

A portrait of Baruch Spinoza, a Dutch philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark blue or black garment with a prominent white collar. He has long, dark, wavy hair and is looking slightly to the right of the viewer with a calm expression. The background is dark and textured.

# Spinoza's Panendeism

Natura, sive Natura naturata



Deus, sive Natura naturans

Fatih Incekara

Moses was, to be sure, a Pantheist, or, if you please,  
in more current terms, a Spinosist.<sup>1</sup>

John Toland

## 1. Introduction

So, what exactly is Spinozism? The interpretations of Spinoza's view on nature and God encompasses a broad range of spectrum, from atheism and materialism to *theissimus* and *christianissimus*.<sup>2</sup> The young Spinoza was issued a *herem*, an excommunication, by the Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam due to 'monstrous deeds' and 'heresy'.<sup>3</sup> Later, French enlightenment philosophers found materialist and atheist inspiration in Spinoza's ideas on nature and God, while in contrast, spiritually inspiring early German philosophers in their view on nature during *Sturm und Drang*. With the *pantheismusstreit*, a controversy among the brightest German philosophers emerged on how to interpret Spinoza, eventually praising Spinozism decades later as the only way of being a philosopher.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I will mainly argue how Spinoza's view on nature and God corresponds with not a pantheistic, but rather a panentheistic worldview infused with deistic elements, or simply panendeism. To do this, I will first discuss what Spinoza exactly meant with *Deus sive Natura*. Then, I will argue how this worldview corresponds with panentheism and how it contains elements of deism, instead of theism. I will thus conclude that Spinozism corresponds closer to panendeism, than pantheism. Finally, I will briefly touch upon how Spinoza's rather complex perspective on nature and God resulted in a broad spectrum of interpretations and how this influenced the age of Enlightenment and the rise of German Idealism.

---

<sup>1</sup> Steven Nadler, "Benedictus Pantheissimus," in *Insiders and Outsiders in Seventeenth Century Philosophy*, ed. G.A.J. Rogers, Tom Sorell, and Jill Kraye (New York: Routledge, 2006), 241.

<sup>2</sup> Detlev Pätzold, "Deus sive Natura," in *The Book of Nature in Early Modern and Modern History*, ed. K van Berkel and Arjo Vanderjagt (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2009), 161.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Nadler "Baruch Spinoza", in *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 225.

<sup>4</sup> Nadler, *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, 625-630.

## 2.1 Deus, sive Natura *naturans*

In Part One of the Ethics, Spinoza describes the core characteristics of God in a clear and geometrical fashion using in total eight definitions, seven axioms and 36 propositions.<sup>5</sup> Spinoza argues through several propositions that God is the one and only substance, a being that infinitely and necessarily exists and that possesses infinite attributes:

God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.<sup>6</sup>

Spinoza argues that “whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God” and he concludes that God is nature (*Deus sive Natura*)<sup>7</sup>. Does Spinoza then argue that God is really identical to nature and that these two concepts can be used interchangeably? To answer this question – and I will argue against it- I want to elaborate further on Spinoza’s crucial concept of Nature. As Nadler puts it, Spinoza distinguishes two sides of this nature; the active *Natura naturans* (naturing nature) and the passive *Natura naturata* (natured nature).<sup>8</sup>

By *Natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, that is ... God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause. But by *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature, or from God's attributes, that is, all the modes of God's attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Benedict de Spinoza. *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. & trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1994), 85-109.

<sup>6</sup> Spinoza, Ethics I, Prop. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Spinoza, Ethics I, Prop. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Nadler, *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, 229.

<sup>9</sup> Spinoza, Ethics I, Prop. 29.

While *Natura naturans* could be identified with the infinite essence of God, *Natura naturata* could be identified with the expression of Gods attributes or modes into existence. As stated in the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Spinoza is regarded as the most distinguished pantheist in Western philosophy. *Pantheism* is the view that God is identical with everything<sup>10</sup>. First, I will argue against this notion that Spinoza's view on God and nature corresponds with pantheism within the context of the previously described concepts of *Natura naturans* vs. *Natura naturata*. Spinoza argues that God has infinite expressions of attributes or modes: "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes."<sup>11</sup> We as finite beings, can comprehend two of them, that is extension and thinking. This is however, in contrast to Descartes, not in a dualistic sense. Since for Spinoza everything that exists, flows out of one single substance or God, as expressions of attributes or modes. There are no two separate substances that have to interact with each other in the Cartesian sense.

Turning now to universal *Natura naturata*, or those modes or creatures which immediately depend on, or have been created by God- we know only two of these; motion in matter, and  
intellect in the thinking thing.<sup>12</sup>

The crucial point in the distinction of nature is that *Natura naturans* is the active force, that produces the modal, passive system what Spinoza calls *Natura naturata*. While God can be identified with the active former force, the latter should not be identified with God itself, but only with its passive modal products.

