Immanence and Infinity in Spinoza's Concept of God as a Manifestation of the Limits of Reason in His Philosophy

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the lacuna arising from Spinoza's rationalism with respect to God as immanent within infinity. Reliance on a human intellect derived from the regularity of God (sive natura) necessarily produces a limitation projected on God, defined as possessing infinite attributes of which we are familiar with a mere two. In doing so, we present a look at the perspective of contemporary studies that relate to the concept of infinity and its problematic nature that arises from the limitations of our minds (For example, Godel', Russell). The article suggests four perspectives that may question the human rationale grounding Spinoza's metaphysical thought.

Defining infinity necessitates an immanent God, thus expropriating his capacity for transcendence. Accordingly, a method which employs the concept of an infinite God is necessarily subject to a definition by negation contradicting God's capacity for transcendence.

KEYWORDS
Spinoza, infinity, God, metaphysics, critique

INTRODUCTION

The present article seeks to present the paradox between an immanent and infinite god and the limitation this premise establishes by pre-negating the possibility of such a god also being transcendent. Spinoza, who identifies God with nature, thereby determines that God is not a personal entity which manages nature from the outside, but rather that nature conducts itself deterministically according to its own laws. Human reason is a manner derived from the laws of nature, a law-abiding nature Spinoza identified as according with the nature of a god which "…which exists from the necessity of its nature alone…" (Ethics, Part 1, Definition 7; Ethics, Part 1, Proposition 17 ["…God acts from the laws of his nature alone, and is compelled by no one…."]) [Spinoza (1677/2016)].

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND CONCERNING CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE'S APPROACH TO INFINITY

Contemporary scientific theories argue that our universe may be one among an infinite number of other universes, each capable of being governed by different laws of physics and containing different dimensions compared to our own. This 'multiverse' issue, in turn, has become one of philosophical significance on account of its purported scientific validity, which rests on a vague empirical grounding [Chan (2024)].

In Multiverse Theories: A Philosophical Perspective, Simon Friedrich (2021) explains that we may learn about the multiverse's existence indirectly via various scientific tools and theories in spite of the fact that we cannot observe it directly.

The idea of a multiverse is related to the idea of an infinitely-expanding universe. According to prevailing cosmological principles, the universe—insofar as it is observable via telescopes—is uniform and its constituent matter is distributed homogeneously. According to Alan Guth (1981), for example, the universe underwent a phase of expansion at light speed very shortly after the Big Bang. The universe began with a volume of less than a proton, and almost immediately expanded to the size of a baseball. Over the next 13.8 billion years, the universe kept on expanding at a lower rate until it reached its present size [Halpern (2024) (video), 41:07 – 44:30].

The multiverse theory does indeed accord with Spinoza's definition of absolute infinity in the material sense and beyond—the spiritual as manifesting the laws of nature and beyond, and as encompassing all that can or cannot be conceived by the human mind to infinity and beyond (Ethics, Part 1, Definition 6) [Spinoza, (1677/2016)].

This statement by Spinoza does not, however, address the logical issue of defining nature by negation (as being absolutely infinite). Beyond the pantheist statement "Deus sive natura" (Ethics, Part 4, Proposition 4, Demonstration) [Spinoza (1677/2016)], some ascribe a pantheist significance to Spinoza's definition of nature (God) as noted, for example, in Melamed (2025, p. 208):

"…Due to Spinoza's insistence on the "inseparability" of God and Nature (see Ep6, IV/36, and Ep73, IV/307), Spinoza has been commonly associated with pantheism, though arguably it would be more proper to describe his views as panentheistic, since what we understand and experience as nature – that is, Extension and Thought – is only an infinitesimal portion of God's absolutely infinite reality…."

As noted above, Spinoza's treatment of God is clearly pantheist in nature. However, if we ascribe a pantheist approach alongside a an "absolutely infinite" definition of God to Spinoza—that is to say, infinite by any metric we may or may not be capable of conceiving—we will find it difficult to reject the possibility of God being immanent within infinity as well as transcendent outside infinity as in the discussion which follows below.

