



GOD AND FREEWILL IN SPINOZA

Spinoza'ya Göre Tanrı ve İrade Özgürlüğü

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GOD AND FREEWILL IN SPINOZA

Abstract

Spinoza is one of the most important philosophers. What makes him famous is his ideas about the God-Universe relation and freedom. Spinoza is a pantheist philosopher. According to Spinoza, everything consists of God, His attributes, and modes. God is the immanent cause of everything that exists and for this reason, there is a necessity in all existence. Every being can only reveal its own power. However, a man who is under the influence of emotions wants to realize things that are beyond his power. According to Spinoza, one can be free and happy only by grasping his own limited power and the essence of Nature.

Keywords: God, freewill, power, affection, passion.

Introduction*

Whether the belief in God and freedom can be defended together is one of the problems discussed in the history of thought. Thinkers of the theism know the difficulty of this problem but argue that it can still be overcome. These thinkers debate whether God's omniscience will result in the predetermination of human actions. In this regard, the claim that "knowledge is dependent on the known" is put forward.¹ The basic line of this movement is that with God's omniscience, freedom can be defended together. However, some contemporary theists such as Muhammad Iqbal and Richard Swinburne argue that if we accept "God's omniscience" as in the traditional understanding, we cannot reconcile this with human freedom. Mehmet Aydın restated Muhammed Iqbal's words that the future is the field of possibilities, not the field of facts. Otherwise, time would be nothing but an unveiling of what had happened. Therefore, God has limited himself to give people the possibility of an open future. Swinburne also advocates similar ideas.² Swinburne thinks that God's freedom must be limited to remove the apparent conflict between God's omniscience and man's freedom. In Swinburne's view, God's omniscience is not to know everything that will happen in

* This article is a revised English version of a study previously published in Turkish. See Yaşar Türkben, "Spinoza'ya Göre Tanrı ve İrade Özgürlüğü", *Fırat Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 15/1 (2010), 117-125.

¹ On this subject, see Hanifi Özcan, "Bilgi-Objekt İlişkisi Açısından İnsan Hürriyeti", *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 5 (1989), 263-286.

² Mehmet Aydın, *Din Felsefesi*, (İstanbul: Selçuk Yayınları, 1996), 167-168.

the future, but to be understood as knowledge of the possible. To him, the situation in question cannot be seen as a deficiency for God since it is God himself who allows this limitation.³

According to atheist thinkers, God and freedom cannot be considered together. N. Hartmann considers even God's grace as a threat to human freedom. For him, grace eliminates freedom.⁴ Nietzsche, Sartre and other existentialist atheist thinkers oppose the understanding of God, by arguing that "existence" cannot come after "essence". To them, acknowledging that God exists means that we pre-existed in someone's mind. In this case, the freedom of man's self-actualisation is just an empty dream. Therefore, according to them, there should be no "God".⁵ Nietzsche probably meant this when he said "God is dead".

Spinoza's Conception of God and Freedom

Spinoza does not find satisfactory the relationship that theists establish between God and freedom satisfactory. To him, theist thinkers complicated the problem instead of solving it. The reason for this is their imagination of the God-Universe relationship they have.⁶ For Spinoza, people have defined God's nature and ascribed some attributes to Him through their own nature. These claims of Spinoza were similarly expressed years later by Feuerbach, one of the contemporary materialists. For him, people imagined some things in the form of God that they want them to be realized. People's life needs arouse some desires that combined with their imagination created gods as ideal conception.⁷ Some other thinkers claim that people seek shelter in order to be secured from natural events such as floods, earthquakes, storms, and lightning strikes and that they have reached the concept of God in time.⁸

³ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 175. See also Cafer Sadık Yaran, *Tanrı İnançının Akliliği* (Samsun: Etüt Yayınları, 2000), 155.

⁴ Bedia Akarsu, *Çağdaş Felsefe* (İstanbul: İnkılâp Kitabevi, 1998), 185.

⁵ Aydın Topaloğlu, *Ateizm ve Eleştirisi* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2002), 152.

⁶ Spinoza, *Etika*, trans. Hilmi Ziya Ülken (Ankara: Dost Kitabevi, 2009), 70.

⁷ Akarsu, *Çağdaş Felsefe*, 111.

⁸ See Spinoza, *Etika*, 70.

Spinoza adopts a pantheistic understanding that removes the God-Universe duality.⁹ However, his understanding of pantheism is different from that of Plotinus, one of Plato's followers. Plotinus speaks of the One as the original source of being. One is above being. Being emanates from the One.¹⁰ In other words, the One does not come out of itself to produce the being, if it did, it would be two. But being emerges from the One. Spinoza does not accept the theory of emanation. For him, God is in the world and the world is in God. There is only one substance that is absolutely infinite, in other words, having all the attributes. Things that are called created are not actually created. These are modes of substance or states of being.¹¹ In Spinoza's theory, unlike Plotinus, there is no hierarchy between the attributes of God, that is, of Substance, because the Substance has all the attributes in equal measure. This requires the absence of hierarchy between the attributes.

