

Spinoza On the Knowledge of God and The Existence of Evil in The World: An Epistemic Purview

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Abstract

This study examines Spinoza's position on the knowledge of God and the problem of evil in the world. Drawing from Spinoza's argument that there is nothing like evil in the world since all finite beings are logically necessary modification of the divine substance, this paper contends that Spinoza did not only fail in solving the problem of evil but also contradicted himself and made it appear more complex. This problem cannot be easily solved either by philosophy or theology because of the complexities in the nature of evil. In both cases, it is impossible to deny the existence of evil as well as to fathom the ontological possibility of evil in the world.

Keywords: God, Evil, Epistemology, World

INTRODUCTION

There is, according to Spinoza only one substance in reality, and this substance is divine, eternal and infinite. It can be called God/Nature. It has many attributes, however two are mainly recognized, and these are idea and extension or, in other words, spirit and matter. By the necessity of its being, it expresses itself in various forms, and these forms are creature, hence all creatures are expressions, modifications, of Nature (God) and they are all part of it. It has two aspects, the *natura naturans* (the maturing nature) and the *natura naturata* (natured nature) that is God and the universe respectively. But these are only two aspects of the same thing, the substance.

Everything in the universe is part of God, a self-expression or modification of God. The nature of God is in such that it expresses itself in various forms because God's action does not depend on the freedom of will. On the contrary, all actions and all events in the universe came from God as the modes of this self-expression, that is, modes with the aid of which God's attributes are communicated with confidence and tenacious bearing. This means that nothing is really evil. In other words, there is in fact no evil in the world since everything comes from God and is part of God. He holds also that the concept of evil is due to inadequate knowledge on the part of man. Men consider certain things, actions or events as evil because they fail to see them in their true perspective as expressions of God.

In this paper, however, we want to examine Spinoza's epistemological movement to the knowledge of God and evaluate his claim of denying the existence of evil in the world. And if evil does not exist, why must man be experiencing such passion in his life or is it a matter of giving name (evil) to some certain things? If man stopped mentioning evil or wipe entirely the idea of evil in the mind, will such attributes of passion stop?

Spinoza's Negation of Traditional Theism and His Theory of Reality

Spinoza's epistemological foundation started by discarding the metaphysics of traditional theism. This is because for him, in the real nature of things God is ahead of whatever that exists. He thought that these ideas might also choose to precisely have an effect on the conclusions we make about things such as human nature, mind and body. And because Spinoza had such new things about human nature, he therefore, starts his rational explanation with the existence of God and the problem of nature. However, he used a different dimension

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from that of traditional theism to give the proof of God's existence. According to Onigbinde (1996,135), traditional theism rests on three central doctrines:

First, God's being distinct from (transcends) that of the world. The existence of the world and all that it contains is the outcome of an act of divine creation. God is both immaterial and possesses infinite power, freedom, goodness and wisdom. Second, despite the attribution of various properties to God, His being is so utterly different and unique that God's nature is ultimately beyond the grasp of man's finite intelligence. One can know that God exists, but not in any clear and definite way that God is. God is not accessible to (transcends) human understanding. Third, on certain special occasions and through the agency of certain select individual persons, God discloses certain truths to mankind. Such disclosures take the form of revelations, direct communications by God to His chosen prophets.

These three doctrines, in effect, are fundamental items in traditional theism. They are common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But Spinoza rejected all. First the notion that God is distinct and different from the world. For him, God is the greatest reality that one can think of, and of which is also identical with nature. He also used the term *Substance* to refer to the same one ultimate reality. So, God, *Nature* and *Substance* are different names for one and the same reality he gives the inimitable explanation of the concept of God in his definition:

"By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence" (ID6)¹.

By his definition of God, he meant God to be infinite substance. This means in effect, that God has all-encompassing attributes, which means that He possesses all kinds of attributes (both good and bad). He acclaimed that with the aid of *Ethics*, the human mind can do nothing other than to recognize thought and extension as the only attributes. In relation to Substance, he writes:

By substance I understand what is in itself and is convinced through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed (Spinoza: ID3)¹

This definition has two meanings. The first one is that a substance is independent of its existence. This means that it does not depend on any external force or transcendental subject for it to exist. While different matters may additionally exist as aspects of something else. _____

1. The citations concerning Spinoza in this paper are collected from the translated text - The Collected Works of Spinoza Vol. 1. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Passages from the Ethics are cited according to Book (1-v), Definition (D), Axiom (A), proposition (P), Corollary (C), and Scholium (S). (IVP13S) refers to Ethics, Book IV, Proposition 13, Scholium. Passages from the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect are cited according to paragraph number. (TIE 35) refers to Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, Paragraph 35.

