

***What does Spinoza mean by 'eternity',
and what role does this notion play in his philosophy?***

Part Two: Spinoza

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Spinoza was primarily concerned with religion, specifically seeking a new interpretation of God, one that rejected any kind of anthropomorphic deity. As such, there is a great deal of discussion in the *Ethics* relating to time, human agency and of course, deity. During the course of the *Ethics*, Spinoza outlines a conception of God that strongly identifies God with nature; "Deus siva Natura". Spinoza saw God or nature as "Being absolutely infinite"¹, and he goes on to present a philosophy that sees all things as existing as attributes of God. Naturally, this fundamentally redefines our conception of our place within both time and nature, and with this our relation to the divine.

This essay will critically examine Spinoza's unique conception of time, along with an explanation of the impact his notion of eternity has on both his metaphysics and his philosophy of religion. A discussion of Spinoza's highly specialised notion of the term 'eternity' will be vital to an understanding of Spinoza's conception of personal identity, and there will be a discussion of the impact this understanding has on the rest of his philosophy.

Spinoza begins the *Ethics* with a series of definitions, from which foundation he constructs a set of beliefs that deal intimately with time and eternity. In the explanation of 1d8, Spinoza states that his notion of eternity "cannot be explained by duration or time, even if the duration be without beginning or end."² This definition of eternity is in direct contrast to more traditional definitions of the concept; a dictionary definition of 'eternal' runs as so: "without beginning or end"³, and the definition of eternity reads "infinite time"⁴, both of which rely on an understanding of eternity which intimately involves temporality. Even from a more philosophical perspective, Spinoza's view of eternity did not fit into any contemporary idea of time, and was in this way unique. There are elements of more orthodox divine theory, for instance in the attribution of causal independence to God, and the assertion that God is a simple substance, that is to say that "God not only has no spatial or temporal parts, but there is no distinction between God and his essence"⁵.

Spinoza's eternity does not involve an infinitely long period of time, instead, Spinoza's definition describes a more atemporal notion. The difference is brought out when set against the fact that Spinoza talks much of the eternity of the human mind. As Harris notes; "The eternity of the 'immortal' part of the human mind or soul is thus not a continued duration after the death of the body, but a quality of being"⁶. By quality of being, Harris means to bring out that the human mind should be thought of as eternal in the same way that abstract notions such as numbers or colours are; they cannot be said to last forever, rather they are not the sort of thing that we can talk of in terms of duration.

Another key factor in Spinoza's concept of eternity is the necessity of the existence of any eternal thing. This is stated, but not explicitly justified, in the explanation of 1d8; "(eternal) existence, like the essence of the thing, is conceived as an eternal truth"⁷. Again, abstract 'pure' notions such as colours are brought to mind. In 1p8, Spinoza states that "Every substance is necessarily infinite"⁸, but why should this be? Is it not conceivable that a substance could be eternal that need not have been so? To understand this correctly, it is necessary to first understand Spinoza's definition of substance. Firstly that any substance must be conceived only through itself and that knowledge of a substance must not rely on another substance (1d3), and secondly that substance cannot be created (nor presumably destroyed) by another substance, for if it were to be created by another, 'true' knowledge of the created

1 1d6

2 1d8

3 Makins: 184

4 Makins: 184

5 Audi: 240

6 Harris in Freeman: 673

7 1d8 explanation

8 1p8

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substance would depend upon knowledge of the creator, thus in contradiction to 1d3. From these two premises it follows that if substance exists, it must *necessarily* exist; "There is nothing by which substance can be produced ... It will therefore be the cause of itself, that is to say, its essence necessarily involves existence"⁹.

So now we have the necessary existence of substance, but what of the necessary eternity of substance? For this, we must look to the demonstration of proposition 8, where Spinoza states that, were there two or more finite substances, they would share the attribute of finiteness, and would therefore be in direct opposition to proposition 5, which states that "there cannot be two or more substances of the same ... attribute"¹⁰. However, this alone surely cannot constitute proof of the eternity of substance, for the argument relies on the impossibility of two substances having identical attributes, but when we examine the definition of an attribute, it seems in no way clear that the attributes cannot be duplicated across substances, in any form other than in our conceptions of those attributes.