To Spinoza, there is only one substance, and that is God. Spinoza says, "*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.*"¹² The Substance is eternal. However, God is not a person unlike the conception of God in monotheistic religions. If that were the case, he would be a certain being. In Spinoza's view, it is impossible to talk about the intelligence and will of God as the religions in question claim.¹³ When these are mentioned we are talking about God as an individual and a person. What Spinoza means by God is the cause of the universe, but he uses "cause" in a different sense from that used by previous thinkers. As Weber points out,

⁹ "Pantheism", which is defined in various ways, removes the God-Universe duality, states that God contains everything, even He is everything, so neither nature nor man can be seen as independent beings, but only the expansions of divine beings in different styles. It is a religious and philosophical doctrine that asserts (Aydın, *Din Felsefesi*, 179; see also Hüsameddin Erdem for pantheism, *Bir Tanrı-Âlem Münasebeti Olarak Panteizm ve Vahdet-i Vucud* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1990).

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza Üzerine Onbir Ders*, trans. Ulus Baker (İstanbul: Kabcacı, 2006), 92.

¹¹ Deleuze, *Spinoza Üzerine Onbir Ders*, 94.

¹² Spinoza, *Etika*, 31.

¹³ Spinoza, *Etika*, 52; For Spinoza's views on monotheistic religions, see Spinoza, *Tanrı Bilimsel Politik İnceleme*, trans. Betül Ertuğrul, (İstanbul: Biblos, 2008).

his idea of cause is associated with the idea of substance and his idea of effect with the idea of accident and attitude. According to him, just as an apple is a cause of red colour and milk is a cause of white, sweetness and liquid, God is the cause of the universe.¹⁴

For Spinoza, Substance, that is, God, has infinite attributes. But in general, two of these are known by people. These are thought and extension. Spinoza states this as thought is an attribute of God or God is a thinking thing and extension is an attribute of God.¹⁵ In this case, God reveals Himself in two ways. And these two attributes have their own structure. Since their functions and connections are different it is not correct to reduce the attributes to each other. “Thought” and “extension”, which were substances for Descartes, are now at the level of attributes in Spinoza.

As Gökberk states, Spinoza’s view of God as the only substance and the “cause” in all phenomena eliminated the difference between “God” and “Universe”. So that God is in the universe, He is the universe itself and the cause of its existence. The bearer of matter and spirit is at the same time they themselves.¹⁶

Spinoza summarizes the attributes of God as follows: He necessarily exists. He is unique, He exists by the necessity of His nature and He is effective. He is the free cause of everything. Everything is in God and depends on him. Therefore, anything couldn’t exist and be conceived without Him. As a result, he has predetermined all things, not by the freedom of will or absolute good pleasure, but by His fundamental nature, in other words infinite power.¹⁷ When Spinoza speaks of God’s freedom, he means His self-determination.

As it can be seen, although Spinoza uses the concepts of his time such as God, universe, substance, accident and power etc. he gives

¹⁴ Alfred Weber, *Felsefe Tarihi*, trans. Vehbi Eralp, (İstanbul: Sosyal Yayınlar, 1991), 230; See also for Spinoza’s views on God M. Kazım Arıcan, *Spinoza’nın Tanrı Anlayışı* (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2004).

¹⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics and on the Improvement of the Understanding* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1954), 80-81.

¹⁶ Macit Gökberk, *Felsefe Tarihi* (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 2007), 263.

¹⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 72.

new meanings to them. In Spinoza's view, there is nothing contingent in nature, but everything that occurs in one way or another and brings about an effect is driven by the necessity of divine nature.¹⁸ For him, existence is not created in any way or order other than the way and order in which they were created by God.¹⁹ Whatever we conceive of in His power exists necessarily.²⁰ His understanding of freedom is better understood from the following statements by Spinoza:

A thing is called necessary either in reference to its essence or its cause. For the existence of a thing necessarily follows either from the essence and definition of the thing itself or from a given efficient cause. In the same way, a thing is said to be impossible either because the essence of the thing itself or its definition involves a contradiction, or because no external cause exists determinate to the production of such a thing.²¹

Spinoza views that people call certain things unnecessary because of their lack of knowledge. According to him, things were created by God competently. They, therefore, necessarily arise from nature, which is the highest perfection.

It is clearly understood that everything in nature occurs by necessity. So, what is the human condition? Can people act freely? According to Spinoza, man is not free, but it is possible to liberate him. What does it mean to be free once it has been said that man is not free?

