

# SPINOZA'S GOD METAPHYSICAL CONCEPTION OF THE DIVINE

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## **Abstract**

The discourse on conception of God has occupied fundamental position either in theology or philosophy. In philosophical one, this conception could be traced since very ancient time of Greek until modern era of philosophy with various metaphysical view points. Spinoza was one of the philosophers whose famous metaphysical conception of God is basically a critique toward transcendental paradigm that detaches God from His creation entirely. In this case, he develops his own metaphysical system that rests upon “substance” as focal category. This paper seeks to discuss Spinoza’s metaphysical conception of God which represents his theological monism through his wide range elaboration on “substance”.

**Keywords:** Substance, independence conceptual, self-caused, thought and extension, modes of substance, monism.

## **Abstrak**

Wacana tentang konsepsi Tuhan telah menduduki posisi penting dalam teologi maupun filsafat. Dalam sisi filosofisnya, konsep ini bisa dilacak sejak zaman kuno dari Yunani sampai era modern filsafat dengan berbagai pandangan metafisik. Spinoza adalah salah satu filsuf yang konsepsi metafisikanya yang terkenal, pada dasarnya adalah kritik terhadap paradigma transendental yang melepaskan Tuhan dari ciptaan-Nya sepenuhnya. Dalam hal ini, ia mengembangkan sistem metafisik sendiri yang bersandar pada “substansi” sebagai kategori fokus. Makalah ini berusaha membahas konsep metafisika Spinoza tentang Tuhan yang mewakili monisme teologisnya melalui berbagai macam elaborasi pada “substansi”.

**Kata-kata Kunci:** Substansi, konseptual independen, sebab diri, pikiran dan ekstensi, mode-mode substansi, monisme.

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## Introduction

Philosophical conception of God could be traced as far as ancient Greek Philosophy. Plato and Aristotle have their own conception of God. What could link them together is that their conception rest upon some metaphysical foundation. Aristotle's notion of God, for instance, was explained by the metaphysics of *prime mover*. Plato, on the other hand, explains God in terms of metaphysics of forms. Each philosopher explains God by his own metaphysical category. Each category, however, has its own problems and complexities. This proves that philosophical conception of God is a rational one and not something based on mere faith.

Several modern philosophers followed the tradition of building metaphysical foundation of God. One of the most prominent one was Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza's philosophy of God is basically a critique toward transcendental paradigm that detaches God from His creation entirely. According to transcendental paradigm, God is an independent deity whose relation with His creation is a causal one. God creates universe by will and design. Consequently, we have the beginning and the end of the universe as God's creation.

Spinoza criticizes all basic tenets of transcendental conception of God. In doing so, he develops his own metaphysical system that rests upon "substance" as focal category. Substance is indeed a very interesting metaphysical notion. It defies all kind of binary opposition between God and His creation. According to my reading, there is conflicting opinion about Spinoza's "substance" and its theological consequences. I will investigate further on how does Spinoza build his metaphysical foundation of God? especially, his notion of "substance". *First*, I will explain what is meant by transcendental paradigm of God by citing Philo as the founding philosopher of that kind of approach. *Second*, I will elaborate Spinoza's metaphysical system that is the bedrock of his philosophical theology. *Finally*, I will uncover several difficulties found in Spinoza's theological-metaphysical project.

## Philo's Scriptural Philosophy

Philo was not a philosopher. He was a preacher on biblical topics who dispensed his philosophic thoughts in forms of sermons. However,

he developed a systematic philosophy of religion based on scripture. His philosophy of religion's starting point is an enumeration and assessment of the various views with regard to the ways by which men have arrived at knowledge of God. Philo enumerates three views.<sup>2</sup>

*First*, men arrive at knowledge of God through imagination. People who hold this view regard the belief in God as fictitious belief. The belief in God was invented by some clever legislator in order to tame rebellious spirit of the people and inspire them with awe and fear and reverence for the law. God is a mere concept in our mind which has a social and political consequence. Philo identified Critias, the leader of Thirty Tyrants in Athens at the beginning of fifth century as strong proponent of fictitious way of seeing God.

*Second*, God is seen as the discovery of human reason. He is not a figment of our imagination, God has real existence outside our mind, and we are able to discover him by the power of reason. It is the God whom Plato discovered when, starting with the world, which he held to have been framed out of an eternal formless matter; he was compelled by reason to assume the existence of Demiurge who has framed the world. It is also the God whom Aristotle discovered when, starting with an eternal world which is eternally in motion; he was compelled by reason to arrive at the existence who is immovable mover.

