life.⁴ Rather, he greatly appreciated the ability of prophets, acting by means of the imagination, to inspire and motivate people toward lives of piety and moral rectitude. The rituals, ceremonies, holidays, iconography, cosmogony, moral theories, and lore of religion all add a special richness to life, and these metaphorical teaching tools educate in ways that dry philosophical prose does not. Like poetry and music, they reach deep into the human psyche and communicate at that profound level. For Spinoza, their validity is not their philosophical truth; rather, it is their motivating power.

And Spinoza also recognized that, for most people, religion fills a psycho-spiritual gap left open by a widespread misunderstanding of determinism. When people hear about determinism, they think that it eliminates the justification for praise and blame. In a world that functions solely in accordance with deterministic physical laws, they ask, how can we say that any action has a moral quality, whether good or bad? Of course, every act has consequences, but in a fully deterministic world, what basis is there for imagining *moral* consequences? Most people intuitively recoil from the nihilism that determinism seems to imply, and for them, faith in a moralistic God provides a much-needed bulwark against the rising tide of nihilism that they associate with modern culture. Indeed, it was with a desire to fill that psycho-spiritual gap — that is, to validate human moral behavior in a deterministic universe — that Spinoza wrote the *Ethics*.

Many people love God because they

⁴ In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza distinguished between philosophy and religion, arguing that each had its appropriate role and that they were mutually compatible.

imagine God to have idealized anthropomorphic qualities like kindness, compassion, self-sacrifice, providence, justice, and just a bit of righteous anger. Neither Vedānta's "universal Self," nor *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism's "nondual consciousness," nor Spinoza's divine "substance" is likely to evoke tears of heartfelt devotion or to inspire a selfish man to repent. But in place of these dry philosophical conceptions of God, religion offers us a God that has an inner psychology very much like our own. It offers us a loving and just God that we can emulate. It offers us a personal God that the great philosopher-saints — whether Śaṅkara (8th century C.E.), Abhinavagupta (10th–11th centuries C.E.), or Spinoza — dare not take away.

Thus, religion meets people where they are, and it speaks to the doubts and fears they feel in that place. And, as noted, people imagine themselves to be an individual soul piloting a body, and they don't want to wake up from that dream. And for a person who is dreaming that dream, nothing reinforces the dream more powerfully than the belief that one can exercise one's absolute free will to choose any course of action at any moment, and nothing disturbs the dream more powerfully than the body's inevitable mortality. Thus, the two greatest fears that most people have are (1) loss of personal agency and (2) bodily death. The first implies that we do not really exist as independent individuals, and the second implies that our existence as independent individuals is fleeting, relatively meaningless, and will end too often in pain.

It is no accident, then, that the two main concerns of most religions are moral choice and the immortality of the soul.

The raw material of religion is the stories that people like to tell, and people like to tell stories about heroes who, exercising their free will, navigated extremely difficult moral dilemmas. And they like to tell stories about the wonderful adventures of the soul before its birth in a body or after the body's death. And they even like to tell a few stories that might wake a person up from the dream of personhood.

2. You Cannot Find the Chooser

If the moon, in the act of completing its eternal way around the earth, were gifted with self-consciousness, it would feel thoroughly convinced that it was traveling its way of its own accord on the strength of a resolution taken once and for all. . . . [¶] . . . If one thinks out to the very last consequence what one exactly knows and understands, there will be hardly any human being who will be impervious to this view, provided his self-love does not ruffle up against it. Man defends himself from being regarded as an impotent object in the course of the Universe. But should the lawfulness of events, such as unveils itself more or less clearly in inorganic nature, cease to function in front of the activities in our brain?⁵

— Albert Einstein (1879–1955 C.E.)

The reader, when confronted by Spinoza's deterministic view of the universe, might immediately object, as did the mathematician Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708 C.E.), that one has the daily experience of making choices — exercising one's absolute freedom, that is

⁵ Einstein, Albert, "About Free Will," in Chatterjee, Ramananda (ed.), *The Golden Book of Tagore: A Homage to Rabindranath Tagore from India and the World in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday* (The Golden Book Committee 1931), pp. 11–12.

— and that this direct experience suffices to disprove determinism. "For who," Tschirnhaus asked, "would deny, except by contradicting his own consciousness, that I can think, in my thoughts, that [now] I want to write, and that [now] I do not want to write[?]" (Letter 58 [IV/267/5–15].) But Spinoza responded that this feeling of exercising one's absolute freedom is merely an illusion. Surely, when one is making a choice, there exists some physical brain-event corresponding to the thought one is having, and if so, then a very expert neuroscientist could, at least in theory, trace the physical causes of that brain-event, and those physical causes would be wholly sufficient to explain why the event occurred and, therefore, why the corresponding thought occurred. There is, then, no need for an individual soul that has absolute free choice. The physical brain, operating according to immutable laws of physics, is perfectly capable of doing all the choosing by itself. Moreover, in a physical system that is causally complete and closed, each event occurring of necessity based on all the events that precede it, there is simply no wiggle room — no non-inevitability — that allows for the exercise of absolute freedom.

And quantum physics offers no solution to the puzzle because quantum physics is fully constrained by fixed probabilities. Therefore, it, too, leaves no room for the exercise of absolute freedom. Hence, according to Spinoza, Tschirnhaus's experience of exercising his so-called freedom — now choosing to write, now choosing not to write — proves nothing more than "that the mind is [not] always equally capable of thinking of the same object." (Letter 58 [IV/267/20–25]; see also *Ethics*, IIP2, Schol.)

So, let's stop and consider: What if Spinoza is correct? What if the laws of physics really are making all the choices one imagines oneself to be making? What if all the deliberations that go into a decisionmaking process have a physical substratum and are physically determined? What if one is merely the knower of the decisionmaking process, not its decider? It certainly *feels as if* one is choosing, but the decision is an inevitable and necessary consequence of all that precedes it, or, perhaps, a fixed probability based on all that precedes it. Yes, one faces a choice, and yes, one makes the decision, but only in a mechanistic sense, for every step in the decisionmaking process is governed by physical laws.

An anecdote about Albert Einstein illustrates this point.⁶ Einstein was once seen on Nassau Street in Princeton, looking pensive as he waited to cross the street. A student asked him, "Prof. Einstein, what are you contemplating?" The student supposed that the famous scientist was struggling with some difficult question of theoretical physics, but Einstein gestured across the street to the popular Baltimore Dairy Lunch and said with a twinkle in his eye, "Whether to have chocolate or vanilla."

So, let us imagine, as a thought experiment, that you, the reader, are contemplating a binary decision — perhaps, whether to have chocolate or vanilla ice cream at "The Balt" in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1950. Imagine further that the desirability of both options is more or less equal in your estimation, and therefore the choice between the two is not an obvious

one. You contemplate the chocolate; then you contemplate the vanilla. Perhaps you even imagine the experience of each based on memories of past visits to The Balt. And then a thought appears in your mind: Chocolate. You step forward to the counter and say, "I'll have a scoop of the chocolate, please," and you think to yourself, "I *chose* the chocolate."