In 1d4, the definition of an attribute is given as "that which the intellect perceives of substance, as if constituting its essence"¹¹ - but surely our perception of a substance can differ from the thing in itself, that is to say, the thing quite apart from any perception the intellect may have of it? This issue may be resolved with recourse to letters sent by Spinoza to Oldenburg some years before the completion of the *Ethics*, stating that "By attribute I understand every thing which is conceived through itself and in itself"¹². This phrasing, though possibly expressing a fundamentally different idea to the one found in the *Ethics*, certainly does not leave room for the kind of criticism conjectured above. The question of an attribute being different from our perception of it does not arise, because in this definition it is not the intellect's perception that is crucial, rather it is simply the thing as conceived through itself.

However, this earlier definition of an attribute reads almost verbatim as both the later and earlier definitions of substance - is there a confusion in Spinoza's meanings of substance and attribute? In the *Ethics*, substance is defined as "that which is in itself and is conceived through itself"¹³, in Oldenburg the same. Donagan contends that Spinoza's 'attribute' is to be read much more like Descartes' principal attribute, in that "(for) Descartes ... a property or quality of a substance constitutes its essence, provided that it does not presuppose ... any other property or quality. By 'presuppose another' he appears to have meant what Spinoza was to express as 'cannot be conceived without the help of another'¹⁴. Thus, we may be satisfied that the Oldenburg definition, when coupled with the later 'official' version at 1d4, gives us an overall picture of attributes that disallows duplication across substances and can be used to support 1d8p's assertion that two finite substances would share the attribute of finiteness, that this is contradictory, and thus that all substances must necessarily be infinite, or, eternal.

Additionally, there can only be one substance. It has been shown how it is impossible for there to be two finite substances, and, says Spinoza, the notion of two infinite substances is absurd, for were there two, the one would limit, and be limited by, the other, and thus neither would actually be infinite.

To Spinoza then, eternity is an attribute of one single substance that must exist, and which cannot but be eternal in its essence. This substance is identified by Spinoza with God or nature, and God's eternity is crucial to the claims Spinoza makes about God's relation to the world and to us. With regard to the place Spinoza's eternity takes in the *Ethics*, one of the

9 1p7d

10 1p5

11 1d4

12 White in Spinoza: xxxv

13 1d3

14 Donagan in Grene: 165

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most discussed aspects of Spinoza's philosophy is in his insistence that, along with every other thing in nature, human beings are aspects of the divine, and as such are eternal. Of particular interest is the statement that "The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal"¹⁵. Spinoza reaches this conclusion with reference to 2p1, that "God is a thinking thing"¹⁶, and as such "In God there necessarily exists a conception or idea which expresses the essence of the human body"¹⁷. But is it so obvious that an attribute of an eternal thing must itself also be eternal? Once again, this argument rests on the assumption that "God is eternal, or, in other words, all His attributes are eternal"¹⁸. As an attribute constitutes the essence of a thing, and we are an attribute of God, we form part of the essence of God. God has already been shown to be infinite, and the essence of an infinite thing cannot logically be finite. As Allison states, "since the attributes express the 'essence of the divine substance', they likewise are eternal in precisely the same way (as God is eternal)"¹⁹

The importance of the view of all things as attributes of an eternal, and moreover logically necessary God can hardly be underestimated. From this revelation, we can see that "Spinoza does not use his doctrine to as a device to connect an infinite God with a world of finite things. He does not do so because he never viewed them as apart"²⁰. It has been argued that although this picture of our eternity does logically follow from the premises given, it leaves out the rather essential *human* element. Yes, something continues after the death of the body, but what that thing is, is no longer the mind of a particular human. Further weight can be added to this claim by looking at both 5p23s, "It is impossible ... that we should recollect that we existed before the body"²¹, and 5p21, "the mind can imagine nothing, nor can it recollect anything that is past, except while the body exists"²². Given this, it seems that thinkers such as Locke would certainly dispute the notion that what continues is in fact the same person; on Locke's theory of personal identity, "Nothing but consciousness can unite remote Existences into the same Person"²³.

