

Finite in Infinity: Spinoza's Conception of Human Freedom Explained Through His Metaphysics

Hannah Laurens

Abstract: One of the main themes in Spinoza's *Ethics* is the issue of human freedom: What does it consist in and how may it be attained? Spinoza's ethical views crucially depend on his metaphysical theory, and this close connection provides the answer to several central questions concerning Spinoza's conception of human freedom. Firstly, how can we accommodate human freedom within Spinoza's necessitarianism—in the context of which Spinoza rejects the notion of a free will? Secondly, how can humans, as merely finite beings, genuinely attain freedom? Can Spinoza defend his claim that we may even attain *blessedness*? I will argue that these questions are answered by appeal to a twofold in human nature. According to Spinoza, we are finite in infinity.

I. Introduction

One of the main themes in Spinoza's *Ethics* is the issue of human freedom: What does it consist in and how may it be attained?¹ Prior to the discussion of human freedom, we find the *Ethics* greatly concerned with metaphysics, and this is no coincidence. Spinoza's ethical theory, where how to live well is equaled with how to live freely, is closely intertwined with his metaphysical theory. His metaphysics provide the cognitive foundation upon which his ethical views are built.

¹ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. and ed. G. H. R. Parkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).



This close connection is crucial, and I will argue that it provides the solution to two problematic aspects of Spinoza's view on human freedom: firstly, how can we accommodate human freedom within Spinoza's *necessitarianism*—in the context of which Spinoza rejects the notion of a free will? This triangle of notions will briefly be discussed in the first section of my paper while exposing the cornerstones of Spinoza's metaphysics.

Secondly, how can humans as finite beings genuinely attain freedom? This second question is discussed in the following sections of my paper. I will start by exploring Spinoza's two conceptions of human freedom found in the *Ethics*. I will explain the idea of *adequate knowledge through reason* and how that leads to some degree of human freedom. Essential herein is the notion of *conatus*, i.e. each individual's inner drive to persevere in his/her being. This part of Spinoza's ethical theory is very naturalistic: He gives a detailed account of how human nature works emotionally. He exposes the laws of human nature and how a proper understanding of these clears the path to freedom. I will then discuss the more abstruse conception of freedom found in Spinoza: Through *intuitive knowledge* we may attain *blessedness*. By becoming blessed one reaches the pinnacle of human existence: ultimate freedom.

I will show how an accurate understanding of Spinoza's thesis of intuitive knowledge and blessedness will shed light on the puzzles concerning human freedom. We will come to see that the human mind is twofold. I will argue that human freedom, both through reason and blessedness, is best explained by appeal to this twofold. This explanation simultaneously allows for human freedom within Spinoza's deterministic universe. My argument shows how deeply Spinoza's metaphysics has penetrated and shaped his ethics.

II. A Necessitarian Context Without Free Will

How does Spinoza manage to defend both a necessitarian outlook on the universe and allow for human freedom? Why does he reject the notion of free will, and how can it be irrelevant to human freedom? Let's first see what Spinoza's necessitarianism amounts to.

Spinoza's *necessitarianism* is most clearly stated in E1p16 and E1p17s:

There must follow, from the necessity of the divine nature, infinite things in infinite ways [...]. [...] I have shown with sufficient clarity (see Prop. 16) that from the supreme power of God, or, from his infinite nature, infinite things in infinite ways (that is, all things) have necessarily flowed or always follow with the same necessity [...].²

Spinoza contends that there necessarily exists one unique substance, and he calls it God or Nature.³ God is necessarily infinite, i.e. is unlimited in any possible way.⁴ Besides substance/God, Spinoza recognizes attributes and modes in his ontology. Attributes are ways in which our intellect perceives of substance. We may, for example, perceive substance through the attribute of extension (i.e. by perceiving three-dimensional bodies in space), or we may perceive substance through the attribute of thought by thinking. Modes for Spinoza are “determinate expressions” of the attributes: “Particular things are nothing other than the affections, i.e. modes, of the attributes of God, by which the attributes of God are expressed in a certain and determinate way.”^{5,6} Thus all things that we encounter as ordinary objects in daily life are modes of the one unique substance. A human body so understood is a determinate expression or affection of God's attribute of extension.