But you didn't choose anything, except in a mechanistic sense, for with what meta-mind did you choose which thought would enter your mind as you chose which ice cream to order? And if there is such a meta-mind, with what meta-meta-mind did you choose *its* thoughts? And the question can be asked *ad infinitum*. What actually happened when you chose the chocolate is that you were conscious of two options, and then you were conscious of a selection that took the form of a strong thought in favor of one of the two options, and then you asserted ownership of that selection, declaring mentally that you had chosen the chocolate, after which you were conscious of, and reveled in, a sense of personal agency. But if the vanilla-thought had come instead of the chocolate-thought, then vanilla would have been your choice, and then you would have said about *that* choice that you had chosen the vanilla, and again you would have reveled in a sense of personal agency.

And that is the point Spinoza made in his letter responding to Tschirnhaus:

But let's examine created things, which are all determined by external causes to exist and to produce effects in a definite and determinate way. To clearly understand this, let's conceive something very simple. Suppose a stone receives, from an external cause which strikes against it, a certain quantity of motion, by which

⁶ This story was related to the present author by his father, who was a student at Princeton in the mid-1950s. It was circulating on campus at the time.

it afterward will necessarily continue to move, even though the impulse of the external cause ceases. This continuance of the stone in motion, then, is compelled, . . . because it must be defined by the impulse of the external cause. What I say here about the stone must be understood concerning any singular thing, however composite it is conceived to be, and however capable of doing many things: each thing is necessarily determined by some external cause to exist and produce effects in a fixed and determinate way.

Next, conceive now, if you will, that while the stone continues to move, it thinks, and knows that as far as it can, it strives to continue moving. Of course, since the stone is conscious only of its striving, and not at all indifferent, it will believe that it is very free, and that it perseveres in motion for no other cause than because it wills to. *This is that famous human freedom everyone brags of having, which consists only in this: that men are conscious of their appetite and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined.* So the infant believes that he freely wants the milk; the angry boy that he wants vengeance; and the timid, flight. . . .

. . . For though experience teaches quite abundantly that there is nothing less in man's power than to restrain his appetites, and that often, when men are torn by contrary affects, they see the better and follow the worse, they still believe themselves to be free (Letter 58 [IV/266], italics added.)

What Spinoza is explaining in this letter is that the laws of physics are the actual causes of all our choices, but our ignorance

of the precise cause-and-effect sequence that underlies those choices leads us to believe (wrongly) that we are making "free" (i.e., indeterministic) choices.

Spinoza makes the same point more formally in the *Ethics*. He writes:

[People] are deceived in that they think themselves free, an opinion which consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined. This, then, is their idea of freedom — that they do not know any cause of their actions. (*Ethics*, IIP35, Schol.; see *id.*, IP33, Schol. 1.)

And as mentioned, the same determinism can be found in the literature of Vedānta. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* explains that our actions give rise to our character and desires, and our character and desires give rise to our actions, in an ongoing cause-and-effect cycle that is fully sufficient to explain human behavior. Specifically, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states:

According as one acts, according as one conducts himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action. [९] . . . [And] as is his desire, such is his resolve; as is his resolve, such the action he performs; what action (*karma*) he performs, that he procures for himself.⁷

7 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.5, translated in Hume, Robert Ernest, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads: Translated from the Sanskrit, with an Outline of the Philosophy of the Upanishads and an Annotated Bibliography* (Oxford Univ. Press 1921), p. 140. See also *Kena Upaniṣad* 1.1, Hume, p. 335 ["By whom impelled soars forth the mind projected?"].

Thus, it is the flow of cause and effect, and the accumulated force of one's resulting habits, not absolute free will, that governs our character and hence our actions. Likewise, the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* says:

This one [(i.e., God)], truly, indeed, causes him whom he wishes to lead up from these worlds, to perform good action. This one, also, indeed, causes him whom he wishes to lead downward, to perform bad action.⁸

Similarly, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, we read:

None indeed, even for a moment, remains without doing [actions]. All, being dependent, are made to [act] by the constituents of *Prakṛti* [(i.e., by the natural forces)].

[Actions] are being done in all ways by the constituents of *Prakṛti* [(i.e., by the natural forces)]. He whose mind is deluded by egoism thinks, “I am the agent.”

Even a man of knowledge behaves according to his nature. All living beings conform to nature. What can repression avail?⁹

These verses from the *Bhagavad Gītā* are so similar to what Spinoza says about human behavior that it merits quoting Spinoza here:

But these turmoils [of current events] move me, neither to laughter nor even to tears, but to philosophizing and to observing human nature better. For I do

8 *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 3.8.33–34, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 328.

9 *Bhagavad Gītā* 3:5, 3:27, and 3:33, translated in Warrior, A.G. Krishna, *Srīmad Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya of Sri Saṁkarācārya, With Text in Devanagiri & English Rendering, and Index of First Lines of Verses* (Sri Ramakrishna Math, 3d impression, 1983), pp. 106, 121, 125.

not think it right for me to mock nature, much less to lament it, when I reflect that men, like all other things, are only a part of nature (Letter 30 [IV/166/10–15].)

Śaṅkara, not surprisingly, holds a similar view regarding the strict determinism implied by the laws of nature. In his commentary on the last of the three *Bhagavad Gītā* verses quoted above, Śaṅkara says:

[The reference to] “nature” means impressions of work, righteous and unrighteous, done already, which manifest themselves in the present life or later. According to that nature, every living being — even one who has knowledge — behaves; let alone the foolish. Therefore all living beings conform to nature.¹⁰

And the way out of this inevitable “conform[ity] to nature” is not to deny determinism but rather to change one's sense of self. Śaṅkara says:

Indeed it is the ignorant who mistake for selves “the fruit and its cause” [(i.e., the deterministic sequence of cause and effect)], which are non-selves; the enlightened never do so. Perceiving the otherness of the Self from “the fruit and its cause,” it is inconsistent for the enlightened to mistake the latter for the real Self.¹¹

And Śaṅkara makes a similar point in his *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*. Equating determinism with the physical body, he says:

The body of one who is liberated moves here and there, [compelled] by

10 *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* III, 33.1, translated in Warrior, *Srīmad Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya of Sri Saṁkarācārya*, p. 125.

11 *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* XIII, 2.11, translated in Warrior, *Srīmad Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya of Sri Saṁkarācārya*, p. 412.

the vital airs, just as the slough of a snake [is blown about by the wind].