For one thing, four points pertaining to the limits of human reason become apparent when we examine Spinoza's method critically beyond the Euclidean logic of the Ethics' overall framework as well as beyond the content's linguistic logic, as follows:

(a) That it is forced to define God/nature solely by negation (as absolutely infinite).
(b) That it is limited to acknowledging only two attributes (thought and expansion) from among the infinite attributes of God (Ethics, Part 1, Proposition 11, Demonstration and Proposition 11, Scholium) [Spinoza (1677/2016)].
(c) That the establishment of God/nature as "absolutely infinite" (Ethics, Part 1, Propositions 8 and 13) [Spinoza (1677/2016)] encompasses an internal contradiction.
(d) The establishment of nature as the "…cause of itself…" (Ethics, Part 1, Definition 1) [Spinoza (1677/2016)] ascribed to God (the object as its own cause) reflects a semantic nullity which opposes the law of causality that constitutes a fundamental tenet of Spinoza's philosophy.

Before we address the four critical points above, it is necessary to discuss the issue of why Spinoza employs the concept of "God" in his philosophy even as he establishes the secular concept of "nature" as the foundation of his metaphysics. This particular issue has been addressed in many and myriad ways by historians, philosophers, theologians, etc.—treatments which are beyond the scope of the present discussion. What we shall offer here instead

is a scholarly interpretation which focuses on Spinoza's philosophy and its objectives.

THE UNDERLYING BACKGROUND OF SPINOZA'S USE OF THE CONCEPT OF "GOD"

The concept of "God" bears strong connotations of sanctity, infinity, and amazement. In this respect, it could be that Spinoza sought to imbue his philosophy with the spiritual and the universal significance associated with the concept of "God" even as he expands and deepens it in the service of identifying it with the natural and necessary order underlying the universe.

At this point, it should be noted that Spinoza's rationalism is both existential and emotional. In this respect, we are presented with a secular reality as long as consciousness is strictly rational and does not involve love. However, an existential philosophy is impossible without the concept of love. That is to say, rationalism does not suffice for human conduct based on "… [Love is] a Joy, accompanied by the idea of an external cause…" (Ethics, Part 3, Definition of Affects, Definition VI) [Spinoza (1677/2016)] in any individual existential philosophy (see Sigad (1979)). In this respect, Yosef Ben Shlomo (2012) lists several grounds which led Spinoza to refer to the single object of his philosophy as "God." Reason governs the metaphysical dimension of the discussion, but the lack of a concept of God would have been an obstacle to realizing the objectives of a philosophy where a metaphysical discussion was meant to serve the emotional dimension of Spinoza's philosophy.

In other words, it appears that happiness and eternity as the objectives of existence did not permit Spinoza to avoid employing the concept of "God." With that said, Spinoza nonetheless attempts to remove the concept's religious connotations by establishing it as a limitless and infinite entity which is entirely self-dependent [Ben Shlomo (2012), p. 25]. In this respect, the love which governs the fifth part of the Ethics, as well as the Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being, seeks to embed the individual into the eternal and infinite totality which is the object—nature or God. It is at this point—the apex of the existence sought by Spinoza's philosophy—that his philosophy's rationalism covers itself in the emotional vagueness of an "...intellectual love of God..." (Amor dei intellectualis) (see Ethics, Part 4, Proposition 33) [Spinoza (1677/2016)].

Spinoza's decision to employ the concept of "God", and to identify it with the coldly rational concept of "nature", requires us to treat the former not only as absolutely infinite as the first cause, and as its own cause, but also as an object for adoration, love, and a desire for closeness. It therefore follows that we must necessarily perceive God as both omnipotent and omniscient. God is

everything an individual can conceive, and everything an individual cannot conceive given that the human intellect is but a marginal means (modus) among the infinite capacities of God (see Ethics, Part 1, Definition 5) [Spinoza (1677/2016)].

In what follows, I shall address the aforementioned four points in greater detail:

A. On the Necessity of Defining God by Negation

The forced intellectual limitation of defining God by negation (as absolutely infinite) in the material plane (expansion) and in mental capacities (thought) contradicts the immanence which limits God's infinite capacities for transcendence.

In this respect, and when human reason is concerned with an infinite God, it is necessary to fill in the concept of infinity. Following from this premise means that the trait of infinity will make God meaningless on the one hand. However, the constraint reason faces when it is required to define "infinite" by negation prevents an infinite God imbued with infinite descriptors and capacities from also being transcendent on the other hand. Spinoza, who identified God with nature, thereby states that God is not a personal entity that manages nature from the outside, but rather an entity which conducts itself according to a reasoned regularity as perceived by human reason, one which also accords with God's nature as Nature itself. In Spinoza's words, God "…exists from the necessity of its nature alone…." (Ethics, Part 1, Definition 7) [Spinoza (1677/2016)]; also see Ethics, Part 1, Proposition 17 [Spinoza (1677/2016)].

