

SOME SIMILARITIES BETWEEN SPINOZA AND HEGEL ON SUBSTANCE



I

IN THIS ESSAY I shall attempt to emphasize some basic similarities between the modes Spinoza and Hegel conceive substance, arguing that their endeavors to comprehend reality in a terminal system by a univocal method make irrelevant the differences between rationalism, idealism, and mysticism.¹ Like Spinoza, Hegel maintained a theory of identity within a tight and unified structural system which recognizes only one reality—called substance by Spinoza and “notion” or Absolute Spirit by Hegel—all parts of the universe and all acts and events fitting together in a systematic form.

In the line of some critics, from Jacobi and Fritz von Baader and left-wing Hegelians more than a century ago down to Nicolai Hartmann and A. Kojève in our times, who pursued the logical implications of the Hegelian principles, I would like to suggest that Hegel’s system is Spinozism brought to its full necessary conclusions and to some possible ramifications. In this sense Nicolai Hartmann was correct in stating that “the exposition of the categories of the Absolute in Hegel’s logic is

¹ For a detailed analysis of Hegel’s interpretation of Spinoza’s concept of substance see my article in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. I, No. 3, (Fall, 1970). The emphasis on similarities rather than on differences between Spinoza’s concept of substance and Hegel’s Absolute Spirit rests on a now widely-accepted interpretation of Spinoza’s substance as being a dynamic activity of ordering all particulars within one system rather than as a static “thing in itself,” totally independent from and outside the particulars, as discussed below.

Laurence Foss in his paper “Hegel, Spinoza and a Theory of Experience as Closed,” *The Thomist* XXXV 3 (July, 1971), replaced the overworked labels “rationalist” and “idealist” by “panist.” He pointed out very aptly how in both these systems the possibility of indeterminacy in experience was eliminated by the “panist” method.

to be regarded as the fulfillment of Spinoza's intention: as a strictly methodical 'geometry' of sequence of the divine attributes and modes . . . within the strict a priori intelligibility, although not 'mathematical' necessity. In this perspective Hegel's philosophy appears as Spinozism led to its ultimate conclusion."² A highly plausible argument seems to be that underlying both systems is the mystical Neoplatonic idea of the "One," conceived as a universal power in nature and in man's creativity. Instead of creation of the world and the soul, both systems offer the emanation as physically and logically necessitated; instead of revelation, both propose intuitive cognition of which the soul is capable by its own natural power, although ultimately this power has its source in the "One." The redemption of man through love of a personal God is replaced by the climbing of the mind upwards through a series of logical operations in Hegel and through the *amor dei intellectualis* in Spinoza. Hegel too had Spinoza's "audacity" to penetrate into the innermost thoughts of God and to make God and the world one entity.

Perhaps the best way to de-emphasize the differences between Spinoza's and Hegel's conceptions of substance would be to refute some arguments against such a de-emphasis. The arguments against looking at Hegel's Absolute Spirit as a legitimate heir of Spinoza's substance can be easily advanced. Some of them, as a matter of fact, have been advanced vigorously. I believe that these arguments can be classified into three principle categories. In the following I shall discuss these categories one by one, interpreting the concepts of both thinkers in a way, warranted by the respective texts, which highlights similarities.

The intention of this study is to open again a question,

² Nicolai Hartmann, *Die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus*, Vol. II, *Hegel*, (Berlin and Leipzig, 1929), p. 26. H. A. Wolfson states as Spinoza's purpose in all this writings "to bring to its logical conclusion the reasoning of philosophy throughout history in their effort to reduce the universe to a unified and uniform whole governed by universal and unchangeable laws." The pursuit of this purpose closely resembles Hegel's project. H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, (Cleveland and New York, 1965), Vol. I, p. 33.

always puzzling but in the Spinoza-Hegel context neglected and almost forgotten, namely, the question of the recurrent attempts to harmonize radical rationalism and speculative mysticism.