*Third*, God is known through revelation. Philo does not believe that reason is the only way of arriving at knowledge of God. There is to him a third way of arriving at knowledge of God, the way of revelation. Revelation, as conceived by Philo, meant two things: *first*, it meant the historical revelation: an event which took place in the past when at Mount Sinai God made himself known to men and gave them the law. *Second*, revelation meant to Philo as progressive revelation, a continuous revealing of God to chosen human being to make known to them the meaning of the revealed Law. Although revelation is seen as final and perfect, it has to be couched in ordinary language which is intelligible to ordinary run of man. The perfection of revelation was often obscured by the imperfection of human language. Therefore, men should search continuously for the inner meaning of revelation, an endeavor which needs the divine aid of God. It is this divine aid in the discovery of the inner meaning of Scripture which is called by Philo *Unwritten Law* that constitutes a new kind of revelation,

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2 Wolfson, Harry Austryn, *Religious Philosophy: A Group of Essays by Harry Austryn Wolfson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 2

a progressive revelation or revelation which comes in response to the search of human reason.

What is this deity disclosed through revelation? Scriptural philosopher like Philo has three conceptions of this Scriptural God.<sup>3</sup> *First*, God is infinite in the sense that He is incomprehensible or cannot be comprehended by the mind. The essence of God cannot be known. All that can be known of Him is the fact of His existence. This distinction between the knowledgability of God's existence and unknowledgeability of His essence was something new in Greek Philosophy. It was introduced by Philo. The terms ineffable, unnamable, and incomprehensible, by which unknowledgeability of God is expressed by Philo, do not occur as a description of God in extant Greek philosophical literature. However, once these terms were used by Philo, they begin to occur frequently in Greek philosophy. The chief source of Philo's view of the incomprehensibility of God was his rigid philosophical interpretation of the scriptural prohibition of the likening of God to anything that is in heaven above, or earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. The unlikeness of God became with him the uniqueness of God. Uniqueness meant that God belonged to no class. And since He belonged to no class, no concept of Him could be formed. He was thus incomprehensible.

*Second*, God is infinite in the sense of infinite goodness. Infinite goodness of God means two things: (a) God acts freely by will and design and purpose (b) God exercises His individual providence over human being. This conception of the infinite goodness of God is different with views held by other Greek philosopher. Plato, for instance, described God as good but not in the sense of an act performed by will and design and for a purpose. Good is applied to God in figurative sense and only because the unwavering, uniform action flowing by necessity from the nature of God. When Plato, in answer to the question "Why God made this world" says that it is because "He was good" and "desired that all things should be good". His using the term "desire" shows that there was no choice on the part of God in the creation of this form of the world. He could not create any other kind of world. There were "fated laws" by which the Demiurge was guided in his act of creation.

*Third*, God is infinite in the sense of infinite power or omnipotence. By omnipotence Philo means four things: (a) God created the world out of nothing and implanted in it certain laws of nature by which it is governed, (b) before the creation of this world of ours, God, if He willed, could not

3 Wolfson, *Religious Philosophy*, p. 6

have created it at all or could have created another kind of world governed by another kind of law, (c) in this present world of ours, God can override the laws which He himself has implanted in the world and create what is called miracles, (d) God, if He wills, can destroy this world and create in its stead a new heaven and a new earth, though Philo happens to be certain that God will not will to do so.

Philo presents this conception of the omnipotence of God, in all its four phases, explicitly in opposition to every school of Greek Philosophy. Philo rejects explicitly the Aristotelian conception of the eternity of the world, and this on the ground, as he says that it “impiously” postulates in God, “a vast inactivity”. By this he means that the assumption of a world existing eternally by the side of God would be a restriction on the power of God. By the same token, he makes the Platonic pre-existent matter out of which God created the world to have been itself created by God. Here again the assumption of an eternal uncreated matter could be a restriction on the power of God. It is for this reason also he rejects the Stoic conception of God as fate. For fate means an internal limitation on the power of God to act according to the freedom of His will.

These principles of scriptural philosophy as laid down by Philo have been generally accepted in all the philosophies of all three revealed religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They all accepted the fact of a historical and final revelation, though they may differ as to which historical revelation was final. They all accept the view that while there was one historical revelation that was final, that final revelation was not a closed revelation; there was progressive revelation supplementary to the final revelation. They all accept of the incomprehensibility of God, though there may be some difference of opinion among them as to how to interpret the terms predicated of God in Scripture. Finally they all accept the principle of divine goodness and of divine omnipotence in the manner Philo conceives them. In short, Philo’s scriptural philosophy as well as three major revealed religions believe in the transcendent conception of God, seeing God as infinite, incomprehensible and therefore cannot be compared to any worldly entities.

