

CHAPTER 10

*“Omnis determinatio est negatio”: determination,  
negation, and self-negation in Spinoza,  
Kant, and Hegel*

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“Everything depends here on the correct understanding of the status  
and significance of negativity”<sup>1</sup>

INTRODUCTION

Spinoza’s letter of June 2, 1674 to his friend Jarig Jelles addresses several distinct and important issues in Spinoza’s philosophy. It explains briefly the core of Spinoza’s disagreement with Hobbes’ political theory, develops his innovative understanding of numbers, and elaborates on Spinoza’s refusal to describe God as one or single.<sup>2</sup> Then, toward the end of the letter, Spinoza writes:

With regard to the statement that figure is a negation and not anything positive, it is obvious that matter in its totality, considered without limitation [*indefinitè consideratam*], can have no figure, and that figure applies only to finite and determinate bodies. For he who says that he apprehends a figure, thereby means to indicate simply this, that he apprehends a determinate thing and the manner of its determination. This determination therefore does not pertain to the thing

<sup>1</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, review of Jacobi’s *Werke* (1816), in *Heidelberg Writings*, trans. B. Bowman and A. Speight (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 8. Unless otherwise marked, all references to the *Ethics*, the early works of Spinoza, and Letters 1–29 are to Edwin Curley’s translations. In references to the other letters of Spinoza I have used Samuel Shirley’s translation. I am indebted to Arash Abazari, Karl Ameriks, Florian Ehrensperger, Eckart Förster, Zach Gartenberg, and Dalia Nassar for their very helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> The original Dutch text of the letter is lost. The *Opera posthuma* relies on a Latin translation. Spinoza’s view of numbers as classes of classes partly anticipates Frege’s conception of number. See P. Geach, “Spinoza and the Divine Attributes,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* (1971), 15–27 (p. 23); and G. Frege, *The Foundation of Arithmetic*, ed. J. L. Austin (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), §49. On Spinoza’s philosophy of mathematics, see Y. Melamed, “On the Exact Science of Non-Beings: Spinoza’s View of Mathematics,” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (2000), 3–22.

in regard to its being [*esse*]; on the contrary, it is its non-being [*non-esse*]. So since figure is nothing but determination, and determination is negation [*Quia ergo figura non aliud, quam determinatio, et determinatio negatio est*], figure can be nothing other than negation, as has been said.<sup>3</sup>

Arguably, what is most notable about this letter is the fate of a single subordinate clause that appears in the last sentence of this passage: *et determinatio negatio est*. That clause was to be adopted by Hegel and transformed into the slogan of his own dialectical method: *Omnis determinatio est negatio* (“Every determination is negation”).<sup>4</sup> Of further significance is the fact that, while Hegel does credit Spinoza with the discovery of this most fundamental insight, he believes Spinoza failed to appreciate the importance of his discovery.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of negation and the possibility of self-negation stand at the very center of the philosophical dialogue between the systems of Spinoza and Hegel, and in this chapter I will attempt to provide a preliminary explication of this foundational debate between the two systems. In the first part of the chapter I will argue that the “determination is negation” formula has been understood in at least three distinct senses among the German Idealists, and as a result many of the participants in the discussion of this formula were actually talking past each other. The clarification of the three distinct senses of the formula will lead, in the second part of the chapter, to a more precise evaluation of the fundamental debate between Spinoza and Hegel (and the German Idealists in general) regarding the possibility (or even necessity) of self-negation. In this part I will evaluate the validity of each interpretation of the determination formula, and motivate the positions of the various participants in the debate.

#### A QUARREL OVER A BEWITCHED FORMULA

The importance of the “determination is negation” formula for understanding Hegel’s philosophy and German Idealism in general is hardly

<sup>3</sup> Ep. 50; G IV/240/6–15; my emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> The universalized formulation (*omnis*) appears first in Hegel’s 1816 review of Jacobi’s *Werke*. See Hegel, *Heidelberg Writings*, p. 9. For the denotation of *determinatio* in classical Latin and in Descartes, see Alan Gabbey’s most helpful study, “Force and Inertia in the Seventeenth Century: Descartes and Newton,” in S. Gaukroger (ed.), *Descartes: Philosophy, Mathematics, and Physics* (Brighton: Harvest Press, 1980), pp. 230–320 (esp. pp. 248–253).

<sup>5</sup> A similar attitude toward Spinoza can be found in Fichte. See his claim in this context that “Spinoza forgets his very act of insight” (J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowing: The 1804 Lectures on the Wissenschaftslehre*, trans. W. E. Wright [Albany: SUNY Press, 2005], eighth lecture, p. 69).

disputed,<sup>6</sup> yet a precise explanation of the meaning of this formula is still a desideratum. The main reason for the evasiveness of such an explanation is the fact that the formula has been used in several distinct ways by various philosophers, and sometimes, perhaps, in more than one way by the same philosopher. In this part I will explain three distinct senses of the formula. While at first glance the differences among these explications of the one formula may appear as mere nuances, the immediate implications of these nuances turn out to be substantial.

(a) “*Determination is negation*” as asserting the unreality of the finite. According to this reading, the formula states that (1) God, or the infinite, is absolutely *indeterminate*, while finite things are just determinations, limitations, or negations of the absolutely infinite (or of the absolutely indeterminate).<sup>7</sup> In addition, this reading accepts that (2) what is merely negation or determination of the infinite is not fully real.

Such a reading of the formula is the way Maimon, Jacobi, and Hegel understood Spinoza’s claims, and for each of the three, this interpretation of the “determination is negation” formula played a crucial role in their general reconstruction of Spinoza’s philosophy.

In his *Streifereien im Gebiete der Philosophie* (1793) Maimon writes: “Spinoza claims with Parmenides: only the real [*das Reelle*], which is comprehended by the understanding, exists. What is linked with the real in a finite being is nothing but a limitation [*Einschränkung*] of the real, a negation to which no existence [*Existenz*] can be ascribed.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in his autobiography (1792–1793), Maimon stresses the same point as the common element between Spinoza and the Kabbalah:

In fact, the Kabbalah is nothing but expanded Spinozism, in which not only is the origin of the world explained by the limitation [*Einschränkung*] of the divine being, but also the origin of every kind of being, and its relation to the rest, is

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, D. Moyar, *Hegel’s Conscience* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 28–29; and P. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 170–171, 340.

<sup>7</sup> This view may already appear in Descartes. See the Fifth Set of Replies: “All limitation implies a negation of the infinite” (AT vii:365; CSM ii:252). This point is essential for Descartes’ argument in the Third Meditation that our notion of the infinite is prior to the finite and thus cannot be constructed from the finite. Yet, it is unclear whether for Descartes the infinite (i.e., God) is absolutely indeterminate (as in medieval negative theology) or maximally determined, i.e., having all determination/perfections. See the discussion of the third interpretation of the *determinatio* formula below.