As identity-philosophies both systems run into the risk of being interpreted either as "atheism" or as "acosmism." I submit, therefore, that at least some monistic philosophies exemplify the closest converging of naturalism or radical rationalism, on the one hand, and of speculative mysticism, on the other hand.

II

First, it has been argued that, while Spinoza's method meant analysis, its paradigm being geometry as a basis of principle of order, Hegel's method was rather the dialectics of an infinite process of the self-positing Spirit, its self-differentiation, and its coming back to itself. Whether in the face of actual or historical facts Hegel's dialectics has done better than Spinoza's geometric method, understood as a principle of order, is here beside the point. Some scholars maintain that the dialectical method was even more helpless in the face of reality. However, it was widely accepted as evident that the self-unfolding Absolute Spirit of Hegel is totally different from Spinoza's always actual and fulfilled substance. The stress upon this difference is indeed the core of Hegel's criticism of Spinoza's substance whenever he opposes it. The essential being of all reality, the Spirit in the certainty of itself, is for Hegel always in motion and never fully actual. One sentence may illustrate the dynamics of the dialectic of the self, the Spirit, in its activities: "For knowing is itself the process and movement of those abstract moments; it is the universal self, the self of itself as well as of the object, and, being universal, is the unity of this process, a unity that returns into itself."³

³ *The Phenomenology of Mind*, translated by Baillie (New York and Evanston, 1967), p. 600. Hegel's fundamental assumption that true being can only be being which knows itself, i.e., the basis of the idealistic ontology of being as consciousness, was probably also shared by Spinoza who followed, in some respects,

Against this argument, however, one must emphasize that Spinoza's ultimate ground for identifying his substance with its attributes and the infinite intellect was his notion of substance as an activity and not as a static "thing in itself" perceived by the intellect from the outside. Spinoza's substance stands for fulness of acts, for the active essence of God. Substance realizes itself not in a relationship of an object to its perceiver but in modifications of its attributes. The manifoldness of the substance is the multiplicity of its activities, the diversification of the acts of the finite intellects in the lawful order of the whole universe as conceived by the infinite intellect.

Throughout his speculation Spinoza employs the concept of analysis with its possibility of a rigid deduction of all the results from a self-evident, intuitively defined principle and criterion—substance. Substance (or God) is for him not the object of proofs, as for Descartes, but the principle of all proofs. Substance is not a principle of order conceived according to human, finite, and relative criteria. It is the supreme infinite condition of all ideas which defines all things analytically. However, as the principle of order substance not only comprises all intelligible orders but also produces and forms them. "*Quod in se est et per se concipitur*" is a term for the universality of order and the totality of conditions within which anything can be conceived. But as such it is neither in back of nor beyond the attributes and the modes, but through and in them as their activating power. In this sense it is *natura naturans* and the infinite intellect.

True, the difference between the geometrical and dialectical method, mentioned above, is most significant and we shall return to it later. Some scholars maintain that Spinoza employed the geometrical method in order to avoid the need of arguing against opponents, whereas it seems obvious that Hegel's dialectics were intentionally designed to cope precisely with this need, namely, to elaborate his criticism of traditional philosophy. However, this difference does not pertain to the Cartesian-idealistic lines. See below the brief discussion of the idealistic possibility in Spinoza.

character of substance in both systems as both full actuality and dynamic *vis activa*. The ambiguities of this character in Spinoza's concept of substance is a problem in itself, since substance is also characterized as the Scholastic *ens realissimum*, the plenitude of all beings and perfections, the whole of reality which comprises all possible essences of being. However, the main characteristic of Spinoza's substance, according to our interpretation, is its all-comprising and all-conditioning ordering of the universe in a manner that all modes of beings are necessarily connected. The pantheistic system thus becomes rather an analytic set of propositions on necessary connections of all particulars within the whole universe.