In contrast to substance, Spinoza claims that modes are finite.⁷ They depend on God for their existence, and, as such, they are not self-sufficient. They only exist for a limited amount of time and have limited powers and possibilities. The dependency of finite modes on substance is stressed by Spinoza's claim that finite modes exist “in” God: “Whatever exists exists in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God.”⁸ Insight into the nature of the relationship between modes and substance, into the meaning of this “existing in,” is of key importance.

² Spinoza, *Ethics*.

³ E1p5, E1p7, E1p11, E1p14.

⁴ E1p11, E1p8.

⁵ E1p28.

⁶ E1p25c.

⁷ E1p28.

⁸ E1p15.



In the above statement of Spinoza's necessitarianism, we see that from God's infinite nature all that follows necessarily.⁹ Thus there is only one true cause in the universe: God. God alone is a free cause: "God acts from the laws of his nature alone, and is compelled by no one."¹⁰ Everything else is determined by God.

In this necessitarian context the **rejection of a free will** is only a logical consequence: "There is in the mind no absolute, i.e. no free will, but the mind is determined to will this or that by a cause, which is again determined by another [...] and so on to infinity."¹¹

The will is understood as unfree as it is never uncaused, i.e. it is never a cause solely dependent upon itself. Being finite beings, we are necessarily in touch with other people and things. We are part of an "infinite chain of causes" and our will is always influenced by external causes: it cannot be free.¹² Spinoza explains free in terms of *necessity by one's own nature* and *causal power*: only that which exists and acts from the necessity of its own nature alone is free.¹³ The common notion of a free decree of will simply does not apply. A free will is sheer illusion, caused by ignorance:¹⁴

Men are deceived in that they think themselves free, an opinion which consists simply in the fact that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which those actions are determined. [...] The decrees of the mind are simply the appetites themselves [...]. [...] So the decrees of the mind arise in the mind

⁹ E1p16.

¹⁰ E1p17.

¹¹ E2p48.

¹² E1p28.

¹³ E1def7 & Letter 58, Spinoza to Schuller for Tschirnhaus. Reprinted in *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 266.

¹⁴ Even God does not have a "free will:" firstly, the notion of "will" as we know it does not belong to God's nature (E1p32c2). Secondly, the necessity of God's nature is what determines the universe in a way that could not have been different; God does not operate by means of "freedom of will" (E1p32c1&2).

with the same necessity as the ideas of things that actually exist. Therefore, those people who believe that they [...] do anything by a free decree of the mind, dream with their eyes open.^{15,16}

Spinoza believes that in any case it is impossible to freely will one of two opposite courses of action.¹⁷ A supposedly free will is merely a reflection of one's natural disposition towards a preferred course of action.

But how do these views then leave room for human freedom, for genuine choice in action and ethical responsibility? Tschirnhaus, a regular correspondent of Spinoza, formulates this worry in a letter: "Also, if we were compelled by external things, who could acquire the habit of virtue? Indeed on this assumption every wicked act would be excusable."¹⁸

If our will is necessarily determined by external causes, and if all happens with necessity from the nature of God, then how are we accountable for our actions? How can we be said to have genuine autonomy over our behaviour?

Spinoza presents his answer in parts 4 and 5 of the *Ethics*. He begins by explaining that a certain degree of autonomy, of freedom, is possible through adequate knowledge.

III. *Conatus*, Reason and Freedom

To every individual Spinoza ascribes a *conatus*: the inner drive of every being to persevere in its existence.¹⁹ As finite beings, however, we humans are necessarily limited by other finite beings.²⁰ We are always subjected to external causes: other people and things affected us. Insofar as we are affected positively, our *conatus* is supported. Insofar as we are affected negatively, our *conatus* is hindered.

¹⁵ E2p35s.

¹⁶ E3p2s.

¹⁷ "I deny that I can think, by any absolute power of thinking, that I do will to write and that I do not will to write." Letter 58, reprinted in Curley, *A Spinoza Reader*. Also see E2p49d: "The mind [...] cannot have an absolute faculty of willing and being unwilling."

¹⁸ Letter 57, Tschirnhaus to Spinoza, 8 October 1674. Reprinted in Curley, *A Spinoza Reader*, 266.

¹⁹ E3p6, E3p7.

²⁰ E1d2.