Just as a piece of wood is tossed by the current to high or low ground, so too a body is carried here and there by destiny as determined by the momentum of its past actions.¹²

We find a similar deterministic model of the universe in the texts of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, which describe choice as a mechanistic process that we erroneously take to be an exercise of absolute free will. A passage from Kṣemarāja's *Spanda-Nirṇaya* speaks of the "senses," a technical term that does not refer merely to the five senses of perception (the *tanmātras*) and their corresponding sense organs (the *jñānendriyas*), but also to the *organs of action* by which we engage the world through the senses (the *karmendriyas*). Kṣemarāja says:

[T]hat [divine] *Spanda* principle not only moves the senses [(*karaṇāni*; lit.: "instruments of action")] but rather by infusing consciousness into the supposed experiencer makes him capable of effecting the movement, etc. of the senses by virtue of which he is full of the erroneous conception, "I am directing the senses." He himself is nothing without the infusion of the [divine] *Spanda* principle into him. Therefore, it is perfectly right to say that one should examine that principle which provides consciousness to both the senses and the perceiver by the impenetration of the forth-going rays of its own light. [¶] If it is maintained that one directs the senses by an internal sense which uses a goad called

desire, then that sense called desire, being itself of the nature of the directed, would require another sense for setting it in motion, and that in its turn would require another, and so on. Thus there would be a *regressus ad infinitum*.¹³

This text is difficult, but Kṣemarāja is saying that we do not actually choose our desires or our actions; rather, we are caused to desire and to act, and then, after witnessing the desire and the action, we imagine that we have made the choice so to desire and so to act. And that, of course, is exactly what Spinoza explained in his letter answering Tschirnhaus's doubt.

All these passages, in different ways, deny the reality of the individual soul's subjective sense of absolute freedom. But the quotation from Kṣemarāja's *Spanda-Nirṇaya* also points out the impossibility of searching within oneself and finding the chooser. As Kṣemarāja explains, if one maintains that there is a special faculty by which one forms the desire that goads one's senses and one's actions, then with what special faculty does one form the desire that goads one's desire? In other words, one has merely rephrased the problem, not answered it. And if one cannot find the chooser, then one cannot find an individual soul that has absolute freedom, and if one cannot find an individual soul that has absolute freedom, then one cannot find a soul that resembles the soul of Cartesian dualism.

The Buddhists call that experience "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*), and whether one is a physicist or a Buddhist (or both), emp-

12 *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 549–550 (GRETIL), translated in Grimes, John, *The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi of Śaṅkarācārya Bhagavatpāda: An Introduction and Translation* (Ashgate 2004), p. 265 (Samata edition, vv. 550–551).

13 *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verse 1.8 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 22), translated in Singh, Jaideva (ed. and transl.), *The Yoga of Vibration and Divine Pulsation: A Translation of the Spanda Kārikās with Kṣemarāja's Commentary, the Spanda Nirṇaya* (SUNY Press 1992), p. 59.

teness can be an unsettling realization, for if “non-self” (*anātman*) is true, then what remains of a person?¹⁴ You don’t get to write the script; you don’t even get to pick the show; but you get a front row seat in the theater, and the story is guaranteed to be a good one.

3. What Does It Mean To Be Free?

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, . . . then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, [then, again,] it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. . . . For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

— The New Testament, Rom 7:15–24 (RSV)

Poor Paul. Consider the foregoing passage from Paul’s famous letter to the church in Rome. Paul has split himself in two by deciding he does not like some of the things that inevitably occur in God’s deterministic world. And because it is all God’s world and because Paul has decided he likes only part of that world, Paul must be devoted to a made-up god of his imag-

14 The Buddhist concepts of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) and “non-self” (*anātman*) are considerably more complex than described here. The precise usage of these terms in Buddhism is beyond the subject matter of this article.

ination, not the God that actually is. And it is no answer to blame the devil for Paul’s “sin,” for either the devil is a second god in competition with God, in which case God is not truly God (i.e., one without a second and free from all external constraint), or the devil is only doing God’s bidding, in which case it is all God’s marvelous show, and Paul has decided he hates part of God’s show, calling it evil and wretched. Poor Paul.¹⁵

Paul’s all-too-familiar dilemma leads us to ask, What does it really mean to be free? There is, of course, the freedom *to gratify* one’s passions, but if we think “freedom” means a sort of libertarian (libertine?) “freedom to indulge,” we are in grave error. The freedom to indulge implies only the absence of artificial constraints such as those imposed by parents, community, or government, but it doesn’t imply absolute freedom. Quite the contrary. A person who indulges passions lives under the sovereignty of those passions. Far from being free, such a person is tossed this way and that by external influences, rarely expressing his or her own essential nature. Thus, the person has only substituted one form of external control (parents, community, or government) for another (the objects of

15 On Paul having split himself in two, see Freud, Sigmund, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” in Strachey, James (ed. and transl.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV* (Hogarth Press, reprint 1955), p. 136 [“In so far as the objects which are presented to [the ego] are sources of pleasure, [the ego] takes them into itself . . . ; and, on the other hand, it expels whatever within itself becomes a cause of unpleasure . . . ”]. The present article does not attempt to explicate the theology of Paul’s letter to the Roman church, which is one of the greatest and most theologically rich texts of the ancient world. Paul may eventually have arrived at an understanding not unlike that proposed herein. See, e.g., Rom 3:20, 8:1.

passionate desire). But as we shall presently see, the freedom *from* one's passions also does not imply that a person has absolute freedom.

Suppose a free being freely chooses what is good. Is that freedom? One would think so. But if this free being freely chooses good, then, assuming this being is not acting based on mere random chance, it must be good by nature because, being free, its choice of good cannot have been compelled by something outside itself. And if this free being is good by nature, then it has always done good, it is now doing good, and it will always do good. In other words, this being is bound fast — by reason of its inner essential nature — to doing good. In what sense is that freedom? How, after all, can we speak of an actual capacity to do evil if, due to an immutable and binding predisposition, evil can never be done?

Perhaps, therefore, we need to reassess what it means to be free, focusing on *relative* freedom instead of *absolute* freedom. Relative freedom is not one's imagined freedom to choose any course of action at any moment; rather, it is the freedom to express one's inner essential nature unimpeded by external influences. Relative freedom, in other words, is the freedom to be the sole cause of an action rather than its concurrent cause; it is the freedom to have one's actions arise from who or what one is, not from some external compulsion. Of course, a person is a finite being, and a finite being is never completely independent of external influences, so this relative freedom is necessarily a matter of degree. Moreover, this relative freedom waxes and wanes as circumstances change. One can certainly increase it by striving to do so, but sometimes to no avail, as Paul's dilem-

ma makes clear. And even if one's actions arise from who or what one is, they are no less deterministic for that fact. Thus, this relative freedom is fully compatible with determinism, and for that reason reliance on it as a vindication of human freedom is called "compatibilism." The same doctrine is also sometimes called "soft determinism." It is "determinism" because everything that one does is governed by immutable laws of physics, and one does it by absolute necessity, compelled to act by one's own essential nature. It is "soft" because it involves a limited sort of free will. One's "will" (i.e., one's innate striving to express one's essential nature) is, to a limited extent, "free" (i.e., not overcome by external compulsion). One is not a puppet dangling from the strings of external circumstances, forced to dance to their tune. One is rule-bound and controlled, but for at least a short time, one is controlled from within, not from without.¹⁶

Some people reject this limited definition of freedom. They want their free actions to be something they somehow make up on the spot, out of nothing, an uncaused cause rather than a deterministic expression of an inner essential nature. But it is not clear why they prefer the former to the latter. In the former case, one's freedom is a spontaneous new creation, expressing nothing other than the whim of the moment. In the latter case, one's freedom is an opportunity for self-expression, and hence the person who strives to ease suffering or to promote justice reveals thereby his or her innate goodness. Is it somehow preferable to live in a world in which at any moment a good person might — by reason of being free in the

¹⁶ On this distinction, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, section 1.

absolute sense — do something hurtful and cruel? It doesn't seem so, and yet that is implied if one's "freedom" is not deterministically grounded in one's essential nature.