Secondly, it has been argued that, whereas Spinoza's substance is the universe as thought and extension, Hegel's spirit is predominantly thought, the unfolding of the "notion" or the "idea." Hegel himself emphasized this difference on many occasions. Indeed, Spinoza's theory of the interrelation of mind and body was often interpreted as a materialistic conception of the meaning and function of ideas. The mind apparently was, for Spinoza, the idea of the body, i. e., the form or nature of the body of which it is a mind. In other words, the mind is nothing other than what the body is. Since body or matter, unlike matter in Plato or Aristotle, is for Spinoza not anything potential but always actual, every bodily change is a mental change. This is apparently the meaning of Spinoza's proposition that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things. Thus, the mind and the body are really one and the same individual which at one time is considered under the attribute of thought and at another under the attribute of extension.⁴ The body as it actually exists and nothing else is the object of the idea constituting the human mind. The natures of the mind and the body are one and the same.

⁴ *Ethics*, II, Prop. 21, proof and note, in accord with II, Prop. 7: "Strictly speaking, the idea of the mind, that is, the idea of an idea, is nothing but the distinctive quality (forma) of the idea in so far as it is conceived as a mode of thought without reference to the object. . . ."

However, this line of interpretation with its emphasis upon the strict identity of idea with form or nature of that of which it is an idea can be, and was often, opposed by an idealistic or rationalistic interpretation of Spinoza's position. Both the materialistic and the idealistic interpretations have apparently good grounds in a metaphysical system in which the mind is not conceived as an independent substance, located in the body in a mysterious way, and on the other hand a true idea is a self-evident or necessary act of thought which cannot be doubted. A self-evident proposition does not require any comparison with an external reality since it states the logically necessary connection between the properties according to the definition.

Thus, the idealistic tradition seems to be preserved in Spinoza. This is evident in his theory of truth. The Scholastic conformity of the thing and the intellect becomes in his system a relation of identity. Agreement in itself does not provide truth; it is rather the coherence with other ideas, the consistency of the idea with the idea of the whole which makes truth. The ideatum can never be known directly, it must be represented in the idea. However, no problem of transcendence arises, since the idea as essence alone provides all the knowledge necessary for the adequate cognition of the ideatum. Ideas are not dependent upon sensation, mind is not dependent upon body. External sensation does not precede internal ideation; they are simultaneous processes, since both are modifications of the same substance. The employment of the conceptional operation is sufficient for obtaining truth and no external criterion is needed for the evidence of truth. To have a true idea is to know that one has it and to be certain of its truth (*Est enim verum index sui et falsi*). Since all knowledge of every true idea is of the essence, of the immutable and eternal nature or form, a reality intrinsically intelligible, it must be within the grasp of mind. In a word, the truth of an idea consists in this essence or ideatum, not in any correspondence with, or conformity to, an external counterpart.

The idealistic tradition is most manifest in the superior

status of the attribute of thought over and above the attribute of extension. Let us recall that, according to Spinoza, the two orders, the order and connection of ideas and the order and connection of things, i. e., thought and extension, are the same; they comprise the varied identity of the substance. That which is connected is of different kinds and belongs to different attributes, but the manner of connection is the same, in the both known attributes, and manifests a primary unity.⁵ The whole is one, although our minds perceive it in two fundamental forms, as a world of extension and as a world of ideas. “Thus, whether we conceive nature under the attribute of extension, or under the attribute of thought, or under any other attribute, we shall find the same order, or one and the same chain of causes—that is, the same things following in either case.”⁶ One has to consider, however, that the order and connection of ideas, the domain of the attribute of thought, is intimately connected with the function of the mind or of the intellect. Since reality is attributed to an object, to an ideatum, not because of any external compulsion which it imposes upon the mind but rather through logical criteria and thinking acts, all being is mediated and posed by cognition. The function of the intellect to conceive every attribute of substance as constituting its essence, expresses the very reality of all being or substance.

Although Spinoza admits an infinite number of attributes which are not accessible to the human mind, opening thus the door to the “Pyrrhonian crisis,”⁷ that is, to the doubting whether human knowledge is not limited to a section of the whole universe, all the infinite attributes must necessarily be defined in terms of the intellect. The intellect, or the mind, therefore, is the fundamental premise of all reality in its unity and manifoldness. Thought, then, is more than one of the

⁵ *Ethics*, I, Prop. 15, proof.