When we examine Spinoza's method critically beyond the Euclidean framework and human reason, therefore, the definition of God's infinity requires us to limit at least one of God's infinite capacities and accordingly gives rise to a contradiction (by definition).

B. On the Limitation Present in The Acknowledgement of Infinite Descriptors

In Part 1, Definition 6 of the Ethics, Spinoza states that "…By God I understand a being absolutely infinite…" [Spinoza (1677/2016)] [absolute infinitum], and proceeds to state that this means "…a substance [its own cause] consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence…." [Spinoza (1677/2016)]. In his explanation of this definition with respect to attributes [descriptors], Spinoza stresses that "…if something [i.e. God] is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence [the essence of God] and involves no negation pertains to its essence…." [Spinoza (1677/2016)]. He later states that "…Since being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature, it follows

[from P7 alone] that every substance must be infinite…." [Spinoza (1677/2016)].

Spinoza defends the core of God's absolute infinity by way of an infinity which unifies the differentiation in the continuum that does not leave a vacuum among the infinite things within the complete object in which each descriptor is limited by type. In other words, each descriptor [of God] is infinite, but only within its own domain, and they all jointly manifest an absolute infinity. Put differently, and in spite of the fact that its descriptors are finite in type, and finiteness expresses negation, God/Nature's entrenched rational nature remains stable by virtue of the defined absolute infinity of its infinite descriptors. Despite the limit of our intellect in only being able to recognise the descriptors thought (mind) and expansion (body), we would have detracted from God/Nature's perfection had we detracted the possibility of infinite descriptors, and by so doing we would not have been able to define God as absolutely infinite [Gilead (1986), pp. 40, 48-49].

The immanent God is thus contextually-dependent with respect to the definition of its own infinity (by way of negation). This definition, in turn, gives rise to an emphatic question, viz. why infinity, which also pertains to the infinite descriptors of God (Ethics, Part 1, Definition 6) [Spinoza (1677/2016)], excludes the possibility of God's transcendence as one among its infinite descriptors. Do we thus clip the proverbial wings of an actually immanent God/Nature on account of the limitations of human reason, which is itself but a limited derivative and a (finite) part of God's infinite descriptor of thought? If God is infinite and the intellect, which is merely a finite part of infinite reason (Ethics, Part 2, Proposition 11, Corollary) [Spinoza (1677/2016)], and is limited to recognising only two among God's infinite descriptors, it follows that there is no way in which it is capable of expropriating God's transcendence, i.e. the possibility of God existing outside the universe.[1]

At this point, it is important to note that it is impossible to convey the most positive expression of God's substance positively except through the use of the negation prefix "in-", which Spinoza defines as an absolute positive. In his own words "...if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence...." (Ethics, Part 1, Definition 6, Explanation, my emphasis) [Spinoza (1677/2016)]. In other words, Spinoza is stating that that which cannot be defined positively does not include any negation. It should also be noted that the Spinozan text itself encompasses an antinomy and raises the question of whether or not anything defined as a negation includes negation. Put differently, if God expresses an essence which cannot contain any negation, how does Spinoza's method, which relies on limited human reasoning, deny God the possibility of transcendence? In this

respect, I do not presume to determine if God is transcendent as well as immanent, but rather to locate a crack in the glass ceiling, as it were, of Spinoza's Euclidean and rational method by way of an isometric examination of the latter's structure (see Mounitz (2020)).

Clarification

I wish to stress that my critique is not being made from a religious perspective, and that it does not seek to undermine the logical continuity of Spinoza's method. Instead, it seeks to present a question that attempts to adopt a view which goes beyond the method's grounding in human logic. Specifically, we are concerned with a wider critical and reflective perspective than the one entrenched in Spinoza's one-dimensional Euclidean and geometric logic. In this respect, I believe that a multidimensional (reflective and critical, logical and semantic, and linguistic) logic is capable of critiquing the Spinozan method's planar aspect.[2]

Accordingly, the question is whether infinity is indeed absolute, or whether there is an end to infinity.