The second one is that a substance is known as it is in itself, which means that the notion of a substance does not in any way related to other things. Therefore, a substance is both ontologically and conceptually self-standing. He finally held that in *Nature, there cannot be two or more substances of the same attribute (IP5)*. Thus, nature should not be seen here as that which is different from and inferior to God, but as one power, the divine power. From the above definitions Spinoza coined the three concepts (God, substance, and nature) to mean one thing to the same one ultimate reality.

The second denial of classical theism by Spinoza was that God (Nature) is unintelligible. He rather claimed that, principle; Nature is open to exploration and understanding by man's reason. That both metaphysics (as in notifying the general is essential structure of Nature) and science (in working to the specific causal connections among the complicated parts of nature) are together found on the conviction that reality is open to man's understanding.

Finally, he rejected the traditional notions of revelations as a final and unquestionable source of truth. For him, reason not revelation is the source of metaphysical and scientific truth, as well as the source of moral guidance. Therefore, whatever truth we discovered about the world, whether of human conduct, goals or standards should be left for human reason to decide. It is human reasoning that will discover the truth with his own

unaided power and not to be relied on revelations which is limited to some sets of people. Thus, Spinoza's epistemological movement to the knowledge of God started from the above analysis, at which he projected three kinds of knowledge.

The Three Kinds of Knowledge

Spinoza projected three kinds of knowledge with which one can proceed from the lowest to the highest level. He said that one should start with the things most familiar to oneself. For him, the more one understands individual things the more one understands God (11P8). By refining one's knowledge of things, one can proceed from *imagination to reason and finally to intuition*. The first (imagination) consist of *inadequate*' ideas. Whereas the second (reason) and the third (intuition) represent, each in its own way, types of what he calls adequate ideas.

The first level of knowledge (imagination) is that in which one relies on non-critical way of the sense memory, imagination, hearsay, and tradition as source of beliefs. One's ideals in this case according to Spinoza are mainly concrete and specific such that the mind remains passive. This is because one only knows things as they affect one's senses. Stumpf (1994, 252) substantiated it thus:

I know that I see a person, but as yet I do not know simply by looking what this person's essential nature is. I can form a general idea, such as human, by seeing several people, and the ideas I form from experience are useful for daily life, but they do not give me true knowledge.

In respect of this, Spinoza argues against imagination to intellect and sees it as imparting nothing other than confused cognition. To use Spinoza's preferred language as cited in Parkinson (1954,11);

The ideas of the imagination are inadequate. They may be essential for getting around in the world, but they give us a distorted and incomplete picture why, it is useful to begin with sense perception. This is the most important form of Imaginative perception, and it is from this form that all others drive.

Spinoza did not claim that everything obtained from the sense or on the basis of authority and heresay are unreliable. But if we have no way of critically evaluating such beliefs by reason, or establishing their truth on the basis of a scientific and rational proof, then we are unable to discriminate what is genuinely true from what is not. So, the first grade of knowledge is, in general, unreliable.

The second level of knowledge goes beyond imagination to reason. At this level, knowledge is adequate and true. For him, everybody has the ability to take part in this type of knowledge, reason being that it is actually done by having a common sharing in the attributes of substance, in God's thought and extension. Using sciences as an example, sciences provide adequate ideas because they give rational justifications for their conclusions.

"Insofar as they are able to determine the cause- effect connections among the parts and events of Nature, the various sciences are able gradually to find patches of lawfulness and mathematical order in nature (Onigbinde 1996 135).

Spinoza in effect concluded that ideas of reason and science are true because truth validates itself. So, it is only when, through reason, men reach the second and third grades of knowledge that they obtain the certainty of having the truth.

The third and highest level of knowledge is intuition which is dependent on the mind, as its formal cause, provided the mind itself is eternal. Sumner (1989, 94) summarized this level of knowledge in different stages.

The mind does not conceive anything under the form of eternity, except in so far as it conceives its own body under the form of eternity (V.xxix); that is, except in so far as it is eternal (V.xxi. xxiii.); therefore (by the last Prop). In so far as it is eternal, it possesses the knowledge of God, which knowledge is necessarily adequate (ii.xIvi.); hence the mind, in so far as it is eternal, is capable of knowing everything which can follow from this given knowledge of God (II.xI.), in other words, of knowing things by the third kind of knowledge (see Det. In II xI. Note ii.), whereof accordingly the mind (III. Det.i), in so far as it is eternal, is the adequate or formal cause of such knowledge.

