

**COMPATIBILITY OF FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM IN SPINOZA'S  
ETHICS**

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**Abstract**

*This study is the examination of Spinoza's notion of the attribute of power and authority from the abnatio vest on the supernatural being(God). Spinoza expressed this position in several of his works, especially in his ethics where he contends that man is capable of knowing everything but himself. The fundamental aim of Spinoza's Ethics is to naturalize and rationalize human life in opposition to the philosophical tradition that looks at the realm of "the emotions and actions of men" as something extra-natura or anti-natura alien or opposite to a rational understanding. using critical and analytic methods the study seeks to show that Spinoza's commitment to his ethics is the search for mankind's reason as the basis of morality. The paper discovers, that his ethics is an attempt to give reason to human facts that are usually not susceptible to a rational explanation, and are condemned to pure irrationality. And that the thought that man can explain everything, know everything and dominate everything, but himself is faulty. The study concludes by asserting that Spinoza's moral philosophy will obviate human rights and individual responsibility. And as a result, the idea of moral responsibility becomes untenable.*

**Keywords:** Spinoza, Freedom, Determinism, Moral Responsibility, Ethics

## **Introduction**

The activities of man in society today are believed to occur according to the dictates of nature. That is to say that everything happens based on the pre-arranged planner of the maker. In our society today, when someone dies, we believed that his death has already been written by his maker. So, anything that occurs is based on the dictates of nature or God. This singular notion is believed to have been influenced by Spinoza's theory of freedom and determinism. In Spinoza's freedom and determinism, man has no power of his own to checkmate his activities on earth rather than operating on the scientific operational key of nature or God. This singular stand identifies Spinoza as a monistic theorist. Spinoza begins with monism, establishes that God and Nature are identical, and then concludes from this that actions ostensibly chosen freely are determined by external causes.

The fundamental aim of Spinoza's Ethics is to naturalize and rationalize human life in opposition to the philosophical tradition that looks at the realm of "the emotions and actions of men" as something extra-natura or anti-natura alien or opposite to a rational understanding. Spinoza's commitment is essential for his search for mankind's reason. His ethics is an attempt to give reason to the human facts that usually are not susceptible to a rational explanation, and are condemned to pure irrationality. It is observable in Spinoza's thought that man can explain everything, know everything and dominate everything, but himself. His actions, the essential of his being, were marginalized, and were put outside of his reach. Thus the specifically human would be a universe determined by a power external to man and alienated from his understanding.

In the history of philosophy, Spinoza is well known as a radical determinist. According to that determinism, everything that exists and acts does it in only one possible way determined from eternity. This doctrine provoked severe criticism addressed to Spinoza because it jeopardized the traditional understanding of freedom as a capability of choice. The traditional understanding states that man has the capacity for decisions. But this theory seems to cripple and limits the 'manness of man'.

However, in this work, we shall be making a critical analysis of Spinoza's theory of freedom and determinism. The paper apart from the introduction is generally divided into three sections, the first section examines conceptual issues, the second looks at Spinoza's Notion of freedom, and section three analysis the activities of man vis-à-vis his freedom. And we shall critique this position and draw a conclusion

### **Conceptual Issues: Freedom and Determinism**

A free action is an action which a man chooses to perform and which he could also choose not to perform. According to Anyam in his book 'Issues in Moral Philosophy', freedom enables us to do what we want, but it does not tell us what we want (Anyam 64). If a man decides to perform an action when he could also alternatively decide not to perform it, his action is also free. This means that he was under compulsion to perform that action since he could have done otherwise if he had chosen to do so. He is therefore responsible for the action, whether it's good or bad. Moral judgment however carries with them a particular implication (Ozumba 60).

In existentialist ethics, the freedom of man and the responsibility that goes with his freedom is paramount. Ozuma stressed that if a man is free, it means that he has an alternative course of action from which he can choose (60). For this reason, man is morally responsible for his actions and choices. Satre tells us that it is not possible for a free being to avoid making choices. Man is free to choose and not to choose what he wants, but he is not free not to choose because a refusal to choose is already a choice made (Satre 481). To refuse to choose is one way of choosing; to refuse to make a decision is already a decision made. "Freedom is the freedom of choice but not the freedom of not choosing. Not to choose is in the fact, to choose not to choose" (483). Satre goes on to say that man is not free not to be free. He cannot avoid being free for he is condemned to be free and whatever he decides to do is an exercise of his freedom.

However, man's freedom is sometimes seen as an illusion, all human actions seem to be determined. Determinism is the theory that everything that happens in the universe is determined according to the law of nature (Uduigwomen 110). Every human action they say is an effect of a cause and is determined by the cause. Moreso, human actions can be explained in terms of cause and effect without any recourse to freedom. So, the view that man is not free, that his actions are determined by certain causes is known as determinism (Omeregbe 38).

### **Spinoza's Notion of Freedom**

The sole meaning of freedom in Spinoza's ethics should depict individual existence, a thing never to have its existence on another. "That a thing is said to be free (*liber*) which exists solely from the necessity of its own nature and is determined to action by itself alone. A thing is said to be necessary [*necessarius*] or rather, constrained [*coactus*], if it is determined by another thing to exist and to act in a definite and determinate way (Kinsner, 232). Spinoza in both definitions says that a thing is "determined" (*determinatur*) to exist

and to act, which means that determination or determinedness is not a property by which a constrained thing differs from the free one. Spinoza does reject some meanings of the term freedom. He repudiates the idea of "free choice." By "free choice" I mean the possibility that a man could have chosen to act other than he did" (Spinoza 1). He further dismisses any account of "will" or "desire" that would support a credible account of free choice.