As stated by Deleuze, Spinoza thinks that nothing is belonging to human nature. In other words, he does not define man as a "rational animal" as Aristotle did. Spinoza is a philosopher who considers everything in terms of becoming. According to him, no one was born with freedom and rationality. It is entirely up to the arbitrariness of the encounters, that is, how the dissolutions are. Writers who think that we are free by nature are those who have a certain idea of nature. In a sense, they think of themselves as an independent substance. It is diffi-

¹⁸ Spinoza, *Etika*, 60.

¹⁹ Spinoza, *Etika*, 64.

²⁰ Spinoza, *Etika*, 67; For pantheism's conception of freedom, see Necati Öner, *İnsan Hürriyeti* (Ankara: Vadi Yayınları, 1995), 40.

²¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 68.

cult to claim that we are free if we see ourselves not as a substance but as a collection of relations.²²

It would be appropriate to mention Spinoza's concept of *conatus* here. According to him, every being seeks to realize itself and protect itself. We can think of animals becoming aggressive to protect their young, and of people changing places to find food in this sense. For Spinoza, the power of self-preservation is limited. The Man is surrounded by external forces. Often these external causes prevail over him. Man cannot get rid of them, because its existence already consists of the sum of these relations. Before Spinoza, Descartes had spoken of "freeing from passions that do not depend on us".²³ Likewise, after himself, Kant tries to overcome the causality of the physical world by leaping over the *noumena*. From Spinoza's point of view, neither of those views reflects the truth. For him, whether we call it Nature or God, we are determined by the causality given by it. It is nothing but a delusion that man can realize himself independently of external causes. We necessarily have to accept the order of nature in which we live. Spinoza states: "Hence it follows that a man is necessarily always subject to passions and that he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, accommodating himself to it as far as the nature of things requires."²⁴

For Spinoza, there is an infinite number of relations; the same relation will not occur twice. The whole of nature is the sum of all possible relations, including human actions. Therefore, according to him, all relations are necessary and consist of an order that creates nature step by step. Spinoza sees nature as an individual. This nature is an individual that includes all individuals. There is a certain order in the unification of relations. The necessity in nature means the absence of any unenforced relation.²⁵

As regards Spinoza, freedom is possible only when one knows one's own *potentia* and relations. He does not use the concept of "potential"

²² Deleuze, *Spinoza Üzerine Onbir Ders*, 79.

²³ See Descartes, *Ruhun İhtirasları*, trans. Mehmet Karahasan, (Ankara: MEB Yayınları, 1997), 112.

²⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 194.

²⁵ Spinoza, *Etika*, 204.

in the sense of “potential power” as the Peripatetic tradition uses. Spinoza uses this concept in the sense of “power”. To him, every being has power. A sea, a river, and a bird have their own powers. Undoubtedly, a human being also has power. So that he must expose this power. However, Spinoza disregards the potential power. A human being either realizes himself or does not. As mentioned above, with the concept of *conatus* Spinoza argues that every being will realize itself instinctively. However, for a human being to reveal himself, namely to use his power he must know his own limits very well. Because the greatest obstacle in front of a human being to realize himself is to be unknowable where his borders do begin and end. Therefore, the way of freedom for a human being passes through knowledge.

In Spinoza’s view, there are three kinds of knowledge. The level of knowledge we have also determines our freedom. The first type of knowledge is the knowledge of inadequate (not clear and distinct) ideas. In other words, emotions (*affectus*) that arise from inadequate ideas are passions. Spinoza claims that people are condemned to these ideas from their birth. He expresses that by saying: “It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should suffer no changes but those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause.”²⁶

What is it that condemns us to this *affectus*? Deleuze regards that, Spinoza attributes this to the fact that we have extended parts. For the extended parts are external to each other and are infinite, that is, they are constantly determined from the outside. Parts external to each other constantly affect each other. In addition, the communities they belong to are constantly changing. This is the order of inappropriate ideas, blurred perceptions, and passive emotions.²⁷ At this level, if a part we encounter matches the part of us to which we relate to we call it good, if not, we call it bad. Take, for example, a case of hunger. As we have mentioned before, every being will want to sustain

²⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 193.