The most obvious answer to this objection is that Spinoza is not constructing a theory of personal identity and that he may be happy to accept that what continues is not the person, but instead, as is stated, 'something of' the human mind. Curley's observation that "Spinoza's doctrine does not imply that the mind or a part of the mind can exist apart from the body in any sense in which existence would imply having any temporal properties"²⁴ also fits with a non-personal continuance. However the assertion that Spinoza is not constructing a theory of personal identity somewhat misses the mark; There can be no doubt that he is not doing so, but what is more important is that he is refuting any possible theory of *personal* identity. Rice elucidates the nature of an important distinction when he states that "Couching the problem of individuation in terms of that of personal identity ... suggests ... that the problem lies in what constitutes the nature of a person, rather than in what constitutes the identity of something which (perhaps only incidentally) happens to be a person"²⁵. Spinoza is asserting that theories of personal identity such as Locke's fail to truly grasp the nature of humanity. Spinoza's conception of an 'adequate knowledge' of our place within the world does not leave any room for a conception of ourselves as being distinct from God in any way.

For Spinoza, if we were to have a proper understanding of our nature, we would realise that

15 5p23
16 2p1
17 5p23d
18 1p19
19 Allison: 66
20 Allison: 68
21 5p23s
22 5p21
23 Locke, Bk2,23 in Fuller: 111
24 Curley: 85
25 Rice in Freeman: 641

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there was no such thing as personal identity, that our concept of it is based on the misunderstanding that we are separate from God. In this regard, Lloyd correctly states that "In perceiving ourselves as eternal, we perceive ourselves truly"²⁶. In 4p62, Spinoza stipulates that a correct understanding of the world will result in an equal view of all times, that "In so far as the conception of an object is formed by the mind ... the mind is equally affected, whether the idea be that of something future, past or present"²⁷. From this, Spinoza concludes that we should no longer see good and evil as being different from one another, as he later states in 4p63: "The knowledge of evil is inadequate knowledge"²⁸ and its corollary that "if the human mind had none but adequate ideas, it would form no notion of evil"²⁹. Interestingly, Spinoza does not here state that the reverse is true, that we would not form any notion of good, though it is hard to see how a notion of good could be formed without any notion of its opposite.

Spinoza does not believe that it is possible for humans to form such adequate ideas, and this may bring out a potential tension in Spinoza's philosophy; how is it that an attribute of God can be imperfect in this way? Surely the same reasoning that led us to accept the eternity of the human mind as an attribute of God must also lead us to accept the essential perfection of the human mind? God is eternal, so all His attributes must be, and God is perfect, so all His attributes must be. There surely can be little doubt that God is perfect, though it is not explicitly asserted. Either God is imperfect, or human beings are not attributes of God. But this undermines Spinoza's doctrine that God and the world at large are unified in an intimate manner. Perhaps only the human mind is an attribute of God, the part of the human that cannot attain adequate ideas separate, but then this runs counter to the assertion that "the mind and the body are one and the same thing, conceived at one time under the attribute of thought, and at another under that of extension"³⁰. Additionally, Spinoza would have to offer a way for something, namely us, to exist outside of the infinite, which again would sharply contrast with the most basic foundations of his philosophy. These objections are partially dealt with by Spinoza in 3p3, where he states that "The actions of the mind arise from adequate ideas alone, but the passions depend upon those alone which are inadequate"³¹, and in 5p34, "The mind is subject to affects which are related to passions only so long as the body exists"³². By gaining a full understanding of the affects which cause inadequate ideas, the affects cease to be passions, and thus we can free ourselves. As stated in 5p3; "as we know an affect better is it more within our control, and the less does the mind suffer from it"³³.

In conclusion, we have seen that Spinoza's view of eternity is defined in a unique manner, that it bears no resemblance to an infinite duration, but rather is an 'eternal truth' more of the kind that pure mathematics makes reference to. Spinoza explicitly states that "eternity is the very essence of God"³⁴ and moreover he defines God or nature as the only substance there can possibly be, asserting this divine substance as necessarily extant and giving it infinite attributes, which constitute the entire universe, that "everything else flows from and depends on God"³⁵. Spinoza uses this world view to build a system of ethics that requires a fundamentally impersonal view of human beings, both oneself and others, but yet which requires care for others in an extremely intimate way. Spinoza believes that the human mind is eternal, not in any sense of continued duration, but rather that of always being an aspect, or attribute, of God as a whole.

26 Lloyd: 116

27 4p62

28 4p63

29 4p63c

30 3p2s

31 3p3

32 5p34

33 5p3

34 5p30d

35 Woolhouse: 31

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