

God.

In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel offers the following verdict on Spinoza's ontology: "According to Spinoza what is, is God, and God alone. Therefore, the allegations of those who accuse Spinoza of atheism are the direct opposite of the truth; with him there is *too much* God" (Hegel 1995, vol. 3, 281-2). It is not easy to dismiss Hegel's grand pronouncement, since Spinoza indeed clearly affirms: "whatever is, is in God" (E1p15). Crocodiles, porcupines (and your thoughts about crocodiles and porcupines) are all in God. There is *nothing* that is not in Spinoza's God.

Spinoza defines God at the very opening page of the *Ethics*, and the definition (and its explication) unfold in three successively elucidatory steps: First, Spinoza characterizes God as "a being absolutely infinite [*ens absolute infinitum*]. Then, he spells out this characterization: "i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence" (E1def6). Finally, Spinoza adds an *explicatio* to the entire definition: "I say absolutely infinite, not infinite in its own kind; for if something is only infinite in its own kind, we can deny infinite attributes of it; but if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence." Throughout his philosophical career Spinoza plays with the precise formulation of this definition; its core remains pretty stable, though the small variations might indicate attempts to explore alternative nuances (see, for example, KV II.1; I/19; Ep. 2; IV/7; Ep. 83; IV/335). Moreover, in his correspondence Spinoza also explains why he prefers this definition rather than the more common definition of God as *ens perfectissimum* (the most perfect being); an adequate definition, claims Spinoza, should express the efficient cause of the thing defined, and the definition of God as *ens perfectissimum* fails to spell out God's efficient cause (Ep. 60; IV/271).

Given the importance of Spinoza's definition of God, each of the clauses in this definition has been the subject of intense scholarly scrutiny. Spinoza never defined infinity, though we can

retrieve some of his understanding of infinity from his definition of finitude (E1def2) and from his defense of actual infinity (Ep. 12; IV/62). The *explicatio* of E1d6 can be read as implying that each of God's attributes is infinite in its kind, and in Ep. 2 (IV/7) Spinoza states this point explicitly (cf. KV II.1; I/19). The precise meaning of Spinoza's claim that God has an "infinity" of attributes has been the subject of a heated debate. Jonathan Bennett (1984, 75-80) argued that for Spinoza "infinite" means just: all, and that as a result, Spinoza's ascription of infinite attributes to God, does not commit him to the existence of more than two attributes. For an intense critique of Bennett's claim, see Ariew (1990), and Melamed (2021, 78-86). Similarly, Spinoza's claim that God is a substance "consisting of" infinite attributes [*substantiam constantem infinitis attributis*] raised questions about the precise meaning of the relation denoted by "consisting". Is Spinoza's God an infinite aggregate whose parts are the infinitely many attributes? Spinoza is clearly committed to the indivisibility of God (E1p13), but if so, in what sense does God consist of the attributes?

In spite of the important open questions regarding Spinoza's definition of God, it is clear that Spinoza's understanding of God diverges very significantly from that of almost all of his Christian contemporaries, for, first, Spinoza's God is not a person, and second, Spinoza's God is extended. Of God's infinitely many attributes, we, human beings, know only two—Extension and Thought—while all the other attributes are beyond our cognitive and causal reach (E2a5, Ep. 64, and Ep. 66). The attributes we know are not attributes of a perfect person (such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence), but are rather just the fundamental kinds of existence with which we are acquainted: the existence of extended and thinking entities.

Throughout his writing, and especially in the TTP, Spinoza attacks the common anthropomorphic conceptions of God. As part of this attack, he argues that God has no free will (E1p32c1) and no emotions (E5p17), and that, strictly speaking, God loves no one (E5p17c). Perhaps Spinoza's most intense attack on the anthropomorphic conception of God occurs in the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*. Here, Spinoza's primary target is the common view that "God has made all things for man, and [has made] man that he might worship God" (E1App (II/78)).

Sharply criticizing this view, Spinoza not only attempts to show its falsity but also to provide a genealogy of the error (in fact, a pile of errors) that result in this view.