But all this implies that the freedom we so much desire is not absolute freedom (i.e., the freedom to choose any course of action at any moment); rather, it is the freedom to express our own essential nature. As Spinoza explains,

we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because [by the exercise of absolute freedom] we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because [due to our essential nature] we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it. (*Ethics*, IIP9, Schol.)

And because we desire this freedom to act solely based on who or what we are in our essential nature, we also desire that our reasoning powers should prevail over our unreasoned bodily impulses, for the latter are strongly affected by external stimuli, and the former, which depend instead on the underlying logic of the universe, reveal to us what is true. Hence, Paul's indictment of his body: "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:23–24.)

Paul, who very much wanted to do good, complains that he finds himself instead doing the "sin" that he "hates." But because Paul cannot control his bodily impulses, he concludes that it is not *he* who does the sin, but the *sin* that dwells in him. In Paul's view, his reasoning powers were proof of his connection to God (and to immortality), and by contrast, he saw his bodily impulses as a sort of imprison-

ment, explicitly associating "sin" with the mortality of his flesh.

But if Paul was incapable of resisting the impulse to do the thing he had reasoned not to do, then, as he says, it was not *he* that did it (in the sense of an individual soul having absolute free will). Rather, it was the forces of nature acting upon him. And the converse, too, is true. If Paul could sometimes resist the thing he had reasoned not to do, then in that moment, the forces of nature permitted Paul's essential nature to express itself. Paul rightfully strove to resist the things he had reasoned not to do, but regardless of whether or not he succeeded, it was all nothing but God's marvelous show.

So, at last, we are equipped to answer the question we asked at the outset of this section. Suppose a free being freely chooses what is good. This free being — which is good by nature — has always done good, is now doing good, and will always do good. This being is bound fast — by reason of its good nature — to doing good. Is that freedom? Yes, that is freedom. But it is not *absolute* freedom; it is not freedom in the sense of being something that is unconstrained and indeterministic. Rather, it is the freedom to express one's essential nature unimpeded, and that is the only freedom anyone should ever desire.

4. Effortless Effort

As for what [your friend] has maintained next: *that if we were compelled by external causes, no one could acquire the habit of virtue*, I don't know who has told him that it can't happen from a fatal necessity, but only from a free decision of the Mind, that we should have a firm and constant disposition.¹⁷

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

¹⁷ Letter 58 [IV/267/30–35].

“But wait a minute!” you might object. “If absolute freedom is an illusion, then why should I struggle to fulfill my duties and my moral obligations? If everything is determined by the laws of physics and if what I do right now cannot change the future even a bit, then I will spend the day sleeping and the night carousing.” The mistake in that sort of fatalistic thinking is the line “what I do right now cannot change the future even a bit.” Go ahead and sleep all day and carouse all night if your essential nature is so weak and easily overcome by external forces, but you are mistaken if you think that such behavior is somehow implied by determinism. Only a fool’s version of determinism fatalistically imagines that good things will come without effort or that hardship will come despite it. If good is “fated,” then why not effort, too? Determinism does not somehow delete the role of personal effort (striving) in the efficient functioning of the universe. Put in practical terms, it is very often the case that, in the fullness of time, the people who have pleasant things happen to them are *not* the same people who “spend the day sleeping and the night carousing.” Rather, they are the people whose essential nature is so strong that they cannot help but strive in every moment, regardless of short-term results. Determinism asserts that everything is fixed by the law of cause-and-effect, but what one does right now is an integral part of that cause-and-effect sequence, and therefore what one does right now is the measure of one’s future experience.¹⁸

18 See, e.g., *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.5 [discussing the law of *karma*]; *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 549–550 [same]. Consider also that one of the core teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is to unite action (effort, striving) with surrender of the results of action (determinism). See *Bhagavad Gītā* 3:7–9,

People tend to think that determinism means fatalism and that free will (in the absolute sense) is necessary to make a person hardworking, self-restrained, and morally upright. And therefore, you would need to look long and hard to find a moral theologian who preaches determinism to a general audience. Rather, moral theologians generally assert that one has the freedom to choose any course of action at any moment and that one should exercise one’s God-given agency by choosing what is noble and rejecting what is harmful. For as the moral theologian knows, such teachings strongly motivate people, especially people who are immersed in Cartesian dualism, imagining themselves to be souls piloting bodies.

But a wise philosopher knows that there is no shortage of personal effort in a deterministic universe, especially when we consider those people who achieve great things. Hence, Vedānta, *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, and Spinoza all teach that one should embrace effort but renounce personal *ownership* of that effort. A fool, by contrast, renounces the effort itself and bemoans the practical difficulties that follow.

But what does it mean to renounce personal *ownership* of effort? Ramana Maharshi was once asked by a seeker, “Are only important events in a man’s life, such as his main occupation or profession, predetermined, or are trifling acts in his life, such as taking a cup of water or moving from one place in the room to another, also predetermined?”

“Yes, *everything* is predetermined,” responded the famous South Indian sage.

“Then . . . what free will has man?” queried the incredulous seeker.

13, 19–30; 4:14–23, 41; 5:7–14; 18:2–12, 23, 26, 49.

“What for . . . does the body come into existence?” Ramana asked rhetorically, and he then taught the same non-identification with the body that we earlier encountered in Śaṅkara’s commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Ramana said:

[The body] is designed for doing the various things marked out for execution in this life. The whole programme is chalked out. . . . *As for freedom for man, he is always free not to identify himself with the body and not to be affected by the pleasures or pains consequent on the body’s activities.*¹⁹

In other words, the body must perform various actions and make various efforts, but by calling such actions and efforts “*my action*” and “*my effort*,” a person steps out of universal nondual consciousness and reinforces the “You are here” arrow that empiricism has placed at the center of his or her world map. A passage from Kṣemarāja’s *Spanda-Nirṇaya* expresses a similar principle, using the name Śaṅkara to refer to Śiva (i.e., God), or the universal nondual consciousness:

Śaṅkara is one who does *śam*. By *śam* is meant the grace which consists in enabling the aspirant to recognize the vast expanse of His (Śiva’s) Consciousness, which is non-dualistic and is the Highest Bliss inasmuch as it calms the heat of all the afflictions. Such Śaṅkara, who is our own essential nature, do we laud. Here, the sense of [the term] “lauding” is that, by considering Him as excelling the entire cosmos, we enter into His being by obliterating the state of assumed agency [(*pramātr*; lit.: “the agent of knowing”)].²⁰

19 Mudaliar, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, pp. 91–92, italics added.

20 *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verse

In this passage, Kṣemarāja is saying that by renouncing one’s false sense of agency, one realizes one’s true identity with something much greater, to wit, the universal nondual consciousness. But Kṣemarāja also describes this state as “Highest Bliss,” making clear that when the idea of “*my action*” and “*my effort*” dissolves, “the heat of all the afflictions” dissolves with it.