<sup>8</sup> “Spinoza behauptet nach dem Parmenides, nur das Reelle, vom Verstande begriffene existirt, was mit dem Reellen in einem endlichen Wesen verknüpft ist, ist bloß die Einschränkung des Reellen, eine Negation, der keine Existenz beigelegt werden kann” (S. Maimon, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. V. Verra, 7 vols. [Hildesheim: Olms, 1965–1976], Vol. iv, pp. 62–63).

derived from a separate attribute of God. God, as the ultimate subject and the ultimate cause of all beings, is called *Ensoph (the Infinite, of which, considered in itself, nothing can be predicated)*.<sup>9</sup>

In both passages, Maimon suggests that for Spinoza finite things are merely limitations, or negations, of the real, i.e., God, which in itself has no predicates. Relying on this interpretation, Maimon suggests that Spinoza is wrongly described as an “atheist,” since in fact in his system only God truly exists. Thus, Maimon argues, Spinoza’s system should be called “acosmism,” since it denies the reality of the world of finite things (the cosmos), rather than the reality of God.<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that Maimon not only ascribed acosmism to Spinoza but in fact adhered to this view himself already in his earliest Hebrew writings.<sup>11</sup>

Jacobi presents a similar view regarding the reality of finite things in Spinoza in his 1785 book, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*:

*Determinatio negatio est, seu determinatio ad rem juxta suum esse non pertinet* [Determination is negation, or determination does not pertain to a thing according to its being]. Individual things [*Die einzelnen Dinge*] therefore, so far as they only exist in a certain determinate mode, are *non-entia*; the indeterminate infinite being [*das unbestimmte unendliche Wesen*] is the single true *ens reale, hoc est, est omne esse, & prater quod nullum datur esse*.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> S. Maimon, *Salomon Maimons Lebensgeschichte*, ed. Z. Batscha (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1984), p. 84 (S. Maimon, *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon*, trans. J. Clark Murray [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001], p. 105); my emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> See Maimon, *Lebensgeschichte*, pp. 216–217. On Maimon’s reading of Spinoza, see Y. Melamed, “Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism in German Idealism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42 (2004), 79–80. On the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza among the German Idealists, see Y. Melamed, “Acosmism or Weak Individuals? Hegel, Spinoza, and the Reality of the Finite,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (2010), 77–92.

<sup>11</sup> In his 1778 Hebrew manuscript, *Hesheq Shelomo [Solomon’s Desire]*, Maimon writes: “It is impossible to conceive any other existence but His, may he be blessed, no matter whether it is a substantial or an accidental existence. And this is the secret of the aforementioned unity, namely, *that only God, may be blessed, exists, and that nothing but him has any existence at all*” (S. Maimon, *Hesheq Shelomo*, ms 8°6426 at the National Library, Jerusalem, p. 139); my emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> F. H. Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, trans. G. di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), pp. 219–220 (F. H. Jacobi, *Die Hauptschriften zum Pantheismusstreit zwischen Jacobi und Mendelssohn*, ed. H. Scholz [Berlin: Reuther & Richard, 1916], pp. 150–151). The phrase *hoc est, est omne esse, et prater quod nullum datur esse* is taken from the end of §76 of Spinoza’s TIE. The phrase is not easy to translate. Most English translations of this phrase regrettably neglect the “*est omne esse*” (“is all Being”), which I believe is quite crucial. For a very helpful discussion of the *Pantheismusstreit* and Jacobi’s reading of Spinoza, see E. Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), Chapter 4.

Finally, Hegel portrays this view in some detail in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* and takes it to be Spinoza’s single most important insight.

With regard to the determinate, Spinoza established this thesis: *omnis determinatio est negatio* [all determination is negation]. Hence, only the non-particularized or the universal *is*. It alone is what is substantial and therefore truly actual. As a singular thing, the soul or the mind is something limited. It is by negation that a singular thing is. Therefore, [the singular thing] does not have genuine actuality. This on the whole is Spinoza’s idea.<sup>13</sup>

Notice the inference in the penultimate sentence of the above paragraph: finite or singular things do not have genuine actuality because they are just negations.

Roughly the same interpretation of the formula also appears in Hegel’s *Lectures on Logic* and in the *Science of Logic*.

Spinoza said, “All determination is negation [*omnis determinatio est negatio*].” That is an important principle which was especially important to Spinoza. Relative to [Spinoza’s] One, everything else is determinate, and everything determinate is negation.<sup>14</sup>

That determinateness is negation posited as affirmative is Spinoza’s proposition: *omnis determinatio est negatio*, a proposition of infinite importance ... *The unity of Spinoza’s substance*, or that there is only one substance, is the necessary consequence of this proposition, that determinateness is negation ... Spinoza conceived [Thought and Extension] as attributes, that is, such as do not have a particular subsistence, a being-in-and-for-itself, but only are as sublated as moments; or rather, since substance is the total void of internal determinateness, they are not even moments; the attributes, like the modes, are distinctions made by an external understanding. – Also the substantiality of individuals cannot hold its own before that substance. The individual refers to itself by setting limits [*Grenzen*] to every other; but these limits are therefore also the limits of its self; they are references to the other; the individual’s existence is not in the individual.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson, 3 vols., Vol. III: *The Lectures of 1825–1826* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 154. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 285–286:

[O]f a truth there exists the One into which everything enters, in order to be absorbed therein, but out of which nothing comes. For as Spinoza set up the great proposition, all determination implies negation, and as of everything, even of thought in contrast to extension, it may be shown that it is determined and finite, what is essential in it rests upon negation.

<sup>14</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Logic*, trans. C. Butler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. G. Di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 87 (GW 21:101).

According to Hegel, Spinoza considers finite things as mere determinations, or negations, of the One, and things that are mere negations of the other cannot be said to have a genuine and independent existence. As a result, Hegel adopts Maimon's claim that the proper description of Spinoza's philosophy should be called acosmism, rather than atheism.<sup>16</sup>

(b) "*Determination is Negation*" as a slogan of *Universal Dialectic*. According to Michael Inwood, "Hegel endorses Spinoza's claim that 'determination is negation,' that is, that a thing or concept is determinate only in virtue of a contrast with other things or concepts, which are determined in away that it is not."<sup>17</sup> Inwood's elegant formulation states the principle of Hegel's own dialectic, yet, as far I can see, it states a view Hegel thought Spinoza *should* have endorsed, though in fact, Spinoza fell short of doing so.