⁶ *Ethics*, II, Prop. 7.

⁷ How the “Pyrrhonian crisis” troubled Descartes is well documented by R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (New York, 1960). Spinoza showed his deep, but generally well concealed, concern with skeptical arguments especially in his responses to the perceptive questioning of Tschirnhaus.

infinite attributes but rather the condition of substance and its modes, i. e., the very condition of both the unity of the universe and the multiplicity of its beings.

The materialistic-idealistic ambiguity in Spinoza conceals an inherent difficulty in his theory of knowledge which attempts to reconcile two different positions, namely, the view that the mind is a reflection of the body, the idea of the body insofar as it manifests the nature of the body and its modification and affections, with the view that the mind is an independent center of acts which encounters the world in a creative way. According to the materialistic view it is hard to realize how the mind is able to emancipate itself from the attachment to the affections of the body and grasp general contents of cognition, let alone the order and connection of all beings. The road from individual affections of the body which the mind is conscious of to the cognition of the whole of all beings seems to be shrouded in a mystery. Spinoza attempted to clarify this difficulty by his concept of the "idea of the idea," or "*cognitio reflexiva*" to which he attached the greatest methodological importance: "Whence it may be gathered that method is nothing else than reflective knowledge (*cognitio reflexiva*) or the idea of an idea."⁸

The concept of this idea of the idea has the function to

⁸ *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, 38, Opera, II, p. 15, whether this kind of knowledge can be properly be called method is controversial. Joachim argued that Spinoza's reflective knowledge or method is not in a position to remodel or rearrange the true ideas on which it reflects. If it does so, it tampers with the knowledge and perverts it into errors. The idea of idea seems, then, to be one and the same as the idea upon which it reflects. Moreover, Joachim argues that the idea *ideae* is not even an integral act of thought, a genuine or true idea. "And far from its being true that we first have knowledge and then reflect upon it, it is only in and by reflection that we for the first time 'know' in any genuine sense at all." Harold H. Joachim, *Spinoza's Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione: A Commentary* (Oxford, 1958), p. 111. However, it seems to me that the reflective knowledge has a broader function than simply to know the true ideas. Its most crucial endeavor, as can be proven by the whole context of the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding*, is to recognize the types of pseudo-cognizance, the fictitious ideas, the errors and doubts as confused thinking. When reflecting upon true ideas, methodological knowledge and substantive knowledge are indeed the same. In this case, the mind reflects upon knowledge which it already possesses truly, and self-reflection or method has nothing to change and

explain how ideas are not only expressions of certain bodily affections or states but are able to disentangle themselves from material realities and become objects of their own reflections in an endless series: "He who knows, knows that he knows," and so on. Through the endless series of self-knowledge thought is apparently constituted as self-conscious experience, and thus, indeed, elevated above all other attributes. The reason for this elevation is the following. Whereas, each modification of the attribute of extension does not signify more than it is, the nature of the idea as an idea of idea possesses an inherent qualitative infinity which cannot be found in any other attribute. The idea of idea, as self-reflection, is therefore not merely an equal correlate of a mode in other attributes; it occupies a special position of significance. For this reason it can be argued that the attribute of thought is not just one of the many attributes or one which can be substituted by other attributes. Thought, therefore, is always needed for constituting the being of substance itself and the infinite attributes which it comprises.⁹

On this second point then, on the spirituality of Hegel's "notion" or "idea," i. e., on his concept of the Absolute Spirit superseding Spinoza's substance, one may conclude that Hegel developed fully, in his own way, Spinoza's concept of self-reflecting knowledge.

There remains the difference in historicity or temporality, the third most common counter-argument. Spinoza conceives substance—it is argued—as existing before all determination, preceding all definite beings as immanent, in the sense of an a priori

can only derive joy from the accomplishment of the mind. Its central controlling and guiding function, however, starts when the mind employs fictitious ideas.