By implication, since man is more potent in this kind of knowledge, he will be more completely conscious of himself and of God; in other words, he will be more perfect and blessed, as will appear more clearly in the sequel. But we must here observe that, although we are already certain that the mind is eternal, in so far as it conceives things under the form of eternity, yet, in order that what we wish to show may be more explained and better understood, we will consider the mind itself, as though it had just begun to exist and to understand things under the form of eternity, as indeed we have done hitherto, this we may do without any danger of error, so long as we are careful not to draw any conclusion, unless our premises are plain. Based on this fact, therefore, we can grasp the whole system of nature. At this level we can understand the particular things we encountered on the first level we saw other bodies in a disconnected way, and now we see them as part of the whole scheme. This kind of knowing “proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of thing” (Parkinson 1954 12).

By the time we get to this level, we are not only knowledgeable about God but also perfect in knowing everything about Nature. This makes us to understand fully the real nature and order of God. Spinoza's conception of reality remained that the world is a completely deterministic causal order. He could not agree with the classical theism that at creation God imposed certain order (like evil), and can suspend it at any time, the operation of that order God can do and undo; He has an infinite freedom and power to do whatever He wills. God does whatever He does in order to achieve certain ends or goals (which may or may not be known to man). In other words, traditionally, the world is a designed system. It is a system in which God, operated by choice and in which man, too as a finite being has the logical necessity that man can act without being causally predetermined to act in a certain way. Therefore, man can act to achieve his own purpose which is not always benevolent or morally approvable.

Spinoza rejected the above ideas. He rejected the idea of the world being designed, the teleological order and the notion of free will, whether being possessed by God or by man. He rather held that the world is a causally determined order, not a designed one. And there should be no need of asking why things happened the way they happened for they are more or less laws of nature. More so, there is no free will in nature or in man that can suspend the laws of Nature. The law of Nature is not the type of things that can be suspended. The causal order to Nature is a necessary order just as a mathematical system exhibits a logical necessity linking premises and conclusions.

In addition to his rejection of free will Spinoza acclaimed that the notion of free will is but a mere belief and referred to it as the delusion of *inadequate ideas*. For him,

“Men believe themselves to be free because they are conscious of their own actions and are ignorant of the causes by which they are determined” (111P25).

He added that human beings are in life bondage of passive affects or passions. A life that does not permit one to exercise a full self-control but surrounded randomly by external circumstances.

“The man who is subject to the (passive) affects, is under the control, not of whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse” (IV preface)

Therefore, life under the sways of the passion is a life of slavery. There is no evil proper (or even good itself), but at the cost of (our) protection and contentment we observe happiness (good), and when there is no such satisfaction, we observe pain (evil). Our thought of good and evil are in line with our understanding of pleasure and pain. This is clearly explicit in Spinoza's position:

By good I understand here all kinds of pleasure and whatever conduces to it, and more especially that which satisfies our fervent desires, whatever they may be. By bad I had understood all kinds of pain, and especially that which frustrates our desires (ID8).

Thus, nothing is innately good or bad, is only that we name something good if we like it and bad if we hate it. Goodness and badness therefore become an individualistic mannerism. As we work on our desires, so also our judgments.

Evaluation of Spinoza's Position

Before every other thing else, we have to admit the obscurity in most of Spinoza's epistemological thought. A good deal of his propositions represents his own unsatisfactory attempt to take over and use some of the basic concepts and principles of medieval thought and adjust these to the needs of the naturalistic and science-oriented philosophy he was concerned to espouse. However, evident in this study is Spinoza's denial of evil, man's free will, and his declaration that God has all-encompassing attributes. First, he upheld that man's activities are predetermined by law of nature. Spinoza's thought does not give room for freedom of choice considering that our actions are absolutely formed by means of our roles in a complicated web of cause and effects.

Second, Spinoza recognized nothing as evil since all finite entities are logically necessary form of existence of the divine being (God). Yet, in his definition of God, he explained it to mean that *"the number of God's attributes is unlimited and that there is no attribute that God does not possess."* If this should be, it means that God possesses the attributes of good and evil. This implies also that God cannot deny being the originator of evil or of Him being aware of it (evil on earth). Knowing this, God should have wiped out the idea of evil in human thought and entire world or else He is irresponsible.

Spinoza's denial of evil is to no avail since even himself was able to define evil as "all kind of pain, especially that which frustrates our desires". Spinoza is not careful enough to say that evil does not exist for he has already given the definition of it. And for one to define something means that the person has already known it. In respect of this, nobody is arguing whether, evil exist or not. Hence, evil has been classified in different varieties such as moral evil, natural evil, horrendous evil etc. The problem of evil is of two major versions: the logical problem and the evidential problem. The logical part of the problem of evil is how to remove every claim about God that are not consistent with the claims about evil.

Mackie (1955, 200) provided a clear and brief analyses of this problem thus:

God is Omnipotent; God is wholly good: and yet evil exist. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once must adhere and cannot consistently adhere to all three.