The main difference between the acosmist (a) and the dialectical (b) interpretations of the *determinatio negatio est* formula is that the latter, but not the former, makes the infinite and finite *mutually* negate each other. In other words, according to the dialectical reading of the formula, not only is the finite a determination, or negation, of the infinite, but also the infinite (or the indeterminate) is a negation of the finite. According to the acosmist reading, it is only finite things that are what they are by virtue of negating their opposition, but the dialectical reading expands the scope of the last principle and makes it universal: anything, either finite or infinite, is what it is by virtue of its opposition to what it is not.

Hegel frequently develops the dialectical reading of the formula as part of a critique of Spinoza's more restricted reading. In these cases, Hegel stresses that while Spinoza's discovery is truly important, his

<sup>16</sup> See Hegel, *Lectures on Logic*, p. 49:

In Spinoza's system God alone *is*. What is other than God is a being that at once is not a being, and so is show. Thus it cannot be said that Spinozism is atheism. It is rather the exact contrary of atheism, namely, *acosmism*. The world is no true being, there is no world. Rather, God and God alone *is*.

Cf. EL §50, and Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. III, p. 281. Hegel probably came across Maimon's discussion of acosmism in K. P. Moritz's *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, in which Maimon's *Lebensgeschichte* was originally published at the beginning of the 1790s. I am indebted to Professor Peter-Rolf Horstmann for this helpful suggestion.

<sup>17</sup> M. Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 78. This reading of 'determination is negation' is very close to Fichte's "Law of reflective opposition" (*das Reflexionsgesetz des Entgegensezens*): "it is only through opposition that it is possible to obtain a specific and clear consciousness of anything whatsoever" (J. G. Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy* (Wissenschaftslehre) *nova methodo*, trans. D. Breazeale [Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1992.], p. 116). For a helpful discussion of Fichte's law, see Franks, *All or Nothing*, p. 348.

understanding of the formula is one sided insofar as it fails to realize that there is an internal negativity in the very notion of the infinite. According to Hegel, Spinoza fails to realize that the infinite is essentially a negation of negation (i.e., a negation of the finite, which, Hegel claims, Spinoza acknowledges as being merely negative). Let us have a look at a few passages in which Hegel develops this critique of Spinoza.

“*Determinateness is negation*” is the absolute principle of Spinozist philosophy; this true and simple insight is at the basis of the absolute unity of substance. But Spinoza stops short at *negation as determinateness* or quality; he does not advance to the cognition of it as absolute, that is, *self-negating negation*.<sup>18</sup>

The Spinozistic determination of infinity, by which infinity is the unlimited affirmation of any matter, is one-sided, since it does not include infinity as negation of the negation. The true infinite is that which remains identical with itself through mediation.<sup>19</sup>

How precisely is the view of infinity as negation of negation (i.e., negation of the finite) related to *Spinoza’s* understanding of *determinatio negatio est*? The following passage from Hegel’s 1816 review of Jacobi’s *Werke* seems to be crucial in this context. Notice that in the second sentence of the passage Hegel points out a major *shortcoming* of Spinoza’s formula:

Everything depends here on the correct understanding of the status and significance of negativity. If it is taken only to be the determinateness of finite things (*omnis determinatio est negatio*), then we are already thinking of it outside of absolute substance and have allowed finite things to fall outside of it; our imagination maintains them *outside* of absolute substance. Conceived of in this way, however, negation fails to be seen as *internal to the infinite* or *internal to substance*, which is supposed rather to be the sublated being of finite things. – Yet the manner in which negation is internal to substance has in fact thus already been said ... Substance is supposed to be the sublation of the finite, and that is just to say that it is the *negation of negation*, since it is precisely negation which we took to be definitive of the finite.<sup>20</sup>

Hegel’s main point seems to be that one cannot introduce negations *arbitrarily* into the substance, unless they are already contained in the very notion of substance (in fact, nothing should be externally introduced into substance since substance is supposed to be self-sufficient). According to Hegel’s reading, Spinoza’s claim that finite things are mere

<sup>18</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 472 (GW 11:376).

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on Logic*, p. 109.

<sup>20</sup> Hegel, *Heidelberg Writings*, pp. 8–9. Hegel continues the passage by arguing that negation of negation is the condition for the emergence of freedom and subjectivity. I do not address these crucial claims here owing to limitations of space.

negations of the infinite is inexplicable since Spinoza cannot explain the *origin* of these negations. Hegel frequently charges Spinoza with introducing modes and attributes arbitrarily without providing any explanation how they develop from the substance.<sup>21</sup> In a similar manner, Schelling argues, “one still naturally demands to know how these limitations of being get into [Spinoza’s] God.”<sup>22</sup> Since negation cannot be arbitrarily (or externally) introduced into the substance, the substance must contain it in its very essence. According to Hegel, this essential negative element of the substance is the negation of finite things (as negation of negation). As a result, one must expand the domain of the “every determination is negation” formula, and affirm that even the substance (the infinite) is also what it is by virtue of negating what it is not. In other words, negativity must not be “taken only to be the determinateness of finite things.”<sup>23</sup>

(c) “*Determination is negation*” as the relation between finite things and the maximally determined Being. This reading, just like the acosmist reading (a), takes finite things to be limitations, or partial negations, of the infinite. Yet, by contrast with the acosmist reading, the infinite is here conceived as *maximally* determined (as opposed to the absolute *indeterminacy* of the infinite in the acosmist reading). The infinite, the archetype of all perfections, serves as the storehouse from which all other qualities are generated through limitation.<sup>24</sup> Several early modern philosophers advocated variants of this view,<sup>25</sup> though here I would like to suggest that none other than Kant endorsed it.

In the “Ideal of Pure Reason” chapter of the first *Critique*, Kant discusses the notion of the *ens realissimum*, an individual being whose concept contains “all of reality” (*omnitudo realitatis*). According to Kant, “all true negations are nothing but limits” of the *omnitudo realitatis*. Kant

<sup>21</sup> “[Substance, attribute, and mode] are only enumerated one after the other, without the inner chain of development, and the [mode] is not negation as negation” (Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 474 [GW 11:378]). Cf. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. III, pp. 269, 273, 285. For an evaluation of the validity of this charge see Melamed, “Acosmism or Weak Individuals?,” and Y. Melamed, “Why Is Spinoza NOT an Eleatic Monist? Or Why Does Diversity Exist?,” in P. Goff (ed.), *Spinoza on Monism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 67.