---

<sup>10</sup> Aloysius P. Martinich, "pantheism," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy 2nd. edition*, ed. Audi, Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 640.

<sup>11</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics* I, Prop. 16.

<sup>12</sup> de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, 58.

The conclusion of this crucial distinction is that what we typically call nature, could be more properly identified with Spinoza's *Natura naturata* that exists in God (or *Natura naturans*) as a result of God itself. Indeed, when Spinoza said *Deus, sive Natura* he meant *Deus, sive Natura naturans*.

The consequence of *Deus, sive Natura naturans* – and this is the crucial point- is thus that all of nature *is* not God and that pantheism does not reflect Spinoza's view on nature and God properly. Instead of pantheism, *Panentheism* - literally meaning "All in God", a term first coined by Karl Christian Friedrich Krause<sup>13</sup> -captures Spinoza's idea that *Natura naturata* or simply nature *is in* *Natura naturans* or God. The panentheistic interpretation makes sense, especially when we recall here that Spinoza (repeatedly) argues that "Whatever is, is *in* God", instead of "Whatever is, is God." or again "I say that all things are in God and move in God".<sup>14</sup>

## **2.2. Atheism, theism or deism?**

Although, as I have argued, panentheism is related more closely to Spinoza than pantheism, the validity of the theistic reference in the word '*panentheism*' should be questioned. Especially in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza openly argues against traditional and dogmatic religion and classical theism: he denies the existence of the immortal soul and the classical Judeo-Christian anthropomorphic view of God<sup>15</sup>. Spinoza challenges and denies the Mozaic authorship of the *Thorah*<sup>16</sup>, questions revelation as a source of knowledge<sup>17</sup> and explicitly argues against the occurrence of miracles<sup>18</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> Jere Paul Surber, "Krause, Karl Christian Friedrich," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy 2nd. edition*, ed. Audi, Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 476.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict De Spinoza, "Letter XXI," in *The correspondence of Spinoza*, ed. A. Wolf (New York: Dial Press, 1927).

<sup>15</sup> de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, 112.

<sup>16</sup> de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, 34-40.

<sup>17</sup> de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, 109-110.

<sup>18</sup> de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, 10-15.

In classical theism, God is a transcendent, benevolent, omnipotent being that is separate from nature. Thus, since this God communicates through prophets with miracles and with holy books through revelations with humanity and since he is especially concerned with daily lives of particular human beings, Spinoza as “theissimus” that Goethe understood does not hold.

However, this doesn’t mean that one should interpret Spinoza automatically as an atheist. Indeed, during his lifetime by his contemporaries and after his death, Spinoza was often interpreted as an atheist by thinkers such as Bayle, Diderot, d’Alembert (as I will point out in the next chapter), Leibniz, Jacobi and more recently by Nadler, because according to the latter, Spinoza reduced God to nature. Nadler argues that the pantheist does not reject as inappropriate the religious psychological attitudes demanded by theism” as an atheist. Therefore, he as a consequence, concludes that Spinoza is not a pantheist, but an atheist.<sup>19</sup> I will provide two arguments against this conclusion and propose a deistic solution to Nadler’s problem.

First, Spinoza explicitly denies the accusations of him being an atheist by himself. In fact, Spinoza states that one of the very first reasons to start writing the *Tractatus Theologico- Politicus* was due to “The opinion which the common people have of me, who do not cease to accuse me falsely of atheism; I am also obliged to avert this accusation as far as it is possible to do so.”<sup>20</sup> Second, Spinoza did not naturalize God, he naturalized God’s modes which are expressed as natural phenomena within nature; “The greater our knowledge of natural phenomena, the more perfect is our knowledge of God’s essence.”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Nadler, Steven, "Baruch Spinoza", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/spinoza/>>.

<sup>20</sup> Benedict De Spinoza, “Letter XXX,” in *The correspondence of Spinoza*. ed. A. Wolf (New York: Dial Press, 1927).

<sup>21</sup> Benedict De Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), 103.

This is the only aspect of God we can understand -intellectually- and what Spinoza accepts as true or natural religion. Spinoza tries to reach God through this intellectual love of God -*Amor intellectualis Dei*- by exploring nature or *Natura naturata*, instead of through religious laws of traditional and dogmatic religion, miracles and revelation.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, all of this shows that Spinoza's ideas -in agreement with Nadler- do not correspond with theism, neither with pantheism (as argued in the previous part). However, this does not automatically mean that Spinoza was an atheist. His view on nature and God corresponds more with deism, which is the view that true religion is natural religion<sup>23</sup>, in which belief in revelation and miracles are often dismissed. As previously argued, this was certainly the case for Spinoza. Spinoza searched for natural or true religion by studying the physical laws of nature. Although he rejected classical theism and dogmatic religion, he argued in favor of an infinite, perfect substance or (a non-anthropomorphic) God, that expressed its modes in a neutral nature. Therefore, I argue that Spinoza has deistic elements in his view on God and nature and that he should be called a deist rather than a theist or an atheist. This pantheistic view infused with deistic elements is what most closely corresponds with Spinoza's view on God and nature and is what I call *Panendeism*.