### **Spinoza’s Theological Monism**

All religious philosophers believed that, unlike the world which is dependent upon God, God is independent of the world. The independence of God may be expressed by the term separateness – separateness in the sense

that existence of God does not necessarily imply the existence of the world. World came into existence after it had not been in existence. Before the existence of the world there was a God without a world. The world would someday come to an end and after Armageddon there will be God, again, without a world. And since God was and will be without a world, even now when the world exists, God's existence is independent of the world, separate from it, and apart from it.

Like the rest of religious philosophers, Spinoza admits that there is something over and above and beyond the aggregate of things, which constitutes this physical universe of ours. However, he is unwilling to admit that something unlike the constituent parts of the universe is separate from the universe. Within the universe itself and inseparable from it, he maintains, there is something unlike its parts. And as he proceeds in his argument he explains that by that something he means the wholeness of the universe, which he contends is not mere aggregate of its parts. In support of this contention, he alludes to two old propositions, which by his time were already philosophically common. The first proposition is that the universe is an organic living being, a view which ever since Plato had been expressed by various philosophers in various ways. The second proposition is that in an organic living being the whole is something different from the mere sum of its parts.

This is a clear and simple thought, which Spinoza could have expressed in clear and simple language. But being a philosopher, he felt that he owed it to his profession to express himself in technical language, even at the risk of making clear things obscure and simple things complicated. And so, rummaging through the stockpile of philosophical terminology, he came upon the term "substance". This he pasted as a label upon the wholeness of the universe of which we have been speaking as a label used by Spinoza as the equivalent for the traditional term: God.

Before Spinoza, "substance" was conceptualized by French philosopher, Rene Descartes. Descartes sees substance as a thing in which other things, such as properties or qualities or states, inhere and which does not inhere in anything else. Substances exist through themselves. They are independent of anything else. The kind of thing, which met the requirement of independence, according to Descartes, is God. All other things depend for their existence on God and are literally inconceivable without God.

Nonetheless, Descartes does recognize a significant sense in which finite things, such as human minds, human bodies, tables, trees, etc. are

substances, for although such things depend on God, they depend on no other created thing. Of course, a table or a tree may be caused to exist by some other finite thing (a carpenter or another tree). But for Descartes, this kind of dependence does not spoil the fact that finite things are substance. For while tree may be caused to exist by another tree, it is conceivable that the tree exists without another tree. Each finite substance is conceptually independent of any other finite substance. Finite substances, however, are dependent of God as their creator. Descartes explicitly regards the definition of substance is not univocal. There are two fundamentally different kinds of substance for Descartes. There are independent substance (God) and dependent substance (finite things created by God).

For Descartes, each substance has what he calls a principal attribute which constitutes its nature and essence and to which all its other properties are referred. These other features of a substance that are explained by its essence Descartes often calls “modes” of the substance. Thus, each substance has a fundamental feature—fundamental in the sense that it is that feature which explains or enables us to understand all other features of the substance and is, for this reason, the essence of the substance.

There are only two attributes that can play this fundamental explanatory role for Descartes: thought and extension. Thought constitutes the essence of minds in the sense that all the particular properties of minds presuppose thought or must be understood through thought. Thus, my feeling pain and my having the thought that today is Wednesday are particular properties of a substance, and to say that substance has these properties is to presuppose that it is thinking. In precisely the same way, extension is the principal attribute since any substance that has this property is such that all of its other properties presuppose extension. Thus, extension is the principal attribute of extended substance such as the table. The table is five feet long, weigh 50 lbs, has round shape. All these properties presuppose that the table extended.

The principal attribute must be conceptually independent of one another. Thus, to understand a thing as thinking thing does not require us to think of it as also extended, and similarly conceiving of a thing as extended does not require conceiving it as thinking. By contrast, as we saw, conceiving a thing as five feet long does require conceiving of it as extended. In this way, being five feet long is a mode of being extended. If thought itself were conceived through extension and thus thought would not be an attribute after all. For this reason, given that thought and extension are each principal attributes, they must be conceptually independent of one another.