<sup>23</sup> Hegel, *Heidelberg Writings*, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Any proponent of this view must address the major problem of reconciling divine simplicity with an ascription of infinite determinations to God. Kant attempts (unsuccessfully, to my mind) to address this issue by suggestion that finite things are merely limitations of the *consequences* of the *ens realissimum* (see A579/B607).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, C. von Wolff, *Theologia naturalis* (Frankfurt am Main, 1737), Part II, no. 92. Cf. A. Altmann, “Moses Mendelssohn on Leibniz and Spinoza,” in Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (London: Routledge, 1969), p. 249.

seems to be using the notion of reality in the particular sense of a “positive determination,” following Baumgarten’s definition: “Those things that are posited in something in determining it are *determinations*; some are positive and affirmative, which if they exist in fact are *reality*, while others are negative, which if they exist in fact are *negation*.”<sup>26</sup> The concept of the *ens realissimum* is such that “of all possible opposed predicates, one, namely that which belongs absolutely to being [*Sein*], is encountered in its determination” (A576/B604). It is clear therefore that the *ens realissimum* cannot be indeterminate since, for an absolutely indeterminate being, there is no reason to attribute one predicate rather than its opposite.

Kant does not mention Spinoza’s name in the “Ideal of Pure Reason” (or anywhere else in the *Critique of Pure Reason*); yet, oddly enough, he employs the very same analogy used by Spinoza in Ep. 50 to explain the relation between the *ens realissimum* and finite things.

[A]ll negations (which are the sole predicates through which everything else is to be distinguished from the *ens realissimum*) are merely limitations of a greater, and finally of the highest reality; hence they presuppose it, and as regards their content they are merely derived from it. All manifoldness of things is only so many different ways of limiting the concept of the highest reality, which is their common substratum, *just as all figures are only possible as different ways of limiting infinite space*. (A578f./B606; my italics)<sup>27</sup>

In the lines that follow this passage, Kant stresses that we remain in complete ignorance regarding the *existence* of such a being, and that the limitation relation is merely a relation between an idea and certain concepts, and not a relation between actual objects. Yet, in a striking note in his lectures on metaphysics, Kant claims: “If I derive the existence [*Dasein*] of the *ens realissimum* from its concept, this is the path to Spinozism” (AA 28:786).<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in his unpublished Prize Essay from the early 1790s, Kant writes:

All negations have to be regarded merely as limitations of the conceptual sum-total of realities [*Allinbegriffes der Realitäten*], and everything else but this one concept of their possibility as merely derived from it. This One which metaphysics – we wonder how – has now conjured up for itself, is the highest

<sup>26</sup> A. G. Baumgarten, *Metaphysics* §36, in E. Watkins (ed.), *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason: Background and Source Materials* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 94. The view of reality as positive determination (or perfection) and the opposition between reality and negation also appear in Spinoza. See E4pref, and Spinoza’s claim (formulated, in fact, as a definition): “By perfection in general I shall understand reality” (“per perfectionem in genere realitatem intelligam”; E4pref); cf. E2d6.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, p. 218.

<sup>28</sup> For further discussion of this passage see Omri Boehm’s chapter in this volume, pp. 000–000.

metaphysical good. It contains the wherewithal for the creation of all other possible things, as the marble quarry does for statues of infinite diversity, which are all of them possible only through limitation ... this metaphysical God (the *realissimum*) likewise falls very much under the suspicion (despite all protestations against Spinozism), that as a universally existing being [*einem All existirender Wesen*] He is identical with the universe.<sup>29</sup>

Although in these passages Kant does not refer explicitly to Spinoza's *determinatio negatio est* formula, there is little doubt in my mind that Kant was aware of the conceptual proximity between his *omnitudo realitatis* and Spinoza's notion of determination.

So far we have encountered at least three possible readings of the *determinatio negatio est* formula. We now turn to the author of the formula and inquire what he meant by it.

#### DETERMINATION AND NEGATION IN SPINOZA

According to the acosmist interpretation, all the determinations of God (such as attributes and modes) are mere negations of God (or the infinite), which in itself is absolutely indeterminate. What truly exists is just one indivisible and unmodified being, which is very similar to *tò ón* of the Eleatics.<sup>30</sup> We have seen that Jacobi, Maimon, and Hegel advocated this reading, and indeed several late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Spinoza scholars inspired by Hegel followed the same path.<sup>31</sup>

The text of Ep. 50 (where the *determinatio negatio est* phrase actually appears) alone does not adequately substantiate this reading. As indicated

<sup>29</sup> I. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, p. 390 (AA 20:303).

<sup>30</sup> See LHP, Vol. III, pp. 257–258; cf. LHP, Vol. I, p. 244, and LPR, Vol. I, p. 376.

<sup>31</sup> For Caird's and Joachim's Hegelian readings of Spinoza, see G. H. R. Parkinson, "Spinoza and British Idealism: The Case of H. H. Joachim," *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 1 (1993), 109–123; and S. Newlands, "More Recent Idealist Readings of Spinoza," *Philosophy Compass* 6 (2011), 109–119. For an outstanding comparative study of monism in Bradley and Hegel see R.-P. Horstmann, *Ontologie und Relationen* (Hain: Athenäum, 1984), esp. pp. 107–168, 246–254. H. A. Wolfson belongs partly to that interpretive school, though Wolfson's motivation was somewhat different, i.e., he attempted to show that Spinoza continued medieval negative theology: "Substance is thus to Spinoza, like God to the medievals, absolutely simple, free from accidental as well as from essential attributes"; H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning*, 2 vols., Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 116. Michael Della Rocca's chapter in this volume expresses great sympathy for the acosmist reading, though Della Rocca defends a more moderate view according to which modes are not illusory, but only partly real. That modes are only partly real (or are less real than the substance) is a view held clearly by both Spinoza and Descartes, and is hardly questionable (and thus should not be taken as supporting particularly the acosmist reading). Yet, Della Rocca also defends the bolder claim that, insofar as modes are only partly real, they are also only partly conceived, and *this* claim seems to be closer to the acosmist reading.

in the opening of that discussion (“With regard to the statement that figure is a negation and not anything positive”), Spinoza does not seem to make a principled claim there about the nature of determination. Yet, similar claims appear in several other texts of Spinoza. Proposition 8 of Part I of the *Ethics* asserts: “Every substance is necessarily infinite,” and in the first Scholium to this proposition Spinoza attempts to motivate the proposition in the following way:

Since being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature, it follows from P7<sup>32</sup> alone that every substance must be infinite.

[Cum finitum esse revera sit ex parte negatio et infinitum absoluta affirmatio existentiae alicujus naturae, sequitur ergo ex sola prop. 7. Omnem substantiam debere esse infinitam.]

According to this passage, being finite is a partial negation of the infinite, or unlimited, existence of some nature. Since, in E1p5, Spinoza equates “nature” and “attribute,” we can reasonably infer that being finite is a partial negation of some attribute. The appearance of the notion of “nature” in this Scholium creates a problem for the acosmist reading, since it seems to indicate that substance truly has an attribute that constitutes its nature.<sup>33</sup> Thus, this passage seems more consistent with our third reading, i.e., the view that every finite being is a partial negation of the maximally determined God.

