

Is Spinoza's pantheistic ontology a template for authoritarianism?

OVERVIEW:

- The pantheist ontology of Baruch Spinoza (b.1632 – d.1677) is an attempt to deny the accountability of political evil.
- Spinoza's instinct for statist control and his distrust of the common man are displayed in *Theological-Political Treatise* (published 1670). His masterwork, *Ethics* (published posthumously in 1677), is a bold attempt (in the guise of ontology) to classify minds and bodies as attributes of the State.
- In *Ethics*, Spinoza 'outlaws' any vantage point from which we can address or protest the kind of 'perfect power' -- and its attendant evils -- that constitute the essence and existence of the State.

By Richard Mather

Little work has been done on the potentially negative effects of *perfection* and *power* in Spinoza's *Ethics* and how his pantheistic ontology not only devalues theodicy, but affirms a model of power that resists accountability. Spinoza scholar Yitzhak Melamed has suggested there is a logically transitive relation between God's essence, existence and attributes, but not much is said about how this relates to perfection and power. Brandon C. Look has examined the relation between power and perfection, but he concerns himself largely with the type of (positive) perfection experienced by the individual (e.g. joy as the transition from lesser perfection to greater perfection). There is still work to be done in examining the negative political implications of Spinoza's system.

In *Ethics*, Spinoza draws the opposite conclusion from his Jewish intellectual forebear, Philo of Alexandria. Philo advances a theory of the transcendence of the Existent One, creator of the Good (but not evil). Philo makes a crucial distinction between God's existence (which can be ascertained) and his essence (which is unknowable). For Spinoza, however, the essence of God does not exist in a transcendent dimension. Rather, "God's existence and his essence are one and the same" (E1p20). And unlike Philo, Spinoza not only assigns everything to God, he says everything *is* God. Spinoza says there can only be one "substance," a substance that is both the cause of itself and whose essence involves existence. Spinoza collapses the ontological difference between God and the world, a radical

assertion of pantheism that eradicates transcendence and ushers in, perhaps for the first time, a philosophy of immanence.

(I have previously argued on this blog that Spinoza was a *panentheist* because of his assertion that God has an infinite number of attributes. However, all but two of these attributes are unknown, and they lie beyond the limits of language. And if there is nothing to be said about these unknown attributes (other than Spinoza's speculative assertion that they exist), then it begs the question whether we should concern ourselves with them, especially if they contribute nothing to the political implications of Spinoza's ontology.)

By collapsing the ontological difference between God and the world, Spinoza devalues the problem of evil because his pantheism outlaws the idea of a transcendent moral God. Ergo, evil cannot be explained; we can only describe its effects. Moreover, Spinoza's rejection of transcendent values and the collapse of the God/Nature distinction leaves us (as "modes") without any vantage point from which to critique power. All we have is a closed system of immanent causation in which God/Nature is the *source* of power, the *expression* of power (via the attributes), and the *effects* of power (modes). Not only is this power necessarily perfect, it is a permanent and ongoing state of affairs for the simple reason that substance is infinite. Spinoza's refutation of teleology offers us nothing but an endless expression of this state of affairs. Human beings are likewise constrained in that they are simply modifications of substance.

One would mind less if Spinoza's all-pervasive substance was *good* rather than icily perfect. But as Spinoza himself admits, God's perfection is not the same as saying God is good. Far from it. Besides, what we judge to be good or bad is not true in any absolute sense, according to Spinoza: Good is merely whatever agrees with our nature.

And there is certainly no sense that Spinoza's pantheistic God *suffers*, unlike Schopenhauer's Will or William C. Lane's pandeistic God who commits an act of self-emptying for the sake of love and suffers as part of the creation he has become. On the contrary, how things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference to Spinoza's pantheistic God, because God *is* how things are in the world. Indeed, for Spinoza, it is not so much why (bad) things happen but *how* things happen.

True, Spinoza holds out the hope that some of us may reach a blessed state in which we are able to intuitively grasp the world as a whole “under the aspect of eternity,” but we know from Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* that this is realistically only available to an elite few. The common man and woman, by contrast, have to suffice with Spinoza’s seven dogmas of popular religion.

Tellingly, one of the reasons Spinoza elaborated his seven laws was the need for a popular religion to ensure discipline. Not only was this popular religion to be under the control of civil authorities, this state religion would be (by Spinoza’s own admission) a lie. It is important, Spinoza says, “that he who adheres to them [the doctrines of faith] *knows not* that they were false” [italics mine] because otherwise “he would necessarily be a rebel.”

Spinoza’s instinct for statist control can be seen in the assertion, “Whatever is, is in God and nothing can exist or be conceived without God” (E1p15). Or to put it another way: *Whatever is, is in the State, and nothing can be conceived without the State*. Spinoza’s substance-as-State expresses itself equally in things and in ideas (via the twin attributes of “extension” and “thought”), an astonishing concept when one realizes that ideas, thoughts and minds belong to substance/State as much as bodies do. In fact, the very *concept* of thought (not just individual thoughts) emanates from the State and belongs to the State.

None of which sits well in our post-Holocaust, post-Soviet world, in part because we have seen how power without accountability — a power that apparently constitutes substance’s “very essence” (E1p34) — can have barbaric consequences. This is of particular interest from a Jewish viewpoint, firstly because of Spinoza’s own troubled relationship with Judaism but also because any attempt to explain or justify evil in the wake of genocide and terrorism is morally and conceptually problematic.

Contrary to a competing claim (made by Antonio Negri) that Spinoza gives us an effective ‘other’ to power, Spinoza’s ontology is actually a closed system, a system that invites moral indifference because there is simply no place from which we, as modes, can critique power. Moreover, we are all guilty by implication because each of us is a modulation of this power, both mentally and physically. (Alain Badiou is closer to the truth of the matter when he says that “Spinoza represents the most radical attempt ever in ontology to identify structure and metastructure.”)

More work needs to be done to develop the suspicion that Spinoza's pantheist ontology is a political ruse designed to bolster the power and reach of the State. But what kind of State? It seems to me that Spinoza is much less interested in social and economic policy than in the ontological *apparatus* needed to uphold civic and religious institutions with the supreme aim of ensuring discipline. Indeed, Spinoza's system looks very much like a political and bureaucratic metastructure that *manages* people.

There is no doubting that Spinoza is an impressive philosopher, perhaps one of the greatest-ever thinkers, but his icy metaphysics and his patent distrust of the common man and woman are troubling. Of course, Spinoza could not have foreseen the degree to which excessive and murderous statism would blight Europe's political landscape during the the first half of the 20th century, but he can (I think) be taken to task for lending credence to the kind of managerial politics espoused by superbodies such as the European Union. And for that reason, it is worth reappraising Spinoza's contribution to political thought.