Spinoza's critique of anthropomorphism is partly directed against religious preachers and theologians, but it also targets some of the most prominent philosophers of his time. In E2p3s, Spinoza mocks those "who say that God has the power of destroying all things and reducing them to nothing [and] compare God's power with the power of kings." It is likely that one of the targets of Spinoza's criticism is Descartes's famous announcement, in his correspondence with Mersenne, that both the eternal truths and the laws of nature are strictly dependent on the free will of God, who institutes them "just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom" (AT I 145 | CSMK 23).

The fact that the *Ethics* opens with the definition of God is not a coincidence. In E2p10s, Spinoza criticizes his predecessors for failing to

observe the proper order of philosophizing. For they believed that the divine nature, which they should have contemplated before all else (because it is prior both in knowledge and in nature) is last in the order of knowledge, and that the things that are called objects of the senses are prior to all. That is why, when they contemplated natural things, they thought of nothing less than they did of the divine nature; and when afterwards they directed their minds to contemplating the divine nature, they could think of nothing less than of their first fictions, on which they had built the knowledge of natural things, because these could not assist knowledge of the divine nature.

For Spinoza, philosophy cannot begin with the finite – whether the cartesian *Cogito* or the things we experience by the senses, as for the Aristotelians. If we begin with finite things and only then conceive of God as having the perfections of these finite beings (but to an infinite degree), we embark on the road that leads straight to anthropomorphism; our *ens perfectissimum* will be just an infinitely improved version of a human being, the creature we imagine as the most perfect creature. Moreover, if we begin philosophizing by contemplating finite things, even our knowledge of finite

things will be deeply distorted, since, according to Spinoza, we cannot adequately understand these finite things without understanding first their ultimate cause (E1a4), i.e., God. Since God's essence is the ultimate cause of all things (E1p16)—both of their essence and their existence (E1p25)—it seems that Spinoza's causal axiom (E1a4) requires that the knowledge of God's essence (i.e., of the attributes) be a precondition for the knowledge of any other thing. Indeed, it is arguably as a result of these considerations that Spinoza concludes in E2p47s that "God's infinite essence and his eternity are known to all." In this sense, the knowledge of those attributes to which we have cognitive access seems to be almost trivial, and we have it whether we are aware of this or not.

Due to Spinoza's insistence on the "inseparability" of God and Nature (see Ep. 6 (IV/36) and Ep. 73 (IV/307)), Spinoza has been commonly associated with pantheism, though arguably it would be more proper to describe his views as *panentheistic*, since what we understand and experience as nature – i.e., Extension and Thought – is only an infinitesimal portion of God's absolutely infinite reality (see Gueroult (1969, 220-239, Carlisle (2021, 63-7, Melamed (forthcoming, §2).

Spinoza's conception of God was radically alien to seventeenth-century Christians; this conception would be much less extraordinary in the context of rabbinic Judaism where both pantheism (among Kabbalists) and radical anti-anthropomorphism (among the disciples of Maimonides) dominated much of the discourse about God.

Some of Spinoza's contemporaries accused him of atheism, and indeed, if one's notion of God is anthropomorphic, Spinoza clearly did not believe in such a God (nor did Maimonides). Responding to these charges, Spinoza describes them as stemming from either malice or ignorance, and then turns to address his own, refined, proofs of God's existence (E1p11d. Cf. Garrett (1979) and Della Rocca (2002)):

Who can be so skillful and cunning that he can give, insincerely, so many and such strong arguments for a thing he regards as false? Who, I say, will he afterward think has written sincerely if

he thinks fictions can be as solidly demonstrated as truths?... Has someone who maintains that God must be recognized as the highest good, and that he should be freely loved as such, 'cast off all religion' (Ep. 43 | IV/220).

While not all of Spinoza's readers were convinced, at least in the case of Hegel, Spinoza's words did not fall on deaf ears.

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Key passages: E1d6; E1p11; E1p15; E1App; E2p10s; E2p47s; Ep. 43 (IV/220); Ep. 54 (IV/253)

See also Attributes; *Causa sui*; Existence; Intellectual Love of God; Kabbalah; Pantheism controversy; Substance;

For further reading:

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