Stronger support for the acosmist interpretation is provided by Ep. 36 (dating probably from 1666). In this letter, Spinoza replaces his common characterization of God as an “absolutely infinite” being with the similar, yet significantly different, notion of “absolutely *indeterminate*.” Since this source is probably the best textual support for the acosmist interpretation, let us have a look at three key passages in this letter.

It is a contradiction to conceive under the negation of existence something whose definition includes existence, or (what is the same) affirms existence. Since determinate denotes nothing positive, but only the privation of existence of that same nature which is conceived as determinate, it follows that that whose definition affirms existence cannot be conceived as determinate.

[[Quòd sit contradictio, aliquid, cujus definitio existentiam includit, aut (quod idem est) existentiam affirmat, sub negatione existentiae concipere. Et quoniam

<sup>32</sup> E1p7 reads: “It pertains to the nature of substance to exist.”

<sup>33</sup> On the debate over whether Spinoza’s attributes constitute the nature of substance or are merely subjectively conceived as such, see Y. Melamed, “The Building Blocks of Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance, Attributes, and Modes,” in M. Della Rocca (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming),” Part II.

determinatum nihil positivi; sed tantum privationem existentiae ejusdem naturae, quae determinata concipitur, denotat; sequitur id, cujus definitio existentiam affirmat, non determinatum posse concipi.] (G IV/184/10–15).

[I]f we suppose that something which is *indeterminate* and perfect *in its own kind* exists by its own sufficiency [*quod in suo genere solummodo indeterminatum, & perfectum est, sua sufficientia existere*], then we must also grant the existence of a being which is *absolutely indeterminate* and perfect [*entis absolute indeterminati*]. This being I shall call God. For example, if we are willing to maintain that Extension and Thought exist by their own sufficiency, we shall have to admit the existence of God who is *absolutely* perfect, that is, the existence of a being who is *absolutely indeterminate* ... (G IV/185/11–19)

Since God's nature does not consist in one definite kind of being [*Dei natura in certo entis genere non consistit*], but in a being which is absolutely indeterminate, his nature also demands all that which perfectly expresses being [*omne, quod to esse perfecte exprimit*]; otherwise his nature would be determinate and deficient. This being so, it follows that there can be only one Being, God, which exists by its own force. (G IV/185/30–34)<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately, we do not have the letter by John Hudde to which this letter, as well as Ep. 34 and 35, respond. Yet, the content of Spinoza's response shows that Hudde was not convinced by Spinoza's argument that there can be only one substance.<sup>35</sup>

There is some tension in the letter between the claim that God is absolutely indeterminate (which seems strongly to support the acosmist reading), and Spinoza's talk of Extension and Thought having a certain *nature* and each constituting a *kind*. Spinoza seems here to equate nature, attribute, and kind. If Extension and Thought truly constitute distinct kinds or natures, and if each exists by its own sufficiency, then it is not clear how they can be mere illusions<sup>36</sup> or external determinations (as the acosmist reading contends). Furthermore, the evidential force of Ep. 36 is

<sup>34</sup> Ep. 36; my emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> “[Y]our difficulty remains quite unresolved, namely as to why there are not several beings existing through themselves but of different natures” (G IV/185/5).

<sup>36</sup> Unlike some commentators, I take Hegel's charge of acosmism to imply that the plurality of attributes and modes is illusory, and not just less real than substance, or having merely derivative existence. Consider the following texts: “Parmenides has to reckon with *illusion* and opinion, the opposites of being and truth; Spinoza likewise, with attributes, modes, extension, movement, understanding, will, and so on” (my emphasis; Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 98); “No truth at all is ascribed to finite things or the world as a whole in [Spinoza's] philosophy” (G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, ed. and trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991], p. 227 [§151a]); “[T]he understanding is ranked by Spinoza only among *affections*, and *as such has no truth*” (my emphasis; Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. III, p. 269; cf. pp. 280–1, 288). For further textual support, see Melamed, “Acosmism or Weak Individuals?,” p. 81 n. 18.

somewhat undermined by the fact that the extant text is a mere translation of the lost original; in translation, “infinite” could easily be replaced by “indeterminate.”

At this point we could perhaps conclude that, overall, Ep. 36 provides some support in favor of the acosmist reading. Yet, with a more careful look, it seems that the third passage above contains a phrase that is hard to reconcile with the acosmist interpretation. At the end of the first sentence of the third paragraph, Spinoza claims that the nature of the absolutely indeterminate “demands *all* that which perfectly expresses being” (“omne, quod tō esse perfectè exprimit”). This statement clearly requires the *inclusion*, rather than *exclusion*, of all attributes. In light of this statement, I believe we should conclude that these important passages from Ep. 36 are far more consistent with the third interpretation than with the acosmist reading.

At this point I would like to point out that there are several important considerations emerging from texts other than Ep. 36 that tell against the acosmist reading.<sup>37</sup> In the following, I summarize very briefly some of the main problems with this reading.

- (1) *Third kind of knowledge.* The third kind of knowledge “proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things” (E2p40s2). Spinoza’s discussion of the third kind of knowledge in Part v of the *Ethics* makes clear that it pertains to the knowledge of *finite* modes – such as our bodies and minds – as well (see, for example, E5p22 and E5p31). But if the finite modes were mere illusions, why would they be the objects of the (adequate) third kind of knowledge?
- (2) *E1p36.* In E1p16, Spinoza claims that the modes are just what follow necessarily from God’s nature or essence. In E1p36, Spinoza argues that everything, including God’s nature, *must* have some effects (“Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow”<sup>38</sup>). But, if the modes (i.e., the effects of God’s nature) were illusory, then God’s nature would not really have any effects.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see my “Acosmism or Weak Individuals?” Part III.

<sup>38</sup> “Nihil existit, ex cuius natura aliquis effectus non sequatur.” This (mostly neglected) proposition states a principle that should properly be termed “the principle of sufficient effect”: everything must have an effect (and not only a cause, as the principle of sufficient reason stipulates).

<sup>39</sup> See G. H. R. Parkinson, “Hegel, Pantheism and Spinoza,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38 (1977), 449–459 [p. 455] for a similar argument. This argument is somewhat less conclusive since *natura naturans* could perhaps just cause itself and thus satisfy E1p36. See, however, my “Why Is Spinoza NOT an Eleatic Monist?” for an explanation of why Spinoza could not accept a world in which *natura naturata* does not exist while *natura naturans* causes itself.