That, then, is what it means to renounce personal ownership of effort. One renounces the idea of being a *person who makes the effort*. Consider the case of an athlete who, after intently pursuing victory on the playing field, notices an abrasion on the leg but is unable to recall when or how it occurred. The injury caused pain, no doubt, but the athlete did not accept ownership of the pain; instead, the athlete’s mind was directed elsewhere, and the pain was never recorded into memory. In like manner, a wise philosopher renounces ownership of effort, doing so by refusing to record the effort into a remembered narrative about a person who suffered that effort.

Everything that occurs in this world is governed by physical laws, but when those laws of physics brought you, the reader of this article, into the world, did those laws create a weak-natured fool who would cease all effort upon learning that, for finite human beings, absolute freedom is an illusion? Unlikely. Therefore, if you feel some internal resistance to effort, you should ask yourself, *Who is resisting?* Vedānta, *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, and Spinoza all teach that it is your false self that is resisting, the self that thinks it has absolute free will, the self that keeps a careful tally of merits and injustices, the self that clings

1.1 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 3), translated in Singh, *The Yoga of Vibration*, p. 9.

to a constructed narrative. Why pay that false self any attention if it is just a concept? Why give it power over you? There is no resistance to the effort required to indulge a pleasure, as the example of the athlete on the playing field shows. Therefore, resistance to effort is merely a matter of having rejected some part of God's perfect world. For you, that resistance is mere static that needs to be tuned out in favor of expressing your essential nature in every moment.

Here, it must be stressed that if one is going to function effectively in the world, allowing optimal decisions to unfold, one must always indulge the *feeling* that one is exercising one's power of free choice, including any feeling of effort that goes along with it. In other words, even after recognizing that, for finite human beings, absolute freedom is an illusion, one must play along as if it were real, for we evolved as entities that imagined themselves to have that freedom, and we operate best based on that self-conception. Indeed, what we experience as the exercise of reasoned choice is none other than the striving of our own essential nature to express itself, and the stronger our essential nature happens to be, the more we will have that experience. Therefore, the only practical difference between a person who knows the truth and a person who does not is that the former makes choices *as if* absolute freedom were a reality, whereas the latter makes choices *believing* absolute freedom to be a reality. But that difference is a meaningful one, for a person gains great peace of mind when the endless stream of regrets associated with "should have," "would have," and "could have" lose their sting.

So, let the moral theologians preach about the freedom to choose any course

of action at any moment, and let them beseech their listeners to exercise their freedom of choice in favor of industriousness, self-restraint, and moral rectitude. Such teachings are suitable for the general congregation. But for you, the thoughtful philosopher, the realization that absolute freedom is an illusion does not cause you to cease your effort to promote the moral good in every moment. Rather, it spurs you to greater effort because, for you, effort is effortless, and moral good is the gentle path.

5. Punishment

As for what [your friend] adds next: *that if we affirmed [determinism], all wickedness would be [morally] excusable*, what of it? For evil men are no less to be feared, nor are they any less harmful, when they are necessarily evil.²¹

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

Perhaps the primary reason we cling to the dogma of absolute free will is to justify reward for those who comply with society's precepts and punishment for those who don't. Is it fair, after all, for society to impose punishment on a violent felon if the felon had no control over the course of events that resulted in his or her criminal behavior? We have all experienced moments when, in the throes of hot passion or the flights of misguided deliberation, we did something we later wished we had not done. If, however, we go over the event in our mind, we recognize that in the moment of acting, we were absolutely convinced that the action was correct, and we could not, therefore, have acted in any other way. And if that is true for us, who are very thoughtful and law abiding by nature, is it not equally true for the rapist and the murderer? Wasn't he, too, acting under

²¹ Letter 58 [IV/268/1–5].

the influence of an irresistible impulse or a wrong-headed conviction? We all know he *was*, for why else would he have done what he did? But how then can we justify his imprisonment or execution? We do so, very often, by invoking the dogma that he had freedom of choice, and therefore he can be held morally responsible for his conduct.

In considering the problem of punishment in a deterministic universe, our earlier discussion of Paul's letter to the Romans is particularly relevant because there we saw that to be "free" in the relative sense means to have one's thoughts and actions determined from within (by one's own essential nature), not from without (by external influences). Consider, for example, the statement, "John is good." The speaker probably doesn't mean that John's actions are all randomly generated and that, by rare chance, they all happen to be good. If that were the intention underlying the statement, then John's very next action would be no more likely to be good than a rolled pair of dice is likely to come up boxcars. What the speaker is saying, therefore, is that John's *essential nature* — the inner something that governs his actions when he is acting autonomously — is good. And if that is so, then the speaker must admit that it is not John's absolute freedom that empowers John to be good; rather, it is the way John is constructed at the core of his being that does so. In other words, our ability to evaluate a person's moral character implies that there is something essential in a person that governs behavior when external influences are absent, which, in turn, implies soft determinism (i.e., compatibilism), not absolute freedom.²²

²² By the phrase "essential nature," I do not mean a person's usual character, thus excusing people who commit terrible crimes that are "out

And, of course, the word "good" in the statement "John is good" is not significant to the foregoing analysis; the adjective could just as well be "reliable," "steadfast," "kind," "moral," or any of their opposites. Whatever the adjective used, the speaker is saying that something about John's essential nature has caused his behavior — either something qualitative (i.e., the *character* of his essential nature) or something quantitative (i.e., the *power* of his essential nature). Therefore, one who relies on human freedom as a justification for punishment is faced with a choice: Either (1) human beings have no essential nature that governs their behavior, in which case a person's past actions tell us nothing about his or her future conduct, and punishment serves no purpose; or (2) human beings have an essential nature that governs their behavior, in which case we can legitimately judge a person's future conduct based on his or her past actions, but then we must concede determinism, not absolute free will.

Indeed, absolute free will (i.e., indeterminism) would imply the absence of any governing principle directing a person's behavior, in which case the person's choices would all be random and therefore blameless. It seems, then, that *determinism*, not the freedom to choose any course of action at any moment, is what actually justifies punishment. We can justly punish a person because we accept that the person's actions are governed by his or her essential nature, not by mere lottery.

of character" for the person. Rather, by "essential nature," I mean only that the person has some internal disposition that determines his or her "free" choices, and thus that the person is never actually free in the absolute sense. See Moore, Michael S., "Choice, Character, and Excuse," in *Social Philosophy and Policy*, vol. 7, issue 2 (1990), pp. 43–44, 53.