⁹ This point was emphasized long ago by E. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, II (Berlin, 1911), pp. 73-125, and recently by E. M. Carley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics, An Essay in Interpretation*, (Harvard, 1969). Carley states, "Here, I contend, we have a key to understanding those passages in which Spinoza speaks of things as following from God's nature. For things to follow from the necessity of the divine nature, for them to exist and be conceived through the one substance, is for them to be determined by and intelligible in terms of scientific laws," p. 49. See also p. 59, where the writer argues that the relation of logical consequence, ". . . is clearly closer to what Spinoza has in mind than the relation of temporal succession."

condition of all beings. Substance or God seems to be identified with the absolute universality of order. The totality of conditions which are the essence of substance guarantees the reality of nature as an unchanged objective order and not as a mere facticity of temporary sense-data. Beings are defined in relation to the order of things which is the same as the logical order. Every particular object which orders another object to move has its cause in God, and insofar as the order of objects forms a causal series, causation is identical with logical entailment and deduction.

However, we always have to keep in mind that according to this analytical view the object of adequate cognition is not a particular as such, but rather, the order of particulars. In their lawful interconnection and mutual interdependence the particular beings constitute an order which is simultaneously both universal and individual: universal, since a cosmic law is realized in all its members, and individual, since this law is instantiated by it but yet remains in this encounter with each individual member, the all-encompassing and super-ordinating principle. The material of our empirical cognition remains unchanged. The individual things (*res particulares*) are in no ways transformed into universal entities in bad scholastic manner. However, the same particular things and occurrences are now intuited in a new form of interconnection, and what was previously a mere aggregate of unrelated particularities, associated only contingently by sense perceptions and imagination, becomes now a system within which each member follows from others on intelligible and necessary grounds. The whole reality becomes thus rationally structured, and knowledge, through its own creative activity, is able to reconstruct it through a series of premises and conclusions. The substantiveness of the particulars, that is, their dependence upon the substance, is thus an everlasting quasi-mathematical dependent. In this sense, substance is the immanent cause of all particular things. Substance as such, therefore, cannot properly be conceived in Spinoza's system as an independent being outside individual objects and separated from them by its own essence

and existence. Nor, on the other hand, can it be conceived as merely the sum of particular things. The law of the interconnected order which rules all particulars is not the product or the result of their existence.

How different, actually, is this position of Spinoza's from Hegel's conception of the "notion" or Spirit as the unfolding God of history is a matter which cannot be decided easily, the pivotal issue being the interpretation of Hegel's "pantheism" or "panlogism" and their relation to time and historicity. It is clear, however, that Spinoza's concept of substance, or God, escapes the great difficulties of theodicy which trouble Hegel's historical God-Spirit conception. In Hegel, history as the reality of the Absolute Spirit must assume the reality of evil in God himself. God according to Hegel, endeavors to return to himself dialectically, via the negativity of the finite, as an infinite and intensive totality. Meanwhile, God is struggling with his own evil, thus being a tragic World-Spirit. His life and creativity is a majestic universal tragedy. In this sense, H. Glockner pointed out the "pan-tragism" of Hegel's system. Spinoza's conception of substance certainly avoided those tragic aspects.¹⁰

III

Although both thinkers ridiculed mystical short-cuts and any appeals to immediacy of intuition as poor substitutes for

¹⁰ From a religious point of view, Emil L. Fackenheim stated Hegel's dilemma as follows: "Either God is ultimately other than man, as is the religious testimony of the believer who stands in relation with Him. But then religion is true in form as well as in content, and philosophic thought must recognize both as well as itself remain finite reflection. Or philosophic thought can become an absolute, all-encompassing self-activity. But then it discloses the illusoriness of the gap between the Divine and the human, and hence that—in the decisive respect—religion is false in content no less than in form." Fackenheim assumes rightly that in the second case historical events and beliefs, like the sin of man and the death of God, are merely aspects of a divine play and not serious realities. Thus, the pan-tragic aspect may be eliminated by God's and the philosopher's enjoyment of the play. History will then become, as for Spinoza, a theatre of spectacular events which one has to observe and take into account "without laughter and tears."