C. On the Linguistic Anomaly

Spinoza would have argued that the very question is illogical since it contains an internal contradiction akin to asking about the existence of cold hot water. In this sense, I wish to argue that the very question illuminates the problem inherent in defining God even if it is unanswerable.

Furthermore, I believe that it is important to distinguish the antinomy inherent in the juxtaposition of two opposing concepts when we are concerned with an absolute infinite substance as defined in Spinoza's method. In this respect, the juxtaposition of the words "infinite[y]" and "absolute" contains an internal contradiction. After all, "infinity" is an undefined concept since we are prevented from its precise delimitation. On the other hand, the concept of "absolute" conveys something defined—something that can be distinguished from other concepts. Spinoza thus reinforces the weakness of "infinity" as a forced linguistic expression by employing the concept of "absolute". It is clearly apparent that the same phrase has two contradictory linguistic viewpoints in defining the main attribute of God as a totality. Put differently, Spinoza's method is required to define God by way of two contradictory concepts.

This antinomy joins our lack of capacity to recognise more than two among the infinite descriptors [of God] and reinforces the critical argument made here suggesting that Spinoza had to forego the existence of transcendence as an attribute of an omniscient and omnipotent God on account of the 'glass ceiling' of a philosophical method grounded in the limitations of human logic.

D. On the Semantic Problem Inherent in "Cause of Itself" [tr. Curley]

The law of causality constitutes the cornerstone of the Spinozan method's guiding rationale. The definition "…cause of itself…" (Ethics, Part 1, Definition 1) [Spinoza (1677/2016)] ascribed to God (the object as its own cause) cannot be reconciled—semantically—with the law of causality's internal logic. In this respect, a closer examination of this definition reveals that the "itself" actually preceded its cause. After all, if "itself" (the object—God/Nature) did not precede its cause, then it would have been impossible to discuss the cause as this object's cause. In other words, and as opposed to the law of causality, which Spinoza conveys in Part 1, Axiom 4 of the Ethics [Spinoza (1677/2016)], when he states that "…The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause…." In other words, it is apparent that the effect (God) preceded its cause here, meaning that the law of causality does not apply in the case of God.[3] Again, it is not possible to escape an admission of the limitations of human logic as represented in language, or the limitations of language as representing human thought.[4]

Therefore, and after questioning the validity of infinity's absoluteness, and in spite of the fact that we accept that these descriptors [attributes] are (1) "…affections of God's attributes…." (Ethics, Part 1, Proposition 14, Corollary 2) [Spinoza (1677/2016)], and that (2) these infinite descriptors [attributes] are the foundation of divine substance (Ethics, Part 1, Definition 4) [Spinoza (1677/2016)], as well as that (3) we are only capable of recognising two among the infinite descriptors [attributes] of God, we still remain with the question of how we can justify the expropriation of potential transcendence from a God which has the infinite capacities of omniscience and omnipotence.

God/Nature, which is not a personal entity but rather an "is" which acts according to its nature and, in Spinoza's words, "…God's omnipotence has been actual from eternity and will remain in the same actuality to eternity…." (Ethics, Part 1, Proposition 17, Corollary 2, Scholium) [Spinoza (1677/2016)]. It thus should have, by virtue of its descriptor [attribute] of infinite thought, been aware of one possibility among an infinity of possibilities whereby an end to infinity might exist, in spite of the fact that our limited intellect as humans identifies an internal contradiction within the definition that necessarily arises from the rational method existing under the 'glass ceiling' of human thought. If this is not the case, then (necessarily):

1. God (in his thought descriptor [attribute]) is not omniscient.

And, according to the principle of parallelization between the thought and expansion descriptors [attributes], if God is not omniscient, then he is also:

2. Not omnipotent. The statement that he acts according to his nature, while acceptable to reason—this being the same reason we employ to recognize his nature—only applies according to the limited human rationale which we forcefully apply to God as his exclusive nature. Furthermore, this rational acceptability limits the "omniscience" and "omnipotence" which lie beyond our limited understanding, as is also applied today to the behavior of physical quanta.[5]
It therefore follows that God is limited.[6]

In Spinoza's words:

"…So God's omnipotence has been actual from eternity and will remain in the same actuality to eternity…." (Ethics, Part 1, Proposition 17, Corollary 2, Scholium) [Spinoza (1677/2016)].

