

Remote Learning Module for 23 March 2020

Lecture Notes on Part I of Spinoza's *Ethics*

When we were last in the classroom, we discussed the first five propositions in Part I of *Ethica*. Let's now refresh ourselves with a brief overview of that material, after which we can proceed to examine the more salient propositions that follow E1Pr14 (note this canonical way of referencing Spinoza's text: "E1" stands for Part I of the *Ethics*, "Pr" indicates a Proposition, followed by its number; corollaries, scholia, lemmas, and appendices will be indicated similarly: "E1Ap" refers to the Appendix to Part One, for example).

Here is the overview of the proofs Spinoza adduces in support of E1Pr14, which asserts that there is but one substance, *Deus sive Natura* (God or Nature), and that therefore every other grammatical subject names either an infinite or finite mode, excepting the names for the Attributes of Substance (of which we know but two: Thought and Extension, which terms refer to Substance itself, differing from the name, Substance, only in logical form):

<http://capone.mtsu.edu/rbombard/RB/PDFs/Monism.pdf>

E1Pr1 says that by definition a substance is prior to its affections (modes). This means logical priority; other examples of logical priority are: musical compositions are logically prior to renditions, hosts are logically prior to parasites (gee is that topical today), and objects are logically prior to desires and fears.

E1Pr2 says that if there are two substances (two grammatical subjects that are also things, not properties of things), having *different* attributes (that is, essences or necessary properties), then they have nothing in common. Recall here our example: in atomic chemistry we might think each element in the Periodic Table is a separate substance, but upon reflection we realize that they *do* have something in common: electrical charge); they are not in fact separate substances, but modes of assemblies of charge (ways that positive, negative, and neutral charge can be arranged). Think of the attributes of Substance that we know (Thought and Extension) as orthogonal axes: their only intersection is the origin, zero, or the empty set); for example, you cannot locate your longitude on the face of this Earth by knowing, however precisely, your latitude.

E1Pr3 says that things with nothing in common are *causally isolated*. This proposition directly contradicts Descartes' contention that minds, human or otherwise, although they are *essentially, that is necessarily*, distinct from bodies (or regions of space with material properties), can and do causally interact with each other.

E1Pr4 is Spinoza's version of what Leibniz will later call the Identity of Indiscernables: although *in idea* we can distinguish between, say, a string of nucleotides (strands of DNA) from the function of these molecules as codes for protein synthesis, they are not distinct things, *in re*. If you say you have two things, but cannot point to an attributive or modal difference between them, then you don't; what you have are different names for one and the same thing.

E1Pr5 says that there cannot be two or more separate substances (things) having the *same* essence (or attribute). This proposition will remove the plurality of Cartesian egos (minds) from the universe. If each mind is, as Descartes supposed, a separate substance, then something must distinguish them, but this distinction cannot be an attribute or essence (each mind is presumed to have the same essence or attribute, being a *res cogitans* and not a chunk of *res extensa*). Nor can two minds, if they are taken to be separate substances) be distinguished by their modes, because, as we noted in E1Pr1, substances are logically prior to their modes. For example, we might think that ice and steam are two different things but in fact they are simply modes of one thing: water.

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This is where we left off just before Spring Break. Now, let us consider the rest of Spinoza's proof of substance monism.

E1Pr6 shows that one substance cannot produce another since, by E1Pr5 they cannot have the same attributes or essences and since, by E1Pr3, they therefore have nothing in common (are causally isolated).

E1Pr7 follows directly from E1Pr6: every substance must be *causa sui*. Otherwise, one substance would produce another; therefore, no substance can be subject to any alien contingency.

E1Pr8 follows in turn: every substance is necessarily infinite; otherwise a given substance would be finite, and therefore limited by another of the same kind (remember the definition of finitude), which is precluded by E1Pr5.

E1Pr9 introduces what subsequent scholars have termed Spinoza's "principle of plenitude." It says that the more *reality* a being has the more attributes it has (it's manifold of dimensions has not upper bound). We can read this as saying that the more "thingy" a thing is, the more distinct essential qualities it has, but it's best to read "reality" here as meaning "power to act" (readers of Plato will recall that in the *Sophist* we find exactly this notion: *ousia estin dynamis* (being is power). Perhaps a more helpful way to understand the principle of plenitude is this: if numbers exist at all (let's not worry disputes over the ontological status of universals here; the analogy will work regardless of whether one is a Platonic realist or an Aristotelian nominalist), then the only ones that do not exist are the impossible ones (as, for example when we say that there is no rational fraction m/n that is equal to the square root of 2). On a more positive note, the principle of plenitude can also be understood as saying that there are no *unactualized possibles*, or that everything possible is actual. Historical note: Parmenides was the first to say this, and Plato followed suit.