patient efforts of philosophical conceptualizing, both nevertheless, attempted to render a cognitive account of some basic mystical insights, particularly of the mysteries of identity-in-distinction and of the interpenetration of the divine and the human. The self-caused, infinite, and unconditionally independent being is in both systems not a totally transcendent being. It is rather experienced, as in mysticism, in a mutuality of interdependence; the infinite and the finite, the divine and the human need each other for their own fulfillment. By abolishing the traditional "static" logic of assertions and negations, within the dialectical synthesis, Hegel tried to overcome the shortcomings of Spinoza's "acosmism," as he termed pantheism, and his "abstractedness of understanding." Evidently there are some differences between the two systems of thought conceived in an interval of approximately 150 years of intellectual endeavors of greatest intensity.

Ultimately, however, both Spinoza and Hegel assert substance as God but deny his transcendent personality. For both, substance (or God) coincides with its own speculative activity which is also its content and form, inception and result. For both philosophers, God is the absolute necessity of identity of being and thought. For both, philosophical reflection is capable of attaining the highest kind of knowledge, which was traditionally called beatific vision of God with all its delectations. Both thinkers, then, were "God intoxicated" and "acosmic," as Hegel described Spinoza, and as Richard Kroner described Hegel: a "Christian mystic seeking adequate speculative expression,"¹¹ or even in a more extreme formula: "Hegel is undoubtedly the greatest irrationalist ever known in the history of philosophy."¹²

¹¹ R. Kroner, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (London, 1965), p. 103. Some recent studies might confirm this assertion, see F. C. Copleston, "Hegel and the Rationalisation of Mysticism" in *Talk of God*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, Vol. II (New York, 1969), pp. 118-132. Compare, however, the different evaluation of Karl Loewith, *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, edited with a critical introduction by Arnold Levison (Evanston, 1966), particularly pp. 165, 202-203.

¹² R. Kroner, *Von Kant bis Hegel*, Vol. II, p. 271: "Hegel ist ohne Zweifel der grösste Irrationalist, den die Geschichte der Philosophie kennt."

The risk of pantheism to be accused either as “atheism” or as “acosmism,” that is, as naturalism and radical rationalism, or as mysticism, seems to be inherent in any philosophical monism. The divergent elements of the monistic system burst apart. The tension between them remains even in what is seemingly a justified synthesis. There persists always the possibility of emphasizing one element of the synthesis over and above the other. It seems, then, that every identity-philosophy suffers from the difficulties which are manifested by the antinomies of Spinoza’s conception of substance and of Hegel’s conception of “notion” or Absolute Spirit. Are they to be interpreted in a pan-logical or pan-mystical, pan-realistic, or pan-idealistic manner? The similarity between the systems discussed in this article might be confirmed in no minor degree by the similarity of the problems their interpreter’s pose.

The attempt of radical rationalism to grasp all realities deductively, as instances of the universal substance or of the Absolute Spirit, (if the pan-logical interpretation of Hegel is accepted), and the intellectual intuition of speculative mysticism are both most bizarre adventures in the impossible. Spinoza and Hegel, however, combined precisely radical rationalism and speculative mysticism in their persistent attempts to reconcile apparent irreconcilables in impressive systems of metaphysics. The enduring fascination of their systems is in the way they failed. Both thinkers attempted to define an intuitional claim that the world is capable of being known as a single, ordered and continuous totality, since its substance is rational, coherent and all-encompassing. Both systems insisted, each in its own manner, that every philosophical flight from the world is a mark of failure but neither could they stay with the world; they sought intensely to rise to eternity. Needless to say, their failure does not necessarily annihilate other possibilities of metaphysical transcendence.

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