At this point, it is worth mentioning Gödel (1931)'s incompleteness theorems, which proved that any consistent and robust axiomatic system contains unprovable statements within the system itself.[7] In this respect, any logical test would reveal that an infinite God-nature is context-dependent on immanence. God exists in the world, and is thus present in anything in the world and thus anything in the world exists within him. As Spinoza phrases it, "...God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things...." (Ethics, Part 1, Proposition 18) [Spinoza (1677/2016)]. However, and on the other hand, how is it possible to expropriate any trait, descriptor [attribute], or capacity from an entity which is both infinitely impotent as well as infinitely omniscient?

In closing, it should be noted that the present article does not seek to cast any doubt on human reason in general or on the Spinozan method's rationale in particular. In this respect, it is certainly possible to reconcile the reasonableness of this method being required to define God as infinite. However, and given the limits of the human intellect (which—even according to Spinoza himself—is finite and limited), I would submit that the lacuna created by the intellectual definition of infinity, which necessitates an immanent God, expropriates God's potential for transcendence and that this must be taken into consideration. Put differently, we are concerned with an option that necessarily arises from the infinite descriptors [attributes] of God that Spinoza admits as being unknown to us. In other words, what I seek to show is that if Spinoza's method makes use of the concept of God for any reason whatsoever, it should have considered the fact that this concept—even if it is Nature—contains a rationale which exists beyond that which is subjected to limited human logic, and that this rationale is necessarily associated with God's definition as infinite on the one hand, and prevents God from being freely immanent on the other hand.

NOTES

[1] In this spirit, Bertrand Russell (1903) expresses an inherent antinomy of infinite sets. Specifically, and within elementary logic, Russell specifies a model of antinomy inherent within infinite set theory, viz. (1) classes which do not include themselves as an element of a set, and (2) classes which include themselves as an element of a set.

Russell then proceeds to establish that:

(1) A class shall only be referred to as "normal" if it does not include itself as an element of said class; and
(2) In any other case, it shall be referred to as "abnormal". An example of a normal class is the class of mathematicians. This class is obviously not a mathematician, and thus does not constitute an element of itself.

An example of an abnormal class, on the other hand, is the class of all conceivable things. It is manifestly clear that this class is itself something that may be conceived, making it an element of itself. In this respect, let N be the class of all normal classes, and let us consider whether N itself is a normal class. If it is, then it is an element of itself (since it includes all normal classes). However, in this case N is abnormal, because we have already established that any class that includes itself as an element is abnormal. On the other hand, if N is abnormal, then it is an element of itself (as established in the definition of an abnormal class above). Given the above, we conclude that N is only normal if it is abnormal. It therefore follows that the statement "N is normal" is both true and false at the same time.

2 In this respect, I would also like to—parenthetically—consider the limitations of reason in offering a single consistent theory explaining the behaviour of the universe's smallest particles (quarks). Quarks behave in an entirely illogical fashion, since—for one thing—they can be present in more than one location at the same time and—for another—their behaviour contradicts the law of causality which is a foundational tenet of the Spinozan method (see Ethics, Part 1, Proposition 28) [Spinoza (1677/2016)].

3 At this point, it is worth diverting our attention from the definition of an all-encompassing totality to the phenomenon of its smallest particle—the behaviour of quanta—in a manner which opposes the law of causality as one of the five parameters that cannot be reconciled with our intuitions. In this respect, the discussion of quantum theory involves the discussion of random events (which actually occur probabilistically, but seemingly by chance), and for which no cause can be found to explain why said events occur in one manner and not another.

4 I deliberately presented both possibilities since I see no point in presently taking a position in the eternal debate lying at the core of the philosophy of language, viz. whether we think a language or speak thoughts.

5 See notes 2 and 3.

6 In this respect, Thomas M. Ward (2022) examines whether God can command us to hate him.

7 Gödel stated that the axiomatic method contains internal limitations that rule out the Gödel possibility of creating an all-encompassing axiomatic system unless we establish reasoning principles of dubitable logical continuity to this end. It is therefore impossible to attain a perfect axiomatic structure even if we rely on what is self-evident. Put differently, Gödel (1931) showed us that it is possible to prove an incapacity for proof. Gödel's original article can also be found in English (translated by B. Meltzer) with an introduction by R.B. Braithwaite. Also see Nagel and Newman (1958, pp. 7-25).

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