More precisely, the propositions can be tabled as follows:

God exists

God is Omnipotent

God is Omniscient

God is perfectly good

Evil exists

Propositions (1)-(4) comprise an important part of the doctrinal notion of God, as this has been discussed in Spinoza. But the proposition (5) is out of Spinoza's logical version since he claimed that evil does not exist. It is not logical for him to still say that evil exists since everything according to him comes from God and is part of God. How could a God who is perfectly good, omnipotent and Omniscient produce or bring about evil? Therefore, whatever comes from such God or part of it must be good. To this end, we hold that logically, Spinoza is right for saying that evil does not exist. However, in relation to the evidential version of the problem of evil, Spinoza will not and cannot deny the existence of Evil. Comparing to the logical problem, the evidential definitions may additionally be based on some certain instances, kinds, amounts, or apportions of evil. However, an event may be classified as evil if it involves any of the following:

Any harm, irrespective of the amount being done to the physical and /or psychological well- being of a sensate creature;

Any unfair treatment of some sensate creature;

Loss of opportunity due to early death;

Whatever that hinders one from living a fulfilling and good life;

One who is involved on an immoral behavior;

The 'privation of good'

Above all, Spinoza summarizes bad or evil as all kind of pain especially that which frustrates our desires. This evidential version of evil is also classified as physical evil because nobody will doubt the particular kind of evil like earthquakes, epidemics, flood, disasters, robbery, rape etc, which are witnessed daily in the society. This is why in presenting his evidential argument from evil, Rowe (1979, 335) thought it wise to concentrate on a particular type of evil that is mostly common in our environment. He selected "intense human and animal suffering" as this is happening every day, is in abundance in our society, and is a good example of evil. To be more exact, "it is a case of *intrinsic* evil: it is bad in and of itself, even though it is sometimes part of, or leads to, some good state of affairs"

But why evil? What could be the source of this evil? Can it be historically traced? However, by the doctrine of emanation, Plotinus argued that God is the originator of evil. God in the first place is not a perfect being, Omnipotent nor Omniscient being, because of this, God could not reduplicate Himself perfectly if not, how could the perfect One, the source of everything, allow this kind of imperfection to exist among human being? The fact that God not only permits the *nous* (mind) which is the only rational part of being but also the lowest level of being, matter, God has given the permission for evil to exist. And since matter comes from God in the sense that everything comes from Him, invariably, God is the source of evil.

In other words, Rowe had wondered if really there is God. Because even if God is not the source of evil, he has the power to prevent evil in the world. To this end, Rowe stated his argument as follows:

There are many cases of severe suffering which the ultimate being has every power to prohibit from happening and as well retain His goodness.

An Omniscient, the ultimate being would disallow the occasions of severe suffering if He could, unless He could lose the goodness of Him if He grants evil or suffering.

(Therefore) such ultimate being (wholly good being), Omniscient, Omnipotent does not exist (Rowen 1979, 336).

How Rowe presents this argument appears so valid such that if actually there are good reasons for accepting its premises, then there should be also good reasons for accepting the conclusion, and that will become atheism. But that is not our major concern here. What is basic so far is that evil exists. Though it may not be like every other being. Why would God allow it to exist in any form as Rowe has argued above? Or should we rely on Albert Camus' view that evil occurs because God is punishing man for his sins? Why then is He called the good God? Unless we are atheist in the first place, then it will be a different case. But Spinoza had maintained not only the existence of God but as a universal nature of which all things are modifications. Even if there is no evil as an entity, but our own interpretations or meanings we give to things, why must man's consciousness be reading differently from that of God (Nature).

CONCLUSION

No matter the criticism raised about him, Spinoza needs to be understood and deserves commendation as well. His position is that there is only one reality, one substance, and it can be called God or Nature. It is infinite, eternal and divine. All things in the universe are its modifications and they proceed from it by the necessity of its nature of which all things are modifications. Logically, the fact remains that if God exists, the wholly good being, Omnipotent and Omniscient, it means therefore that evil does not exist provided that for him everything comes from Nature (God). Besides, there is no being elsewhere bearing the name evil. Yet, if God exists and He is wholly good with such great power and if the world was really made by him, it is not possible to comprehend why there could be so much evil in it.

Nevertheless, Spinoza still entangled himself by declaring that God possesses all attributes (good and evil) which means that God is also the source of evil. He recognized nothing as evil and at the same time states the meaning of evil as “all kind of pain especially that which frustrates our desires”. This shows he already knew what evil is, for one cannot explain the meaning of what he doesn’t know.

Moreso, going by his claim, one wonders if human consciousness is no longer part of the universal consciousness which is God. Why should on the contrary, individual consciousness be conscious of itself as an autonomous separate entity? And if evil is not from nature or God, where does evil emanate from? Unless man stops experiencing evil in the world nor wipe out the idea of evil in his heart, evil will not cease to exist.

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