- (3) *The parallelism among the attributes.* In E2p7s, Spinoza argues that the order and connection of causes in all attributes is the same.<sup>40</sup> This doctrine directly contradicts the acosmist reading of Spinoza, insofar as it clearly asserts the existence of a plurality of entities. Simply put, were Spinoza's substance a singular, undifferentiated entity, no plurality would obtain, and it would be pointless to speak of any "order" or "connection" among things.
- (4) *Knowledge of God via knowledge of finite nature.* In the fourth chapter of the TTP, Spinoza claims "we acquire a greater and more perfect knowledge of God as we gain more knowledge of natural things [*res naturales*]" (TTP III/60).<sup>41</sup> If finite things ("natural things") were merely illusory, it would make little sense that by engaging with such illusions we could promote our knowledge of God. Spinoza continues by making the point even more explicit: "To put it another way, since the knowledge of an effect through its cause is nothing other than the knowledge of the property of that cause [*causae proprietatem aliquam cognoscere*], the greater our knowledge of natural things, the more perfect is our knowledge of God's essence, which is the cause of all things" (TTP III/60/11–12). Knowledge of finite things increases our knowledge of God, since these finite things are nothing but God's properties (or rather, *propria*), which follow from God's essence.<sup>42</sup> Granting such an elevated status to finite things (i.e., being properties of God) is hardly consistent with viewing them as illusions.
- (5) *"Falls under the intellect."* In E1p16, Spinoza equates the *infinita infinitis modis*, which follow from God's essence, with "everything which can fall under an infinite intellect" [*omnia, quae sub intellectum infinitum cadere possunt*]. For Spinoza, the only cause of error is the imagination, while the perceptions of the intellect are always adequate (E2p41). Thus, what "falls under" the intellect cannot be an illusion.<sup>43</sup>
- (6) *Only nothingness has no properties.* Spinoza subscribes to the view that reality comes in degrees and, like Descartes, he accepts that

<sup>40</sup> "[W]hether we conceive nature under the attribute of Extension, or under the attribute of Thought, or under any other attribute, we shall find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes, i.e., that the same things follow one another."

<sup>41</sup> Translation modified. Spinoza makes similar claims in several other texts. See, for example, E5p24.

<sup>42</sup> On Spinoza's modes as God's *propria*, see Y. Melamed, "Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance: The Substance–Mode Relation as a Relation of Inherence and Predication," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78 (2009), 17–82, §6.

<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, in E1p16d Spinoza insinuates that the intellect infers [*concludit*] the modes.

only nothingness has no properties;<sup>44</sup> the more reality or being [*esse*] a thing has, the more properties or attributes belong to it (Eipros and Eip16d). Since God is real, it must have properties. In fact, since God is absolutely infinite and most real, it must have infinitely many attributes.<sup>45</sup>

- (7) *Everything in common with created things.* In Letter 4 Spinoza responds to Henry Oldenburg’s claim that “God has nothing formally in common with created things.” This view seems to be quite close to the acosmist reading (and to negative theology), since it denies of God all the qualities we regularly know. Spinoza’s response to this suggestion is straightforward: “I have maintained the complete opposite of this in my definition. For I have said that God is a Being consisting of infinite attributes, of which each is infinite, or supremely perfect in its kind” (G IV/14/13–16). The complete opposite of Oldenburg’s claim seems to be that “God has *everything* formally in common with finite things,” and this is hardly consistent with the view of God as having no qualities.

In light of all the texts and considerations we have discussed so far, I believe we have to reject the acosmist interpretation in spite of its great charm and boldness.

Let us turn now to the dialectical reading of *omnis determinatio est negatio* and consider whether Spinoza accepts the claim that “a thing or concept is determinate only by virtue of a contrast with other things or concepts, which are determined in a way that it is not.”

As we saw earlier, Hegel thought Spinoza *should have* endorsed, but did not actually endorse, the dialectical reading of the formula. Hegel was right in realizing that Spinoza did not mean the *determinatio* formula in its dialectical reading, but was probably unaware that this was not a coincidental omission on Spinoza’s part – the dialectal reading conflicts explicitly with some of Spinoza’s deepest metaphysical principles.

For Spinoza, there is a clear asymmetry between the infinite and finite: the finite is generated by a negation of the infinite, but not the other way around (i.e., the infinite is not generated by negating the finite).<sup>46</sup> Thus,

<sup>44</sup> See Letter 9 (G IV/44/34–45/25); and DPP 1:52.

<sup>45</sup> See Eipros; and Letter 9 (G IV/44/34–45/25).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Descartes’ similar claim in the Third Meditation:

And I must not think that, just as my conceptions of rest and darkness are arrived at by negating movement and light, so my perception of the infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite. On the contrary, I clearly understand that there is more reality in

in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza stresses that one cannot read metaphysics from grammar,<sup>47</sup> and that terms that are grammatically negative frequently denote affirmative qualities.

[T]he names given to things that are only in the intellect, and not in the imagination, are often negative (for example, infinite, incorporeal, etc.) ... they express negatively many things that are really affirmative, and conversely (for example, uncreated, independent, infinite, immortal). Because the contraries of these are much more easily imagined, they occurred first to the earliest men [*primis hominibus*], and they used positive names. We affirm and deny many things because the nature of words – not the nature of things – allows us to affirm them. And in our ignorance of this, we easily take something false to be true.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, in the *Cogitata metaphysica*, Spinoza notes, “God’s *infinity*, in spite of what the term suggests, is something most positive” (*Dei Infinitas, invito vocabulo, sit quid maximè positivum*)<sup>49</sup> According to the passage above from the TIE, we are accustomed to talking about infinity as a negative term, since we can easily *imagine* finitude, while it is difficult to imagine infinity. Thus, language works at the service of the imagination, which, according to Spinoza, “is the only source of error” (E2p41). The intellect, unlike the imagination, conceives infinity adequately as something affirmative, but since conceiving things through the intellect is far more difficult than through the imagination, our linguistic practices follow the imagination.

We see now that one major difference between the systems of Spinoza and Hegel is that for Hegel, everything, *even the absolute*, is what it is also by virtue of negating what it is not, whereas for Spinoza, God, or the infinite, is purely affirmative (and is *not* what it is by virtue of negating the finite). This point leads us to another important and closely related deep disagreement between the two systems. For Spinoza, “the proper Order of Philosophizing” is to *begin* with God (E2p10s2). According to Spinoza, a philosophy that begins with finite things and then ascends to the infinite, God, inverts the order of knowledge, and thus leads to complete misunderstanding of both God and finite things.<sup>50</sup> Hegel clearly

an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. (AT VII:45; CSM II:31)

<sup>47</sup> On the misleading and imaginary nature of language according to Spinoza, see D. Savan, “Spinoza and Language,” *Philosophical Review* 67 (1958), 212–225. While I agree with Savan’s main claim, I believe it needs to be moderated and qualified.

<sup>48</sup> TIE §89.

<sup>49</sup> CM II.iii; G 1/253/33.