E1Pr10 asserts what we nowadays call "Property Dualism": each attribute or essence or necessary quality of substance must be conceived through itself. Remember what we said about E1Pr2: you cannot locate your longitude on the face of this Earth by knowing, however precisely, your latitude. For Spinoza, this means that the attributes of Thought and Extension must be understood separately. We can coin a term here and think of the attribute of Extension as a landscape, and the attribute of Thought as a mindscape. Both exhaust the universe, but

neither can be understood through the other. As we'll see soon enough, Leibniz recognized the implication of this proposition quite clearly (it implies materialism), and in order to avoid it, he posits that the units of existence are *monads* (he takes the term from Euclid: English "point" translates Greek *monas*), which Euclid defines as "that which has no parts").

E1Pr11, E1Pr12, and E1Pr13 assert that every substance must be necessary (since *causa sui*) and indivisible (since, if substance could be divided into parts each of which shared the same essence, then one could produce the other, and we saw in E1Pr5, that this is logically impossible).

E1Pr14 concludes Spinoza's reasoning for substance monism: given the first thirteen propositions, there is only one, and can only be one, substance. The Latin word, "Deus" (English "God"), names this one thing: the Universe, or all there is. Why this point of grammar? Because in both philosophical and religious discourse, these terms typically serve to answer the question: Why are things just the way they are and not some other way they might have been? Hence, *Deus sive Natura* (note that Spinoza, ever cautious, doesn't introduce this phrase until the Preface to E4; he uses it explicitly in E4Pr4)

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The more salient propositions in E1 that remain for our consideration are these.

E1Pr17: this is an exceedingly important proposition for Spinoza, and calls for careful analysis. We have here the claim that "God (or Nature) acts from the laws of his/its own nature, constrained by none (substance is subject to no alien contingencies). Note that in further articulating this proposition, Spinoza distinguishes between two senses of the term "Nature": *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* (perfectly good Latin, but in English not so much, since they must be translated as "nature naturing" and "nature natured" respectively. The point of the distinction is this: (a) with respect to itself (*natura naturans*), Nature/God acts *freely* (note well, however, that this meaning of the term "free" echoes Descartes' analysis of error: it means that God acts from the necessity of his/its own nature, not arbitrary will); but (b) with respect to its modes (*natura naturata*, or the various states of the universe unfolding in time), Nature acts deterministically.

E1Pr18 says that Nature/God is the *immanent* not *transitive* cause of all things that happen. Remember that transitive causes pass along causal influence from cause to effect (think of the familiar billiard ball analogy), while immanent causes are inseparable *in re* from their effects (one might think here of the causal relation between digestive enzymes and digestion—the enzymes cause digestion all right, but they do not act like cue balls bouncing into eight balls; or you might think of laughter as what's caused by your getting a joke, or your DNA as the cause of the agency of your genes. Effectively, what Spinoza calls an immanent cause is what Aristotle would have called a formal cause. Spinoza's example is that the cause of given circle's having a given circumference is the magnitude of its diameter; in other words, the magnitude of the diameter determines (causes) the magnitude of the circumference.

E1Pr29 says that nothing in nature (nothing that happens) is contingent; everything is determined (*natura naturata* again) to act just as it does. We might say that this proposition

announces Rationalism or Bust, or that there are no “hidden variables” behind the operations of nature, nor are there any “brute facts”; rather, there is a complete, consistent systematic description of the whole of reality: divine omniscience is simply the mindscape of the universe, and insofar as the mindscape maps the landscape, there are no gaps.

E1Pr32 says that no acts of will are free causes, but rather necessary causes. Only divine omnipotence is free (but again, remember that *natura naturans* means that God acts from the determinations of his/its own nature, not the dictates of another), all other causal interactions (*natura naturata*) follow from what we typically call the laws of nature. Moreover, Spinoza contends in this proposition, contra Descartes, that the human will is not a distinct faculty or power: the will is simply the intellect considered as an element in a causal chain. It might help here to think of what Descartes called the *natural light of reason*: we simply can’t withhold our assent from claims or judgments we conceive as following from the recognition that their denial would be or would entail a contradiction. While we may not (at least not with present science and technology) be able to trace the causes of our actions when, say, choosing to turn right rather than left upon entering a grocery store, all the way back to the moment of our biological conceptions, we can be assured by E1Pr32 that we are no more free when so choosing than we are when we acknowledge that whenever a proposition, *p*, logically entails another proposition, *q*, and that *p* is true, so must *q* be true (in other words, we cannot refrain intellectually from assenting to the validity of *modus ponens*).

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Tomorrow, we’ll begin our tour of E2. Be well everyone, and remember: social distancing saves lives, which is presumably why we are not in JUB 202 presently.

Also note that we’ve set Monday, the 30th as the due date for submitting your abstracts of E1Ap (the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics*). If you need more time, just let me know; these are extraordinary times.