Therefore, what is relevant for purposes of punishment is not whether a person's wrongful act was devoid of deterministic causes; rather, what is relevant is whether, at the moment of acting, the person had "both the capacity and the opportunity to exercise the practical reasoning that is distinctive of his personhood,"²³ meaning that the person's act revealed something about his or her essential nature. As we have already explained, the freedom to express one's essential nature unimpeded by external influences is fully compatible with determinism; it is the label we give to determinism when actions are determined from within, not from without. But the latter distinction is an important one. Spinoza used the phrase "power of acting" to refer to the measure of a thing's ability to be the sole cause of an event rather than its concurrent cause, and Spinoza further argued that an increase in this "power of acting" — this ability to self-actualize — is the key to true happiness, salvation, and blessedness. (*Ethics*, IID2; IIP11, with Schol; VP36, Schol.; and VP42, Dem.) In other words, human autonomy, although never absolute, is an important value that is not contradicted by determinism, and allocating criminal responsibility to those who, with the capacity and opportunity

23 See Moore, Michael S., "Causation and the Excuses," in *California Law Review*, vol. 73 (1985), pp. 1132–1137, 1148–1149. See also Hart, Herbert L.A., *Punishment and Responsibility: Essays in the Philosophy of Law* (Clarendon Press 1968), pp. 152–153. Of course, "the capacity and the opportunity [for] practical reasoning" does not mean "the capacity and the opportunity [for] flawless reasoning," since flawless reasoning is incompatible with wrongdoing. Rather, the consideration of the person's "capacity" for "practical reasoning" is meant to address special cases such as children, the cognitively disabled, and those who do wrongful acts based on hallucinations, delusions, or similar mental aberrations.

for practical reasoning, choose to commit crimes recognizes and serves the autonomy interests of both the criminal and the noncriminal — autonomy interests that are denied in a system that exonerates the criminal by ascribing all human behavior to social and environmental factors.²⁴

That said, society only has an interest in controlling antisocial behavior at its real source. A person acting under provocation or duress is obviously not the sole or even the primary author of his or her actions. And it may be that most wrongdoers act under the influence of external forces, some immediate (such as provocation or duress) and others more remote (such as upbringing or community).²⁵ Some people are unusually weak natured, easily swayed by bad company or the pull of destructive habits. Others have been the victims of widespread injustice and therefore have no social obligation. And still others are misinformed, and that misinformation may have hardened into a false conviction or a deep-seated distrust, distorting the person's judgment and influencing his or her behavior. Indeed, Spinoza went so far as to argue that *all* wrongdoers act under

24 See Pillsbury, Samuel H., "The Meaning of Deserved Punishment: An Essay on Choice, Character, and Responsibility," in *Indiana Law Journal*, vol. 67, issue 3 (1992), esp. pp. 735, 752; Weinreb, Lloyd L., "Desert, Punishment, and Criminal Responsibility," in *Law and Contemporary Problems*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1986), pp. 73–80; Moore, "Causation and the Excuses," pp. 1148–1149; Morris, Herbert, "Persons and Punishment," in *The Monist*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Oct. 1968), pp. 475–501; Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility*, pp. 181–183.

25 See Delgado, Richard, "'Rotten Social Background': Should the Criminal Law Recognize a Defense of Severe Environmental Deprivation?," in *Law and Inequality*, vol. 3 (1985), pp. 9–90; Kadish, Sanford, "Excusing Crime," in *California Law Review*, vol. 75 (1987), pp. 257–289.

the influence of external forces. In his view, a perfectly free person — that is, a person whose own essential nature is the sole cause of his or her actions (see *Ethics*, ID7) — will always act based on reason and virtue (see *id.*, IIP3, IVD8, IVP18, Schol., IVP24, IVP66, Schol., and IVP72, Dem.), although no finite being can be perfectly free in that sense. Thus, for Spinoza, all wrongdoing is attributable to weakness rather than to some inherent evil quality of a person's nature. In many cases, the external forces that influence a wrongdoer may be viewed as too remote to constitute a legal excuse for the person's actions, and some form of punishment may be justified (see *Ethics*, IVP51, Schol.), but it may also be that punishment supplemented by other remedies (including a commitment to social reform) would better serve society's valid interest in preserving the peace and promoting the common good, while fairly distributing the benefits and burdens of collaborative living.

6. Theodicy

Indeed, they seem to conceive man in nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man . . . has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself. And they attribute the cause of human impotence, not to the common power of nature, but to I know not what vice of human nature, which they therefore bewail, or laugh at, or disdain, or (as usually happens) curse. . . .

. . . .

But . . . nothing happens in nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, for nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, i.e., the laws and rules of nature, according to which

all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. . . .²⁶

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

In Spinoza's assessment, God didn't create a universe that has any evil in it at all. But people nevertheless imagine evil, projecting their human conception of what ought to be upon the events they witness, and then — like modern-day versions of the prophet Job — they puzzle about evil, and they question God. Why, they ask, is there evil if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good? Why are there Holocausts? Why earthquakes? Why epidemic diseases? Why wars?

It does not seem to occur to such people that their god is as much a human invention as the good and evil they assign to the events they are witnessing. They fashion a mental idol that shares their human measure of what is good, and then, because many things in the world fall short of that measure, they begin to doubt the idol they have fashioned. And, finally, they invent a second idol, at war with their beloved first idol, and they blame the second idol for everything they dislike, reassuring themselves that, in the end, the first idol will prevail over the second idol. But Spinoza saw the matter differently. He argued that, however we might legitimately define good for purposes of regulating human society and fostering human happiness (see, e.g., *Ethics*, IVP18, Schol.), the only valid measure of good for purposes of judging God's creation is what actually is.²⁷

Many things are evil relative to human beings, and as human beings, we can and should fight against such things. But

²⁶ *Ethics*, III, Preface.

²⁷ See Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot* 29b.

regardless of the outcome of such efforts, the universe remains perfect, for if it is not perfect, then God, its author, is not perfect. Spinoza says it this way:

[T]hings have been produced by God with the highest perfection, since they have followed necessarily from a given most perfect nature. Nor does this convict God of any imperfection, for his perfection compels us to affirm this. Indeed, from the opposite, it would clearly follow . . . that God is not supremely perfect; because if things had been produced by God in another way, we would have to attribute to God another nature, different from that which we have been compelled to attribute to him from the consideration of the most perfect Being. (*Ethics*, IP33, Schol. 2.)

Not surprisingly, the Upanishads, too, deny the existence of anything that is evil in the absolute sense. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, for example, we read the following about a “brahmin,” meaning a person who knows “Brahman” (i.e., God): “Evil does not overcome him; he overcomes all evil. Evil does not burn him; he burns all evil. Free from evil, free from impurity, free from doubt, he becomes a brahmin.”²⁸ And in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, we read:

Now, the Soul (*Ātman*) is the bridge [or dam], the separation for keeping these worlds apart. Over that bridge [or dam] there cross neither day, nor night, nor old age, nor death, nor sorrow, nor well-doing, nor evil-doing. [¶] All evils turn back therefrom, for that Brahman-world is freed from evil.²⁹

28 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.23, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 144. See also *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.22.

29 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.4.1–2, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 265,

Likewise, in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, we read:

Such a one, verily, the thought does not torment: “Why have I not done the good (*sadhu*)? Why have I done the evil (*pāpa*)?” He who knows this, saves (*sprṇute*) himself (*ātmānam*) from these [thoughts]. For truly, from both of these he saves himself — he who knows this! [¶] Such is the mystic doctrine (*upaniṣad*)!³⁰

And finally, in the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad*, we read:

There [in the Brahman-world] he shakes off his good deeds and his evil deeds. His dear relatives succeed to the good deeds; those not dear, to the evil deeds. Then, just as one driving a chariot looks down upon the two chariot-wheels, thus he looks down upon day and night, thus upon good deeds and evil deeds, and upon all the pairs of opposites. This one, devoid of good deeds, devoid of evil deeds, a knower of Brahman, unto very Brahman goes on.³¹

[In regard to] he who understands [Brahman] — by no deed whatsoever of his is his world injured, not by stealing, not by killing an embryo, not by the murder of his mother, not by the murder of his father; if he has done any evil (*pāpa*), the dark color departs not from his face.³²

textual emendations by the translator.