<sup>50</sup> See E2p10s2. The main motivation behind this bold view of Spinoza’s is his strict commitment to the claim that one must know the cause in order to know the effect (E1a4). Given that God’s essence is the cause of all things, knowledge must begin with it. For a more detailed discussion

appreciates the boldness of this view, which he describes as “profound and correct.”<sup>51</sup> Yet, in his lengthy remark on Spinoza’s philosophy in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel targets precisely this point: “The absolute cannot be a first, an immediate. Essentially the absolute is rather its result” (“[D]as Absolute kann nicht ein Erstes, Unmittelbares sein, sondern das Absolute ist wesentlich sein Resultat”).<sup>52</sup> In Hegel’s logic, there is a circle whose end is identical to the beginning, though in a more elevated level. Spinoza, however, would strongly object to any attempt to cast God in the image of anything other than God, and would consider the enrichment of the absolute through the cycle of Hegel’s logic just as such. Hegel seems to be aware of this crucial point, as he persistently complains that Spinoza refuses to make God into a *person*.<sup>53</sup>

Are *finite* things, according to Spinoza, determined by negating their opposites? We have seen Spinoza’s claim in E1p8s1 that finite things are in part negations, presumably of one of the attributes (“the existence of some nature”), i.e., negations of the infinite. But do finite things determine the essence of *each other* through mutual negations? Consider the following claim from E3p54: “The Mind’s essence (as is known through itself) affirms only what the Mind is and can do, *not what it is not and cannot do*” (my emphasis). Presumably, Spinoza’s bracketed remark – “as is known through itself” – indicates that essences *in general* assert what a thing is and can do and not what it is not and cannot do.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, in E1p17s Spinoza claims, “a man is the cause of the existence of another man, but not of his essence, for the latter is an eternal truth” (G 11/63/18). Thus, my parents are the causes (or are among the causes) of my existence, but not of my essence. Spinoza’s claim in E1p17s seems to imply that particular things do not determine the essence of one another since they do not cause the essence of one another.

A text supporting the same conclusion somewhat more explicitly appears in §101 of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*: “The essences of singular, changeable things are not to be drawn from their

of Spinoza’s claim regarding the “Order of Philosophizing” in E2p2s2, see Y. Melamed, review of M. Ayers (ed.), *Rationalism, Platonism, and God*, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, February 24, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 462 (GW 11:376).

<sup>52</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 463 (GW 11:376–377). Cf. Hegel’s review of Jacobi’s *Werke*: “For since *God* is the result, the mediation in question immediately reveals itself to be a mediation which sublates itself in that result” (Hegel, *Heidelberg Writings*, p. 11).

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, p. 462 (GW 11:376).

<sup>54</sup> Otherwise, if this point were restricted only to the mind, Spinoza should have substantiated the claim by a reference to a previous proposition discussing the nature of the mind.

series, or order of existing, since it offers us nothing but extrinsic denominations, relations, or at most, circumstances [*denominationes extrinsecas, relationes, aut ad summum circumstantias*], all of which are far from the inmost essence of things.” While the “order of existing [*ordine existendi*]” refers to essences having duration, and not to essences that are eternal or formal,<sup>55</sup> it seems that we can still infer from this passage that for Spinoza “extrinsic denominations and relations” cannot determine the essence of particular things. Insofar as mutual negation is an extrinsic denomination, it would seem that particular things cannot determine the essence of one another.

Thus far we have seen several texts that indicate that, for Spinoza, finite things do not determine the *essence* of each other through mutual negation.<sup>56</sup> Is there *any* sense in which particular things determine each other for Spinoza? Yes. Particular things determine the *durational existence* of each other – they determine the beginning and end of the period in which things endure – since the essence of each finite thing does not determine or limit its existence.<sup>57</sup> One of Spinoza’s most central doctrines states: “No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause” (E3p4). Spinoza develops the implications of this crucial claim in E3p8:

E3p8: The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time.

Dem.: For if [the striving by which a thing strives to persevere in its being] involved a limited time, which determined the thing’s duration, then it would follow just from that very power by which the thing exists that it could not exist after that limited time, but that it would have to be destroyed. But (by P4) this is absurd. Therefore, the striving by which a thing exists involves no definite time. On the contrary, since (by P4) it will always continue to exist by the same power by which it now exists, *unless it is destroyed by an external cause*, this striving involves indefinite time, q.e.d. (My italics)

<sup>55</sup> For the distinction between formal essences and essences having duration, see E2p8. Cf. D. Garrett, “Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind that Is Eternal,” in O. Koistinen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 284–302.

<sup>56</sup> Another text that provides some support for this conclusion is E1p8s2: “the true definition of each thing neither involves nor expresses *anything except* the nature of the thing defined” (my emphasis). Assuming that the determination relation is transitive, it would seem that if one allows for the negation of a particular thing *x* to be included in the essence of *x*, this essence would have to expand indefinitely and, by virtue of transitivity, also include all the negations of the particular things that negate *x*. This does not seem to be consistent with the above passage from E1p8s2.

<sup>57</sup> See E4pref (G 11/209/6): “the duration of things cannot be determined from their essence, since the essence of things involves no certain and determinate time of existing.”

Things cannot *expire* by virtue of their essence. The duration of finite things must be externally limited since the essence of a thing (either finite or infinite) always affirms and supports the continuation of the thing’s existence. Thus there must be some causes external to the essence (and ultimately external to the thing) in order to bring a finite thing to its demise. Here is how Spinoza demonstrates E3p4:

E3p4: No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause.

Dem.: This Proposition is evident through itself. For the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing’s essence, or it posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away. So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it, q.e.d.

For Spinoza, the definition of a thing states its essence, and in this passage Spinoza argues that the essence, or definition, of a thing cannot bring about its destruction. Notice the strength Spinoza ascribes to this proposition: it is “evident through itself,” just like an axiom or an eternal truth. In another place, Spinoza suggests that violation of this principle is “as impossible as that something should come from nothing.”<sup>58</sup>

Relying on E3p4, Spinoza states his celebrated *conatus* doctrine: “E3p6: Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being” (*Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur*).<sup>59</sup> Variants of E3p4 appear in almost all of Spinoza’s writings.<sup>60</sup> The first Appendix to the *Short Treatise*, one of Spinoza’s earliest works, is apparently a very early draft of the opening of the *Ethics*. The sixth axiom of this Appendix reads: “What is a cause of itself could not possibly have limited itself” (“Dat gene ’t welk een oorzaak is van zig zelfs, is onmogelyk dat het zig zelfs zoude hebben bepaald”). The axiom seems to be a restriction, or application, of Spinoza’s general principle barring self-limitation. Why Spinoza specifies here the *causa sui* as that which cannot limit itself is an interesting question that cannot be properly addressed here.<sup>61</sup> It is clear, however, that by the time Spinoza wrote the final versions of the *Ethics*, he rejected the possibility of any self-limitation or self-negation.