### **3. Spinozism after Spinoza**

Although an extensive discussion on Spinozism after Spinoza in 18th and 19th century Europe falls out of the scope of this essay, I do briefly want to touch upon his significant influence on the thought of the concept of nature during the ages of Enlightenment and during the rise of German Idealism.

---

<sup>22</sup> de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, 260.

<sup>23</sup> William J. Wainwright, "deism," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy 2nd. edition*, ed. Audi, Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 216.

It is known that Spinoza inspired French early enlightenment philosophers such as La Mettrie and d'Holbach. While the former denied the existence of the human soul, thereby naturalizing and materializing the human body to a machine in *L'Homme Machine*, the latter naturalized nature as a whole in his *Système de la Nature*. Diderot and d'Alembert's highly influential work *Encyclopédie* labeled Spinoza as an atheist, naming him "by birth a Jew and then a deserter from Judaism, and finally an atheist" and "the first to reduce atheism to a system".<sup>24</sup>

On the contrary, German philosophers such as Goethe found that French perspectives on nature too superficial, lacking depth in philosophy, especially that of d'Holbach and Voltaire. Goethe thought that d'Holbach treated nature in his *Système* like a dead corpse; it was dark, and lifeless. During *Sturm und Drang*, a proto-Romantic movement between 1760-1780, German philosophers found more depth in their philosophy on nature within Spinozism. Spinoza, according to Lessing, 'der Toter Hund' was re-discovered, which became apparent especially with the *Panteismusstreit* (1785-1789).<sup>25</sup> The Pantheist Controversy was a discussion that started after Jacobi's claim that Lessing was a Spinozist, which practically meant that he was an atheist during his lifetime. Influential thinkers such as Mendelson and even Kant were involved in the controversy and they all disputed over what being a Spinozist really meant, and importantly whether it corresponded with atheism. All this eventually, boosted interest in Spinozism especially during the rise of German Idealism. Spinoza's philosophy was eventually praised by Hegel with "You are either a Spinozist or not a philosopher at all".<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Denis Diderot, Jean le Rond d'Alembert. "Spinoza, philosophy of," in *The Encyclopedia*, trans. Eden, Malcolm (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, 2007), 463–474.

<sup>25</sup> Frederick C. Beiser. "Jacobi and the Pantheism Controversy," in *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> Georg W.F. Hegel. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Elizabeth Haldane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 283.



#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, in this essay, I have discussed Spinoza's view on the relation between nature and God and the concepts of *Natura naturans* vs. *Natura naturata*. I have argued that Spinoza identified the former with God, and the latter with nature itself *in* God. Spinozism in this sense corresponds, not to pantheism as Toland one of the first argued, but closer to panentheism. I have further argued that, despite the theistic reference in panentheism, Spinoza's view on God does not match with theism, neither with atheism, but more closely with deism. Spinoza's philosophy on nature and God can thus be identified with a panentheistic worldview infused with deistic elements, or in short, panendeism. This complex Spinozist worldview gave rise to a broad range of interpretations from atheistic materialism to pantheism and even true theism and a true Christian during the ages of French Enlightenment, German Idealism and even today almost 350 years after Spinoza's death.

#### 5. Bibliography

Beiser, Frederick C. "Jacobi and the Pantheism Controversy." In *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Martinich, Aloysius P. "pantheism." In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy 2nd. edition*, edited by Robert Audi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Surber, Jere Paul. "Krause, Karl Christian Friedrich." In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy 2nd. edition*, edited by Robert Audi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Nadler, Steven. "Baruch Spinoza". In *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Steven Nadler, 225. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

Nadler, Steven. "Benedictus Pantheissimus". In *Insiders and Outsiders in Seventeenth Century Philosophy*, edited by G.A.J. Rogers, Tom Sorell, and Jill Kraye, 238. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Pätzold, Detlev, "Deus sive Natura." In *The Book of Nature in Early Modern and Modern History*, edited by K van Berkel and Arjo Vanderjagt. Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2009.

Spinoza, Benedict de. *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: "On Revelation", "On Miracles" and Ethics: "First Part". In *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, edited and translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton University press, 1994.

Wainwright, William J. "deism." In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy 2nd. edition*, edited by Robert Audi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.