²⁷ Deleuze, *Spinoza Üzerine Onbir Ders*, 212.



its existence (*conatus*). A creature with a certain *potentia* will want to eat in order to maintain its existence. To relieve this need, he will take something he finds and eat it. If what he eats is suitable for his body, i.e if it does not disturb the living thing at that moment, he will describe the relationship between the food and his own stomach as good. However, this idea is a vague one that is far from clear-cut. Perhaps the food in question will make him sick in the long run. Spinoza describes the human being at this level of knowledge as slavery. He says, “The impotence of man to govern or restrain the emotions I call “bondage”; for a man who is under their control is not his own master.”²⁸

The second kind of knowledge is to know the relations that make us up outside of ourselves. Such ideas arise out of rational knowledge. Spinoza expresses this type of knowledge as follows:

An emotion which is a passion is a confused idea (by the general definition of the emotions). If therefore, we form a clear and distinct idea of this emotion, the idea will not be distinguished except by reason from this emotion, in so far as the emotion is related to the mind alone, and therefore the emotion will cease to be a passion.²⁹

He argues that the more we know about an *affect/affectio*, the less the affection will affect us. One can obtain intuitive knowledge of the whole existence from vague ideas to clear and distinct knowledge. Thus, he begins to understand his place in the universe as a thinking being.³⁰ Therefore, according to Spinoza, it is necessary to try to use *potentia*, that is, to use our power, as much as possible, and to have a clear and distinct knowledge of relations as much as possible. We will be freed from the delusion of attributing to external causes every emotion (*affectus*) that we recognize clearly and distinctly. From now on, we will have the opportunity to connect this feeling to a correct thought. Thus, not only will love and hatred for the external object affecting us from the outside be extinguished,

²⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 187.

²⁹ Spinoza, *Etika*, 267.

³⁰ Ahmet Cevizci, *Etîğe Giriş* (İstanbul: Paradigma, 2002), 116.

but also the passions arising from this feeling will not be excessive.³¹ In this way, the person will get rid of being passive, and become active. People are constantly subject to passions. It is inevitable. Spinoza states that we must manage this process that we cannot avoid. We must know our passions in order to prevent them from dominating us and to ensure that they take place as an action in which our mind dominates them. For Spinoza, a desire which springs from reason can never be in excess.³²

There is also a third type of knowledge. This type of knowledge is the knowledge that goes beyond understanding the relationship between relations. This kind is the knowledge of essences. It goes beyond relations. For it reaches the essence upon which these relations depend.³³ The third kind is, in a sense, one's intuitive understanding of existence. The human being, who is buried in himself at the first step of knowledge, becomes aware of the relations he is involved in at the second step, and at the third type, he rationally senses the lawfulness of existence as a whole.

Spinoza, as mentioned above, claims that every being has a *potentia*. Here's what he claims that those who have access to the third type of knowledge will understand: "There is no individual thing in Nature which is not surpassed in strength and power by some other thing."³⁴ Whoever understands this will realize that the supreme power is God or Nature. According to him, the highest knowledge that the mind can reach is the knowledge of God. God is the only common substance "underneath" everything conceivable, and without him nothing can be thought of.³⁵ To him, with the third type of knowledge, we enjoy all that we know. This idea of pleasure is also due to our understanding of the Nature or divine order we have. Thus, Spinoza says that true freedom will be achieved with the third

³¹ Moris Fransez, *Spinoza'nın Tao'su* (İstanbul: Kabalcı Yayınevi, 2004), 285.

³² Spinoza, *Ethics*, 233.

³³ Deleuze, *Spinoza Üzerine Onbir Ders*, 217.

³⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 191.

³⁵ Fransez, *Spinoza'nın Tao'su*, 253.

kind of knowledge. To him, mental love for God necessarily occurs in the third form of knowledge. It is understood that God is eternal, and this brings His love.³⁶ The love of God that one feels brings about him to be consent with all that's going on. However, the point that should not be ignored is that Spinoza does not mean to be a spectator to what is going on without doing anything, but to know one's own *potentia* and realize it, and to accept what is beyond one's own power by consenting. Thus, according to him, the mind will not be saddened by what happens to us because of things beyond our power, and it will understand this. In other words, a person's freedom is not absolute, his freedom is limited by his power. In fact, according to Spinoza, everything in existence is like this. So, our freedom is relative.

Conclusion

Spinoza puts forward that an incorrect idea of the God-Universe relationship lies at the root of the discussions on God and freedom. He advocates a pantheistic understanding of God. However, Spinoza rejects the theory of emanation, which is defended by some pantheist thinkers. According to him, the hierarchical understanding of existence is not correct. God or Nature is the whole of being in relation to each other, it is itself. God is the unique substance. All that exists are His attributes.

Spinoza's understanding of freedom is highly related to his understanding of God or Nature. For Spinoza, people have inadequate ideas because they have certain feelings and affections. Unless one gets rid of these inadequate ideas and intuitively grasps the relationships between beings and the divine order that exists in all beings, he cannot attain freedom. A free man lives according to the orders of reason. One can achieve his freedom by obeying reason. However, this freedom seems to consist of knowing one's own limits.

³⁶ Spinoza, *Etika*, 285.

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