<sup>58</sup> E4p20s. I suspect that in E4p20s Spinoza is even alluding to the possibility of *reducing* the *conatus* doctrine to the *ex nihilo nihil fit*, but this issue cannot be discussed here.

<sup>59</sup> For an excellent study of this doctrine, see D. Garrett, “Spinoza’s *Conatus* Argument,” in O. Koistinen and J. I. Biro (eds.), *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 127–158.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, CM II:xii (1/278/10); KV I:i (1/18/14), I:ii (1/20/16); KV II:xxvi (1/110/15).

<sup>61</sup> I suspect that this axiom might have had the Kabbalistic–Lurianic doctrine of divine self-limitation (*zimzum*) as a target. I hope to discuss this issue on another occasion.

The essence of no thing, finite or infinite, can negate, limit, or destroy the thing. Here, I believe, lies the deepest incongruity between the systems of Hegel and Spinoza. While for Hegel self-negation is the primary engine that brings about the unfolding of the system and the transition from one category to another, for Spinoza self-negation is a simple anathema. We have seen that Hegel scolds Spinoza for “not advancing to the cognition of [negation] as absolute, that is, *self-negating negation*.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Spinoza does not allow for self-negation, but this is a principled view, and not a coincidental omission. It is noteworthy that in his numerous detailed discussions of Spinoza, Hegel hardly ever addressed either the *conatus* doctrine or E3p4.

Before we turn to summarize our discussion of the dialectical reading of the *determinatio* formula let me address very briefly the issue of the two philosophers’ attitudes toward the law of non-contradiction. Hegel is frequently charged with rejecting the law of non-contradiction.<sup>63</sup> Spinoza accepts the law without any reservation, yet alludes to a different view that seems just as bold as Hegel’s alleged rejection of the law, i.e., that the law of non-contradiction is *not primitive*, but rather derived from a more basic principle. Consider E3p5:

Things are of a contrary nature, i.e., cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other [*Res eatenus contrariae sunt naturae, hoc est eatenus in eodem subjecto esse nequeunt, quatenus una alteram potest destruere.*]

Dem.: For if they could agree with one another, or be in the same subject at once [*simul esse possent*], then there could be something in the same subject which could destroy it, which (by P4) is absurd. Therefore, things etc., q.e.d.

The formulation of the proposition and its demonstration (i.e., the use of the logical term *subjectum* and the stress that contraries cannot be in the same subject *at the same time* [*simul*]), are reminiscent of Aristotle’s classical formulation of the law of non-contradiction. Yet, oddly enough, in the demonstration Spinoza seems to provide a *justification* of why contradictions are impossible: *because* the contradictory elements in the subject would cause the subject’s destruction, while destruction (per E3p4)

<sup>62</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 472 (GW 11:376).

<sup>63</sup> For a helpful discussion of the debate surrounding this issue, see R.-P. Horstmann, “Schwierigkeiten und Voraussetzungen der dialektischen Philosophie Hegels,” in Horstmann (ed.), *Seminar: Dialektik in der Philosophie Hegels* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), pp. 9–30. I will not enter into his debate here, though I think this charge is partly true. I take Hegel’s attitude toward the law of non-contradiction as typical Hegelian sublation. He wishes to preserve the law in order to make necessary transgressions force us to repel from one category to another.

cannot originate from an internal source. Does Spinoza take E3p4 to be the ground of the law of non-contradiction? Can one make sense of E3p4 without first assuming the law of non-contradiction? I cannot properly address these questions here, yet the appeal to E3p4 in order to justify the impossibility of contradiction seems to hint in this rather bold direction.

Turning now to the summary of our discussion of the dialectic interpretation of the formula, we can conclude that Spinoza could not endorse this reading since, unlike Hegel, he did not believe that God is what it is (infinite) by virtue of negating what it is not (finite). It also seems that for Spinoza finite things mutually determine the durational existence, but not the essence, of each other. Finally, and most crucially, Spinoza could not follow Hegel’s suggestion that all things must contain self-negation, since Spinoza considered self-negation a strict impossibility.

Is the third reading of the *determinatio* formula – i.e., that finite things are negations of the *maximally* determinate infinite being – consistent with Spinoza’s claims? I believe the answer is positive. Recall Spinoza’s assertion in E1p8s2 that “being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature.” I suggested earlier that Spinoza’s talk of “the absolute affirmation of some nature” is a reference to the *attributes*, since Spinoza frequently identifies the nature and attribute of a thing. Thus, for example, in E1p5 Spinoza presents the two as interchangeable in the *naturae sive attributi*. If we understand ‘nature’ in E1p8s2 as referring to an attribute, we get the following picture: the attributes, each being infinite, are absolute affirmations of some nature, while finite things are partial negations of the attribute, or nature, to which they belong. This view of the attributes as absolute affirmations appears at the very opening of the *Ethics*, when Spinoza stresses that God is absolutely infinite, i.e., that “whatever expresses essence and *involves no negation* pertains to its essence” (E1d6e; my italics). Only attributes “pertain to God’s essence,” since modes belong to *natura naturata*, not *natura naturans*. According to E1d6, the attributes are such that “each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence.” Thus, we can conclude that the phrase “whatever expresses essence and involves no negation” in E1d6e must refer to the attributes.<sup>64</sup> This view fits nicely our reading of E1p8s2, which suggests that finite things are just partial negations or limitations

<sup>64</sup> There is some internal tension in E1d6e, since the beginning of the *explicatio* asserts that it is possible to deny [*negare*] infinite attributes from what is infinite in its own kind, while the end of the explication implies that each attribute “involves no negation.” It is commonly assumed that the attributes are infinite in their own kind, but if so, it would seem that the beginning of the *explicatio* affirms, while the end denies, that attributes negate *each other*.

of the existence expressed by the attributes. This view has precedence in Descartes, of which Spinoza was clearly aware,<sup>65</sup> and thus I believe should be confirmed as the adequate interpretation of the *determinatio* formula.

#### CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that the famous *omnis determinatio est negatio* slogan which Hegel attributed to Spinoza was read in more than one way among his contemporaries. I have distinguished among three different interpretations of the formula, and examined the validity of each interpretation. Surprisingly, in spite of Kant's expressed hostility toward Spinoza's philosophy, his latent use of the formula turned out to be closer to Spinoza's claims than Hegel's enthusiastic adoption of the slogan. Hegel was clearly an insightful and acute reader of Spinoza, yet the Spinoza he adopted, as much as the Spinoza he rejected, was baptized in the ether of Hegel's own system.

<sup>65</sup> See DPPrd8: "The substance which we understand to be through itself supremely perfect, and in which we conceive nothing which involves any defect or limitation of perfection, is called God."