Spinoza, like Descartes, sees a substance as something that has properties but that itself is not a property of anything else. Things inhere in substance and it, in turn, inheres in nothing else. Spinoza also defines substance in terms of independence. The kind of independence Spinoza, like Descartes, has in mind is conceptual independence, and thus the other part of Spinoza's definition of substance is that substance is conceived through itself. Spinoza wrote:

*By substance, I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; in other words, that, the conception of which does not need the conception of another thing from which it must be formed.<sup>4</sup>*

Spinoza would agree with Descartes that only God meets the requirement for being a substance, but, unlike Descartes, he does not look for a way to have finite things count as substance as well. Spinoza holds a naturalistic view that there is only one substance. There are no two substances regulated by two different rules. If the notion of a mode is of a being that is conceptually dependent on another, and if finite things such as the table and chairs are dependent in this way, then one should have the courage of one's convictions and admit that such things are modes of the substance.

Spinoza, like Descartes, regards thought and extension as attributes. He, however, holds that there is infinity of attributes including thought and extension. These other attributes are unknown to human being. Spinoza rules out any kind of conceptual connection between attributes. Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself. Spinoza, like Descartes, does not see any conceptual relation between thought and extension. However, Spinoza also does not allow any causal relation between thought and extension. It is precisely because thought and extension are conceptually separate that those two cannot causally interact. For Spinoza, in other words, causal dependence amounts to conceptual dependence.

In addition to the definition of substance and attribute, there is one further crucial definition at work in Spinoza's argument, and that is his definition of mode as that which is in another through which it is also conceived. A mode is thus conceptually dependent on something other than the mode itself, and this is why a mode is a mode and not a

<sup>4</sup> Spinoza, Benedict De, *Ethics* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2001), p. 3



substance. Using these definitions and other claims, the argument goes through four key steps. First, no two substances can share an attribute. Second, Spinoza argues that it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist. Third, Spinoza argues that God, defined as substance with all the attributes, exists. Finally, since God exists and has all the attributes and since there can be no sharing of attributes, no other substance besides God can exist. Any such substance would have to share attributes with God and such sharing is ruled out.

Let us begin by elaborating the second argument. Spinoza means by this claim that each substance is such that its existence somehow follows from its very concept or nature. Other things, limited things or modes, are not such that their existence follows from their very nature. For such things, their existence is at the mercy of other things, the things that limit them. But a substance is special: its existence is beholden only to its own nature. He wrote:

*By cause of itself, I understand that, whose essence involves existence; or that, whose nature cannot be conceived unless existing.*<sup>5</sup>

If substance owes its existence to something else, it would have to be conceived through that something else. But this would conflict with the self-conceived nature of substance. Since substance cannot be produced by anything else, he concludes that substance is produced by itself. Since substance is not produced by anything else, it must be produced by itself, or it is self-caused. Given Spinoza's equation of causation and conceivability, it follows that a substance's existence is simply a function of its concept or definition. Given that God is by definition a substance and given that existence follows from the nature of substance, Spinoza concludes that God exists. Indeed, Spinoza states here that God exists necessarily, and it is easy to see why. Definitional or conceptual truths are necessary truths. Because existence is a part of the concept of God, we can say that God exists is a necessary truth.

God is the only substance. Spinoza holds this view quite strongly. Precisely because God is defined as having all attributes, it follows that if another substance were to exist in addition to God, it would have to share attributes to God. So, given that God exists necessarily, no other substance exists, or indeed, can exist. But what does "having all attributes" mean? Does it mean that you, body, thought and table are merely God's attributes? Are

<sup>5</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 3

they not finite substances conceivable through themselves? If God is the only substance then where does that leave such familiar objects as those mentioned above? What metaphysical status do such objects have?

Spinoza's answer is, of course, that those things are modes of one substance. But exactly what is it to be a mode? Descartes regards the attribute of a substance as the fundamental feature of a substance that all of its other features presuppose. These other, non-fundamental features are the modes of the substance. On this account, each mode presupposes a particular attribute. Modes of extension would be things such as the shape of the table, its size, and its weight.

Two aspects of the way Descartes conceives the relation between a mode and a substance are important. First, Descartes regards a mode as in the substance, which it is a mode. This does not mean that the mode is a part of the substance but rather the mode is a state of the substance. The traditional, technical term for such a relation is inherence: modes inhere in substance. Thus roundness inheres in the table just in the sense that this is a state in which the table exists. Inherence is a kind of dependence relation: states of a substance depend their existence on the substance. There cannot be a state of being round without some thing. Second, modes are conceived through the substance of which they are modes. For Descartes, modes literally cannot be understood except in a substance. Descartes makes clear that this is a kind of conceptual connection between modes and substance: the nature of a mode is such that it cannot be understood at all unless the concept of the thing of which it is a mode is implied in its concept.