Spinoza explicates this thesis through the notions of *passions* (both positive/negative affections supporting/hindering our conatus) and *actions* (positive processes (not affections) whereby we act from our own nature) which are based on “inadequate” and “adequate” ideas, respectively.²¹ In daily life, we are affected by many external influences, which cause emotions in us. These emotions often lead to confused ideas, i.e. inadequate ideas. Proceeding from inadequate ideas, we are necessarily passive, as the external causes have a hold on our state of being.

Spinoza believes that this is how most of us operate most of the time. We go through life being swept away on currents of pleasure and pain and feel powerless in the face of the challenges that life presents. However, he presents us with a way of overcoming the passions, resulting in at least a *certain degree of freedom*.

It is through adequate ideas generated by “adequate causes” that freedom can be attained. For us, an adequate cause follows from our inner nature alone, and is not influenced by external circumstances.²² Because “reason demands nothing contrary to Nature,” Spinoza believes that our inner human nature and power lies in *rationality*.^{23,24} Therefore, the ideas based on reason will lead us to a more stable state of being, in which we are less affected by the passions. It is not rationality itself that overpowers the passions because emotions can only be overcome by other emotions.²⁵ Passions may only be transformed by reason-generated emotions. Reason also provides the primary basis for ethical actions or *virtue*.²⁶ How does Spinoza establish this connection between reason and virtue? Virtue, for Spinoza, is simply that in which our nature and essence consist.²⁷ As such virtue equals acting in accordance with reason. Thus, via reason, we gain an accurate understanding of the nature of God and of the necessity of the universe. With clarity of mind we are able to understand particular situations better and deal with them more virtuously.

²¹ E3p11, E3p11s, E3p12, E3p13.

²² E4App2.

²³ E4p18s.

²⁴ E4App3.

²⁵ E4p14.

²⁶ E4p56d.

²⁷ E4def8.

Through adequate ideas our passions are transformed into actions, and our conatus succeeds on the bedrock of solid insights. Reason provides a steady beacon amongst the unavoidable whirlwinds of life.

Subtly but surely Spinoza's views on freedom have now shifted. Earlier on we noted that freedom was defined both in terms of causal power and acting from the necessity of one's own nature. Initially, Spinoza claimed that only substance/God had free causal power. However, through reason human beings are also granted genuine causal power, even if only to a lesser degree. How can this be: is Spinoza not contradicting himself?

IV. Blessedness

At this stage, we are able to deal with the passions: guided by reason and truthful to our nature, we may act in all circumstances with wisdom and courage. But is that really all that our freedom amounts to: being able to remain relatively composed in the flux of life, keeping up faith in the bad times as well as in the good? Is being free indeed confined to a negation, to a "free from" definition? As one would perhaps expect from Spinoza, the answer is: no. Nothing less than pure *blessedness* will do.

Through his thesis of blessedness, Spinoza reveals his conception of ultimate freedom. For our discussion, this thesis is of key importance as it will give us the clues to the answers we are looking for.

When one reasons through adequate knowledge, one achieves greater clarity of mind and is able to discern the true nature of things clearly and distinctly.²⁸ Clear and distinct knowledge through reason might even give rise²⁹ to the highest form of knowledge possible for us, i.e. *intuitive knowledge*.³⁰ According to Spinoza, we can consider particular things/modes in two ways: either we consider them related

²⁸ E2p29s.

²⁹ Spinoza clearly states that intuitive knowledge is not rational inference, but intuitive insight. As such, it is a fundamentally different kind of knowing and not a more advanced sort of rationality. However, as intuitive knowledge is based on an adequate understanding of the nature of being, which can be acquired through reason, reason may serve as basis for intuitive knowledge.

³⁰ E2p40s2.



to time, or understand them *sub specie aeternitatis*.³¹ Understanding modes in this second manner, i.e. under a “species of eternity,” is what Spinoza describes as having intuitive knowledge.³² It means that we do not understand particulars in relation to duration. We do not conceive of them as entities existent in time, but we discern as it were their most fundamental features which are timeless. We come to understand the true essence of modes and see that it is eternal and unchanging: “The essences of singular, changeable things [...] is to be sought only from the fixed and eternal things [...]”³³ Through this kind of understanding we gain insight into how particular essences relate to substance. We will see shortly how an understanding of this relationship will give us a crucial lead in solving the problems concerning freedom. The result of intuitive knowledge is a deepened knowledge of God, which leads in turn to an “intellectual love of God.”³⁴ According to Spinoza we will come to understand the fundamental nature of the world we live in. This leads to a sense of contentment that is deeper than any emotion that can arise from the passions, and it is in this state of loving God that blessedness consists. The highest endeavour of our minds is fulfilled: ultimate freedom is attained.

