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### Evaluating Spinoza's Arguments for Determinism

Benedict de Spinoza was a deeply impactful but controversial thinker. The rejection of free will was certainly one of his more controversial topics, and he spends a significant portion of the *Ethics* speaking on the idea of an infinite God that predetermines every state of the Universe. This God is contrary to the majority of Christian theology, and Spinoza was heavily disregarded and oppressed for his views. He believed that all things were created by God or nature, but on a deeper level that God manifests his extension by creating all possible things in an infinite universe. Since all things except for God must have a cause (1p28), all of your thoughts and actions must have an immanent cause – God (1p18). The consequences of this are that knowledge of the state of the Universe at one point in time reveals the state of the Universe at all points in time. However, I reject Spinoza's God and his view of a Universe where all interactions are inevitable – it is impossible to know the cause of all things. As humanity's knowledge in fields such as physics and mathematics increases, there are a multitude of things that we realize that we may be *unable* to know. Despite praise from the most famed 20<sup>th</sup> Century genius, the Spinozistic view of a Universe determined solely by its previous states is not consistent with many modern discoveries suggesting gaps in what knowledge is possible and discredits the God or nature that is responsible for our existence today.

To begin, there were two major discoveries in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century concerning the nature of knowledge. The first came in 1931: Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorems. As it turns out, given any possible language of mathematical notation, there will always be statements that are neither provable nor rejectable (Raatikainen 1). It follows that human mathematical knowledge will forever be limited – an almost heretical statement to the Renaissance-inspired early modern philosophers. Spinoza believes that God is omniscient (1p33s) because of his perfection: being an infinitely thinking being. Does an all-knowing God know whether the Twin Prime Conjecture is true or not? I think not – it may be logically impossible to know such a thing. There is no indication that Spinoza's God is capable of acting outside of logic as a thinking being – thus he cannot be completely omniscient and determine all things. The second major discovery was developed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and that is our current understanding of quantum mechanics. The work of thinkers like Heisenberg and Schrödinger suggests that some interactions of particles may be purely probabilistic or otherwise indeterminate. Tim Andersen, a research scientist at Georgia Institute of Technology, suggests in an article for Medium that this randomness allows for us to make decisions *despite our past*, or rather, we are able to make decisions that are not determined by our past due to quantum randomness (1). If we are incapable of knowing all things, we are incapable of using the current state of the Universe in order to determine future or past states of the Universe – since this would require knowledge of all particles and all of their possible mathematical interactions according to the laws of physics, mathematics and logic. These discoveries suggest that some level of free will or indeterminate actions are possible – knowledge compresses reality into true or false – but there may be more to the story than is possible to know.

Furthermore, it does not appeal to God or nature to be deterministic. If “things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced” (1p33), then God’s actions are also determined. But by what? Unless he is purely an atheist, Spinoza must believe that there is some infinite God capable of influencing the Universe. That God must have free will to act in such a way, or else there is a more powerful being influencing his actions. I am confident that Spinoza is not purely an atheist, so it follows that under his worldview, some infinite being must have the will to leave the remainder of the Universe as a determined place. Even for atheists, if the universe is God-less and determined, how are the laws of nature determined? Remember, chance is choice. Even if we are speaking from survivorship bias, *why* do our set of laws of nature allow for dogs and birch trees and consciousness to exist if other sets of laws lead to infinitely large black holes or dead, spread-out universes? I am not committed to the idea of human free will in this regard, but I am certainly committed to the idea that God has free will. Spinoza believes that “God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists” (1p11). I have already shown that Spinoza’s God is not in control of these infinite attributes and cannot act as sovereign over them. Thus, there is nothing preventing the existence of a “will” substance that allows for genuine sovereignty over your own being. This substance is not alike any other Spinozistic substance (1p2, 1p5), but a maximally real being must have the attributes of this substance (1p9). Therefore, Spinoza’s infinite and all-powerful God must have free will or else he does not have all possible attributes. This obviously contradicts 1p33; perhaps a God could have created all things in any possible combination, but chose to create them in this way, even bounded by infinity.

One of the possible counterarguments to my first argument concerning the free will of humans and the impossibility of omniscience is that they're seemingly unrelated. It appears that merely because certain mathematical truths may be logically impossible to validate does not imply that humans have free will. However, it is important to reflect back on what actually constitutes free will. Free will is merely just the ability to make decisions that are not impacted by your past (Andersen 1). Many biologists and philosophers do feel that this does not exist – simply because our brains are certainly shaped by our perception and also genetic nature. Nonetheless, we have free will as long as nothing can perfectly predict our actions. In order to perfectly predict human actions, one needs to be able to predict future states of the universe from present ones. It is impossible to predict future states of the universe because of the indeterminate nature of particles, mathematics, and maybe consciousness. Therefore, we have free will. An interesting side note that I will leave unresolved is that the weather is also indeterminate by these same rules and also has free will. But the fundamental difference between human free will and the free will of nature is that human free will is a consequence of intelligence and consciousness – we are too smart to predict to perfection. Spinoza's view that we are merely modes of thought and extension is missing the picture that we have a special characteristic providing exceptional control of our behavior. Human reactions are wholly unpredictable. Jordan Peterson writes in his *12 Rules for Life* about the wide array of reactions that humans have towards tragedy and the trials and tribulations of life. This includes Solzhenitsyn, the famed Russian author whose work in exposing the authoritarian state may have partly led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the “young man who shot twenty children and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in

2012” (Peterson 147). Both faced incredible struggles of similar magnitudes and had nearly polar opposite reactions. This is just one brutal comparison of human nature, but we truly do have enough sovereignty over our actions as an attribute of our thinking selves to have immense consequences for the extended world.

Another counterargument is that as long as it appears that we humans have free will, then our actions still may be predestined but still unknown to us. Spinoza’s philosophy appears to be correct – we are mere modes of extension and thought and should try to act rationally and morally to maximize our happiness (4p37). However, humans are still subjects to the bondage of the Universe according to Spinoza and their actions are henceforth determined; with every stimulus or situation we face, there is a natural and predictable reaction that we will have, as well as a guide to acting moral. For example: “hate can never be good” (4p45) and “the mind strives to imagine only those things which posit its power of acting” (3p54). How is this world view appealing? Sure, being hateful is not good, but Spinoza’s metaphysical views contradict moral absolutism. Belief that the mind is determined to think the way that it will regardless of any is not freeing – it is quite literally “human bondage” to the inevitable reality of our Universe.

Spinoza’s view of a universe that is predestined to act in a certain way does not align with the nature of humans nor the physical world. Powered by an omnipotent God whose sole purpose is to create matter and consciousness, the predetermined Universe is contradictory to numerous modern discoveries that suggest limitations on possible knowledge – implying that the universe may be in an indeterminate state. In addition, God’s actions are also inevitable under a certain set of rules in order to be maximally real, but an all-powerful being could

choose which set of rules to create the universe under. Nonetheless, this worldview is not compatible with human flourishing and morality, which relies on the power of humans to control their own destiny and act how they feel is optimal. Overall, Spinoza attempts to build off of Descartes' rejection of skepticism by forming a set of axioms and propositions that determine human behavior, but misses the mark by failing to consider that we may be *infinitely* complex beings that are not possible to track like a flying arrow's trajectory.

Works Cited

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