Descartes holds that substance is not singular. Objects such as mind, body, and table are not modes of any substance; rather they are substances in their own right. And although such finite substances do depend completely on God, they do not depend on God in the way that states of a substance depend on and inhere in that substance. Thus we can see that Descartes recognizes two different kinds of relation of dependence: inherence and conceptual dependence. For Descartes, finite substances depend on God only on the later way, but modes depend on substance in both of these ways.

Spinoza, unlike Descartes, sees inherence as nothing but conceptual dependence. For him, there is only one relation of dependence here, and not two as in Descartes. For Spinoza, there is only one substance, God. Because all there exists, for Spinoza, is either a substance or a mode, it follows that ordinary objects such as finite minds and bodies are modes of

God. If Spinoza is adopting the Cartesian account of modes with all of its deep roots in medieval and ancient philosophy, then it would seem that the table, for example, is a state of God, that the relation between God and the table is much like the way that Descartes conceives the relation between the table and its roundness.

But how is this possible? How can a thing such a table or your mind be a state or a feature of another things such as God. Such objects are not, it would seem, ways in which God or anything else exists, rather they have existence of their own. Modes are properties or universals, while tables and minds are particulars, and no particular can be a universal. However, modes, as Descartes conceive them are not necessarily universals; rather they may be, as it were, particularized properties, such as the table's roundness or this roundness instead of mere roundness in general. On this understanding, modes would be particulars and thus perhaps the right logical type.

Spinoza's monism has its own difficulties. Yet, the argument is indeed a strong counter-argument to Philo's scriptural philosophy, which convey the transcendent conception of God: seeing God as infinite, incomprehensible and therefore cannot be compared to any worldly entities. Spinoza's monism does not regard worldly entity as completely different entity compared to the divine. Instead, he holds that all worldly entities are not substances on their own but modes of God. The relation between God's creations and God itself is not causality but inherence. Finite entities are modes of God, the only substance there is.

## Closing

Spinoza's theologico-metaphysics did question basic tenets of scriptural philosophy. It also questioned theological claim held by three major revealed religions. Yet, there are difficulties in seeing the relation between finite entities and God as "inherence". There are at least three objections to that claim. *First*, if all things were modes, or properties of God, then God, the subject of all things, would have contradictory properties. When we attribute properties to things or persons, what we are really doing is attributing properties to God, in so far as the said things or persons are in God. In nature, there are things whose properties are opposed to each other. These properties should be attributed to the one Spinozistic substance underlying all things, i.e. God. If, for instance, Napoleon loves

honey, while Josephine hates it, and if both Napoleon and God are modes of God, it will follow that "God loves and hates, denies and affirms, the same thing, at the same time. Thus, Spinoza metaphysics would violate the law of non-contradiction.

*Second*, if the particular things were modes of God, then God would not be immutable. The world we encounter is filled with particular things that are constantly changing, and Spinoza does not seem to deny the reality of change and motion. These things come into and out of being, and change their properties. If these particular things were modes of God, God would gain and lose modes, and thus be in motion. But if God changes he is not at all the supremely perfect being, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. God's immutability is not just a traditional theological view, but also a view openly endorsed by Spinoza in his book: Ethics. The inherence modes, thus, generates an internal inconsistency in Spinoza's system.

*Third*, if all things were modes of God, then God would be directly responsible for all the evil in the world. Traditional theology strives to explain how God can be omnipotent and omniscient cause of all things, and yet not be responsible for the evil in the created world. Spinoza's view that all things are modes of God connects God far more intimately to evil and makes him the real agent of all crimes. In order to avoid these absurdities, we should do away with the traditional interpretation of substance-mode relation in Spinoza as a relation of inherence. We should propose that in using "substance-mode" terminology Spinoza primarily meant to point out a certain asymmetric dependence of modes on the substance. While modes are entities that depend on the substance and its attributes, the substance is a completely independent entity. Preserving this asymmetric dependence by no means requires that we conceive modes as inhering in the substance. The very fact that modes are caused by the substance suffices to establish this asymmetric dependence. Thus, the claim that Napoleon is a mode of God, should amount to nothing over and above that God is the efficient cause of Napoleon. Under this interpretation, the claim that all things are modes of God appears to be completely innocent, insofar as it ascribes to Spinoza a common theistic view, namely that God is just the cause of all things.

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