It has been claimed that the state of blessedness is set as an example at which we can only aim, but which is in practice unattainable.³⁵ Spinoza agrees that we fluctuate between degrees of freedom, as “we live in a state of continuous variation,”³⁶ but the wise man may nourish himself through reason and intuitive knowledge, reaching a state in which he “always possesses true contentment of mind,”³⁷ i.e. blessedness. The purpose of the *Ethics* is to convince us of what our true happiness consists in and to guide us on the path towards genuine freedom. If blessedness would be impossible, his purpose seems defeated: why would we bother? Spinoza does admit that “the way [towards it is] very arduous,” but believes that “yet it can be discovered.”³⁸

³¹ E5p29s. Note that Spinoza’s conception of eternity is not endless and beginningless time.

³² E2p40s2, E5p36s.

³³ Spinoza, “Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect,” in Curley, *A Spinoza Reader*, 54.

³⁴ E5p32c.

³⁵ Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 204.

³⁶ E5p39s.

³⁷ E5p42s.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

V. Finite in Infinity

No matter how promising blessedness sounds, at this point we are still left with Spinoza's seemingly contradictory statements: on the one hand, only God can be a free cause, on the other hand, freedom, both through reason and blessedness, is possible for finite human beings. In addition Spinoza contends that genuine human freedom is possible in his deterministic universe. How can Spinoza endorse these outwardly opposing claims?

I argue that these tensions can be resolved by acknowledging a *twofold in the nature of human beings*. God is the only substance that exists and human beings are finite modes of God. However, when we know things through intuitive knowledge, we view the world from under a species of eternity and gain an adequate understanding of the essence of particulars. We come to know the fundamental nature of modes: their essence is eternal.

My claim is that through Spinoza's thesis of intuitive knowledge we see that the ultimate reality of anything that exists is nothing less than eternal substance itself. The eternity of the essence of particulars can only be a case of instantiation of substance, as "eternity belongs to the nature of substance."³⁹ We can interpret the *existing in* relationship between modes and substance as follows: for a mode to exist in God means that its essence instantiates substance.

When we now apply this thesis to human beings, the following story unfolds. Considering ourselves under a species of eternity, we discover that there is an eternal element even within our own minds.⁴⁰ We come to understand that the true essence of our own minds is substance/God: the *essence of our minds instantiates God*. We thus have a twofold nature: we are finite and our existence is in time, but simultaneously our essence instantiates timeless substance. It is this twofold that finally resolves the persisting problems that we have been faced with.

Let's first see how finite beings can have genuine free causal power. Insofar as we are finite we are limited and necessarily influenced by other finite beings. But insofar as our essence is substance/God, we directly express the divine nature and

³⁹ E1p19d.

⁴⁰ E5p23.



instantiate God. Genuine human *action* is possible, because insofar as we instantiate God, we have the powers that God has, *including free causal power*. The more we act through our eternal mind, i.e. the mind that instantiates God/substance, the more we act from our inner nature and the more causal power we manifest. In acting through reason and intuitive knowledge, we proceed from our eternal essence, and we are necessarily free from external causes. Thus, freedom is possible for finite beings.