30 *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.9, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 289.

31 *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 1.4 (TITUS), translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, pp. 304–305.

32 *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 3.1 (TITUS), translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 321. See also *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* 6.18, Hume, pp. 435 and 436; *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:36, 18:17.

Consistent with these Upanishadic passages, Śāṅkara, too, describes an ultimate state in which the knower of absolute truth transcends moral distinctions.³³ But the practitioners of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism go even further. Moral transcendence, for them, justifies backroom theurgic rituals that transgress religious and social norms. And here, nondual Shaivism becomes a subject of some criticism. The point being made by scriptural passages that validate moral transcendence is not that a person can or should act as a self-indulgent libertine or that moral ideals serve no legitimate function. On the contrary, all actions (even hidden ones) have consequences, and moral ideals evolved and are sustained because they regulate human behavior in ways that serve our common interests. Hence, an intelligent person will certainly pursue the moral good. The point being made by these scriptural passages is that one is never alienated from God on account of anything one may have done.

But, one might ask, can the world really be perfect if it has Holocausts, earthquakes, epidemics, and wars? As said, a wise person will certainly seek to avoid such calamities, but a wise person sees no absolute cosmological evil in them. Our sense organs allow us to perceive only a minute fraction of the universe, and we perceive it only by way of a distorted and indistinct representation. How, then, can we judge something to be evil in the absolute sense? As Spinoza says:

[W]hatever [a person] thinks is troublesome and evil, and moreover, whatever seems immoral, dreadful, unjust, and dishonorable, arises from the fact that he

³³ See, e.g., *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 1, 22; II, 3, 48; III, 3, 26–28; *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 433, 503, 545.

conceives the things themselves in a way that is disordered, mutilated, and confused. For this reason, [a moral person] strives most of all to conceive things as they are in themselves, and to remove the obstacles to true knowledge, like Hate, Anger, Envy, Mockery, Pride, and the rest (*Ethics*, IVP73, Schol.)

Relative to our human personhood, suffering and death are certainly evil, and we must resist and avoid them, but the fact remains that human bodies die — if not after 20 years, then after 90 or more. Consciousness, however, is eternal.

7. The Perfect Freedom of God

I say that a thing is free if it exists and acts solely from the necessity of its own nature, and [that it is] compelled if it is determined by something else to exist and produce effects in a fixed and determinate way. E.g., even though God exists necessarily, still he exists freely, because he exists from the necessity of his own nature alone. . . . You see, then, that I place freedom not in a free decree, but in a free necessity.

. . . .

Finally, I'd like your friend . . . to tell me how he conceives the human virtue which arises from the free decree of the Mind to be consistent with God's preordination. If he confesses, with Descartes, that he doesn't know how to reconcile these things, then he's trying to launch against me the same weapon which has pierced him.³⁴

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

God created a magnificent universe that is an outward expression of God's own eternal essence. It is constructed in perfect

³⁴ Letter 58 [IV/265/20–30 and IV/268/5–15].

accord with elegant physical laws, and it plays itself out across the time dimension like an ever-turning kaleidoscope, each new configuration necessarily determined by, and every bit as beautiful, as the one that came before. Some people are troubled by that model of the universe. They don't like imagining time to be a fixed landscape, analogous to one of the spatial dimensions. For them, determinism seems to reduce the infinite possibilities associated with free choice to the single possibility associated with the laws of physics. Is not God more powerful than the laws of physics? Thus, determinism seems to constrain God's freedom.

The truth is that most people imagine that they exist at the vanguard of time, creating the future by their free choices. Therefore, the only type of freedom most people can appreciate is the freedom they imagine they have to make decisions about the future as they proceed forward through the time dimension. And if God lacks that freedom, most people believe, then God is not free at all, which calls into doubt God's omnipotence.

Reasoning in this way, most people insist that God must be able to change creation at any moment, making adjustments (large or small) to what the laws of physics would otherwise demand — even parting the Red Sea when necessary. Thus, they place God inside time. They cannot imagine a God that is outside time, the creator of time, existing changelessly throughout all time. Instead, they imagine a god that, like themselves, is an actor on the stage of time.³⁵ Spinoza joked that a circle, if it could

35 Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (the "Rambam") (12th century C.E.) pointed out that because God exists outside time, any interruption of the laws of physics that occurs at a particular point in time must have been created by God outside time. And

if that is so, then that particular interruption of the laws of physics is itself one of the laws of physics. See discussion of Aristotle in Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* II.29.

speaking, would assert that God is a perfect circle, and likewise human beings imagine God to be a perfect human being. (Letter 56 [IV/260/5–10].) They find themselves to be subject to time, and so they imagine that God, too, must be subject to time. But by placing God inside time, they make time ontologically prior to the god they are worshiping, thus ignoring the God that is the source of time.

At the heart of this error may be the devotee's strong belief in the efficacy of prayer. God's devotee may feel that if God is not an actor on the stage of time, capable of intervening in history at any moment, then prayer is futile. But determinism doesn't make prayer futile any more than it makes effort futile. As explained above, the fact that all things are a deterministic expression of God's eternal essence doesn't somehow negate the role each of us must play in producing favorable outcomes for ourselves, and sometimes that role might include prayer. The essence of prayer is intention, and if thought and matter are the same thing, then intention is as integral to the efficient functioning of the physical universe as fermions and bosons are. Determinism tells us that we live in an orderly world governed by the law of cause-and-effect, but it doesn't tell us that prayer can't be one of the causes producing a particular desired effect. And if, in that situation, we imagine otherwise, deeming prayer to be unnecessary, then we are like a person who fatalistically expects water to boil without lighting the stove. In a deterministic world, tomorrow might bring healing and salvation, but if healing and salvation are ordained for tomorrow, then

if that is so, then that particular interruption of the laws of physics is itself one of the laws of physics. See discussion of Aristotle in Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* II.29.

why not prayer for today? and why can't the former depend on the latter? According to both *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism and Spinoza, the human mind is not an insular isolated thing; rather, it participates in many larger systems of thought (minds), and ultimately it participates in a universal system of thought that the teachers of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism called "Śiva" and that Spinoza called the "infinite intellect of God." And if that is so, then determinism doesn't prevent the universe from heeding our prayers any more than it prevents a mother from heeding the cries of her child. Thus, our prayers are heard, they are answered, and they are necessary, but they cannot change or affect God even slightly, for they are an *expression* of what God is, not a *determinant* of what God is. And if we think about it, we wouldn't want it to be any other way, for if we could change or affect God with our prayers, then God wouldn't be God (i.e., one without a second and free from all external constraint).