Secondly, how can Spinoza account for free action in a deterministic universe? Human freedom fits into Spinoza's necessitarian framework in two ways. Firstly, even if we as finite beings occasionally display true causal power, the course of the universe can still be determined by necessity. Our action is genuinely determined by *us*, but *that* it is determined by us, can be so of necessity. There is nothing logically inconsistent in that, keeping Spinoza's definition of *free as self-determined* (which is not *undetermined*) in mind. Another perspective presents itself as follows: because the essence of the human mind instantiates God's nature, our free human actions *constitute the necessary course of events*. Our eternal human essence even *determines the necessary course of the universe*. God/substance is understood as timeless, and, therefore, the cause by which all things flow should likewise not be understood within a time-framework. When we think of determinism, we ordinarily think of a series of events with a beginning in time from which all subsequent events follow with necessity. We perhaps imagine Spinoza's universe in a similar fashion with God at the very beginning of this series of events. But this is incorrect. God's nature and the necessity of the universe are not to be understood in such a time-framework. As Spinoza says, "[...] all these [eternal] things [i.e. God] are at once."⁴¹ Even though we ordinarily experience the universe and its unfolding events in time, God's nature and its necessary consequences are a timeless given, something that simply obtains. Self-determined human action does not then consist in a change of a pre-determined course of events. Instead, free action originates directly from the nature of substance, and it *instantiates* the necessary course of events. Free human action is not in opposition to necessitarianism. Our eternal essence shapes the necessary course of events and our actions constitute it.

⁴¹ T§102.

Thus we see that this twofold in the nature of the human mind plays a crucial explanatory role in resolving the issues concerning human freedom. Although Spinoza does not explicitly appeal to this twofold to explain human freedom, it is referred to in many of his metaphysical claims. There is strong textual support for believing that Spinoza would assert this twofold in human minds.

Firstly, Spinoza explicitly states that the human mind is part of the mind of God:

[...] the human mind is a part of the infinite intellect of God. Therefore, when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are simply saying that God—not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human mind, or, insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human mind—has this or that idea.⁴²

It is an explicit statement that God constitutes the essence of the human mind. As Spinoza is otherwise adamant that we are finite beings and not infinite substance, we must be twofold.

Spinoza also holds that both adequate and inadequate ideas necessarily make up the human mind and that they depend on different causes.^{43,44} We see this idea reflected in Spinoza's claim that we act through one part of the mind, while through another we are acted upon, clearly suggesting a twofold: "For the eternal part of the mind is the intellect, through which alone we are said to act. But the part which we have shown to perish is the imagination, through which alone we are said to be acted on."⁴⁵

More support for my thesis is found in Spinoza's treatment of the intellectual love of God, i.e. blessedness. Spinoza claims that that our intellectual love for God *is* God's love for himself

⁴² E2p11C.

⁴³ E3p9d.

⁴⁴ E2p29s.

⁴⁵ E5p40c.



The intellectual love of the mind for God is the love by which God loves himself. [...] It is an action by which God, insofar as he can be explained through the human mind, contemplates himself with the accompaniment of the idea of himself. [...] the love of God for men, and the intellectual love of the mind for God, is one and the same.⁴⁶

We can only make sense of this claim if human minds do indeed instantiate God directly.

The clearest indication of the twofold is perhaps found in E5p23: “The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the human body, but there remains of it something that is eternal.”⁴⁷ Spinoza unquestionably distinguishes a part of the mind that perishes and a part of the mind that cannot be destroyed.

The textual evidence for my thesis that human minds are twofold is plenty and present throughout the whole of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Appeal to this twofold in the nature of human minds provides a plausible and effective solution to the problems concerning human freedom. As finite beings we are necessarily acted upon by external causes, and therefore we cannot solely proceed from our own nature. But insofar as our eternal minds instantiate substance/God, we can be said to genuinely have free causal power. Our free actions are self-determined and constitute the necessary course of the universe.

VI. Conclusion

Spinoza’s metaphysics fundamentally determines his ethical system. He defines freedom in terms of necessity by one’s own nature and causal power: only that which exists and acts from the necessity of its own nature alone is free. By that definition, only substance/God is a free being, and humans as finite beings are necessarily unfree. However, Spinoza does claim that a certain degree of human freedom is possible through reason and that we may even attain ultimate freedom: blessedness is achievable. These seemingly contradictory statements are explained through Spinoza’s metaphysics. The human mind is twofold. Because the essence

⁴⁶ E5p36.

⁴⁷ E5p23.

of the human mind instantiates God, we have the powers that God has, including free causal power. When proceeding purely from our essence, we genuinely act freely. The twofold also explains how Spinoza can account for human freedom in his deterministic universe. Even though our free actions may not be undetermined, they are self-determined, thus free. Furthermore, because our essence instantiates God's eternal nature, we directly determine the course of the universe: our free actions *constitute* the necessary course of events.

Finite in infinity, we may be free. ❖