Therefore, one should certainly pray, and likewise one should thank God. If all the vast forces of the universe align in unseen ways to offer guidance and protection, why not feel grateful? and why not express that gratitude? But a wise person will also be grateful for what appears on the surface to be undesirable, for otherwise one's god is a mere creature of one's imagination.

Interestingly, the same people who reject Spinoza's strict necessitarianism, insisting on God's ability to intervene in history, are usually not bothered by imagining God as the creator of the physical universe. But if God can create a *three-dimensional* universe, giving a unique spatial location to each object, without thereby compromising divine freedom

and omnipotence, then certainly God can instead make a *four-dimensional* universe, giving a unique temporal location to each event, without thereby compromising divine freedom and omnipotence. In other words, the ability to make choices in the dimension of time is not the measure of God's freedom. Rather, the measure of God's freedom is the ability to actualize every possibility implied by God's own eternal essence. Spinoza explains:

[N]othing can be or be conceived without God, but . . . all things are in God. So there can be nothing outside him by which he is determined or compelled to act. (*Ethics*, IP17, Dem.)

God alone is a free cause. For God alone exists only from the necessity of his nature, and acts [only] from the necessity of his nature. (*Id.*, IP17, Cor. 2.)

But since the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes, each of which also expresses an essence infinite in its own kind, from its necessity there must follow infinitely many things in infinite modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect). (*Id.*, IP16, Dem.)

In *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, the Sanskrit word *svatantrā* connotes this same understanding of divine freedom, one in which the world is understood to be a free and perfect expression of God's own eternal essence (*citiḥ svatantrā viśvasiddhihetuḥ*).³⁶ As such, God can't be an actor on the stage of time, intervening in history in response to transient human needs, because if God ever needed to intervene to make some adjustment as time unfolded,

³⁶ *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, *sūtra* 1 (KSTS, vol. 3, p. 2), translated in Singh, Jaideva (ed. and transl.), *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam: The Secret of Self-Recognition* (Motilal Banarsidass 1982), p. 46.

then such an intervention would necessarily imply that God's eternal essence had changed, which is logically nonsensical.

In making this point, I am fully cognizant of the harsh criticism that both Spinoza and Einstein faced for denying that God intervenes in history. As already noted, it is quite natural and psychologically healthy for most religious people to imagine God in anthropomorphic or, at least, anthropopathic terms. For them, God is an all-powerful personal companion and a model of human moral values, acting in ways that an idealized human being would act. That is the only God most people know, and so to deny the existence of that God is tantamount to preaching atheism. Moreover, to do so would be highly destabilizing in present-day society, leading some people to categorically deny moral obligation and others to lose the emotional strength by which they daily face severe hardship. Let me therefore be clear. I do not deny the validity and critical importance of a personal deity. But here we are considering the issue solely from the perspective of science and philosophy. If God is eternal (i.e., outside time), and if the universe freely expresses, in the dimensions of space and time, God's eternal unchanging essence, then the universe needs no temporal interventions from God to make it more God-like, and if somehow it *did* need such interventions, then God's eternal essence would need to have changed, which, as said, is nonsensical.³⁷

37 It is no answer to argue that human free will introduces evil into the world and that God must continuously intervene to counteract human evil, for that theory turns human free will into a second power alongside God, in which case God is not one without a second. It merits noting that Vedānta, too, struggles with the tension between the absolute detachment associated with the God

From this we see that although our prayers might be indispensable prerequisites to the occurrence of certain events, they cannot change or affect God in any way. Rather, God's absolute "freedom" (*svatantrā*) connotes the complete absence of any impediment to or limitation upon God's perfect self-expression,³⁸ a self-expression that includes our prayers as well as their effects. In the *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, Kṣemarāja describes this absolute freedom, using the name Śaṃkara for God:

Of that — i.e., of Śaṃkara — who is a compact mass of Light and Bliss and who is everyone's own being, there is nowhere — i.e., in no space, time, or form — any obstruction — i.e., any impediment — in His free advance, because nothing can veil His nature.³⁹

In the context of this discussion, it is useful to consider the "many worlds" theory of quantum mechanics.⁴⁰ This debated theory proposes that whenever there is entanglement between a quantum system and its environment, every possible outcome of that entanglement actually exists in some version of the world. Moreover, because in our own version of the world, we observe only one outcome (with all its effects), it follows that in other versions of of philosophy (*brahman*) and the active engagement associated with the God of popular religion (*īśvara*).

38 See Singh, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, p. 122, n. 14.

39 *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verse 1.2 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 9), translated in Singh, *The Yoga of Vibration*, p. 27.

40 The "many worlds" theory was proposed by Bryce Seligman Dewitt and R. Neill Graham based on Hugh Everett's 1956 doctoral thesis at Princeton University. See Dewitt, Bryce Seligman, and Neill Graham (eds.), *The Many Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics* (Princeton Univ. Press 1973).

the world, other versions of ourselves are observing other outcomes (with all their effects). The result is decoherence among the different versions of the world. The universe “splits” into multiple versions of itself. Therefore, according to this theory, it is only the first-person perspective (the “You are here” arrow) that we impose on the universe that causes us to measure a subatomic particle as having a particular property. Everything that according to the laws of physics can possibly occur actually does occur, somewhere, at some time, in some version of the universe, but because of the limitations imposed by our sense organs, we experience the unfolding of only one of those possibilities.⁴¹

In other words, in God’s infinite universe, all possibilities are *actualities*, and it is only the limits of human perception that prevent a person from experiencing more than one of those actualities. As humans who are subject to time, we equate choice with freedom, but choice would actually *limit* God’s freedom, forcing God to choose one possibility and to reject all the others. Infinity, not choice, is the measure of God’s freedom, as Spinoza explains:

Others think that God is a free cause because he can (so they think) bring it about that the things which we have said follow from his nature (i.e., which are in his power) do not happen or are not produced by him. . . .

. . . .

41 Put in more technical terms, the brain that observes the measured property of a particular electron is in a superposition of possible states of observation, and because all consciousness is consciousness of one’s own self, the consciousness of that superpositional brain necessarily becomes fragmented. Thus, the so-called “collapse” of the wave function is merely a limitation of perspective, like seeing a circle and not realizing that one is really looking at a sphere.

But I think I have shown clearly enough . . . that from God’s supreme power, *or* infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things, have necessarily flowed So God’s omnipotence has been actual from eternity and will remain in the same actuality to eternity. And in this way, at least in my opinion, God’s omnipotence is maintained far more perfectly.

Indeed — to speak openly — my opponents seem to deny God’s omnipotence. For they are forced to confess that God understands infinitely many creatable things, which nevertheless he will never be able to create. . . . Therefore to maintain that God is perfect, they are driven to maintain at the same time that he cannot bring about everything to which his power extends. I do not see what could be feigned which would be more absurd than this or more contrary to God’s omnipotence. (*Ethics*, IP17, Schol.; see also *id.*, IP32, Cor. 2.)

Freedom, for the *Pratyabhijñā* masters and also for Spinoza, is the ability to choose every possibility, not just one. Prof. Einstein can have both the chocolate and the vanilla. Indeed, if his choice between the two was entangled with some quantum system, then he *did* have both, each in a separate version of the world that actually exists.

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