According to Spinoza, nature admits of no contingency, caprice, or indeterminateness. Man's very idea of free choice is the illusory result of inadequate knowledge. Men believe themselves to be free, he writes, "simply because they are conscious of their actions and unconscious of the causes whereby those actions are determined" (1). Man is limited by the confused perception that characterizes inadequate knowledge and, hence, delusively ascribes the adjective "free" to an alleged phenomenon of "choice." According to Spinoza, humans fail to recognize that acts of choice are caused and subsequently imagine themselves free since they are conscious of their volitions and desires, but they never even dream, in their ignorance, of the causes which have disposed them to wish and desire.

Spinoza disagrees with those who assert that "human actions depend on the will" since this is a mere phrase without any idea to correspond thereto. Much like the intellect, the will is mere "a particular mode of thinking. Whether the will is conceived as finite or infinite, it should require a cause by which it should be conditioned to exist and act. Moreover, the will is related to God because "it must be conditioned by God (Prop. xxix] to exist and act in a particular manner. Explaining human action in terms of the will illustrates our ignorance; sufficient accounts of human action derive only from our having a clear and adequate idea of what causes behaviour.

Analogously, Spinoza rejected the notion of "decision" as representing an adequate explanation of free choice. Clearly, "a mental decision and a bodily appetite, or determined state, are simultaneous, or rather, are the same thing. A decision is not free (i.e., a decision cannot be the cause of itself). External causes, then, constrain decisions as well. Spinoza flatly affirms that "everything proceeds from a sort of necessity, and with the utmost perfection" Nothing in the universe is contingent, but all things are conditioned to exist and operate in a particular manner by the necessity of divine nature (Spinoza 25).

Men are not free in the fictitious sense that they imagine; ignorance and inadequate knowledge is the source of this false meaning of freedom that Spinoza rejects. Nothing in nature is indeterminate or uncaused, as Spinoza remarked in a letter to Boxel: "the world (is) a necessary effect of divine nature," thus he utterly denies that the world has been made by chance" (Epistle Lviii). Concerning necessity and human choice, Stuart Hampshire aptly concludes that,

Any statement of the kind "an alternative action was possible" or "he could have done otherwise," is necessarily the sign of the incompleteness of our scientific knowledge or an expression of our present state of ignorance . . .”(Hampshire 113).

In conclusion, then, human choices are neither uncaused nor arbitrary; that choices are capricious is, for Spinoza, chimerical (an idea born out of ignorance). Necessity applies to "will" and "decision." Will is not a free cause, only a necessary or constrained cause. Will is externally caused and in no way can it adequately support the idea of "free choice"; the will is determined to exist and act only by God. Thus, Spinoza opposes any conception of "freedom" as tantamount to being uncaused or indeterminate. Rather, causes determine the will and, hence, human behaviour can be considered neither capricious nor accidental. Correspondingly, since "decision" is simultaneous with a determined state, it is not a free cause. So decision also fails to sufficiently account for the idea of "free choice." In conclusion, then, Spinoza allows for no "free choice"; the scope of necessity is universal.

Necessity precludes the possibility of "free choice," whether conceived under the rubric of "will" or "decision." "Things could not have been brought into being by God in any manner or in an order different from that which has obtained. Hence, man could not have acted other than he did; no choice and action were even possible:

Each so-called "act of choice" in the matter is in reality a necessarily determined assertion or denial... The "volitio," or "mentis decretum," is thus like any ideal or extended event determined and necessary (Joachim 197).

God, Spinoza's all-inclusive substance (Deus sive Natura), comprises the universe, and each "mental" or "physical" event of experience follows necessarily from this one substance.

### **Man as Active and Free**

Those acts which follow from adequate causes are neither compelled nor constrained from without. When a man is the adequate causal agent of his actions, then he is free. Individuals are "active" according to Spinoza when they are the authors (causes) of their actions. To the extent that an individual is active, the adequate cause of his actions, that individual is free. Here we see that freedom, activity, and causal agency are compatible terms.

How can we free ourselves from the constraint of passion and bondage? The determination that characterizes reason or adequate knowledge can release us from the yoke of passion. More narrowly, we can modify and transform confused ideas and passions (like a particular emotion) through self-conscious reflection. Spinoza states that "an emotion, which is a passion, ceases to be a passion, as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea thereof" (197). Now any emotion that Spinoza calls a passion is also a confusing idea. When we form a clear and distinct idea of a given emotion . . . the emotion will cease (in effect) to be a passion. Accordingly, we attain freedom by forming clear and distinct ideas (adequate knowledge) about passions. Note that these clear and distinct ideas are causes, instances of cognitive or mental determination. Generally, then, we "determine solely by the knowledge of the mind, the remedies against" confused ideas or emotions (197).

### **Exposing the Idea of Freedom**

We recall that, for Spinoza, God alone is the sole free cause. Moreover, man's conatus derives from the "eternal necessity of God's nature"; in short, man's conatus is God's conatus. Any human act that follows from conatus is not constrained or compelled from without. Rather, it is the product of adequate causality. To the degree that man's acts derive from conatus, he can be said to be "free."

Man's freedom, in marked contrast to God's, is not perfect (complete). Man's freedom is limited. Man is free when he is seen in his proper relation to God. Human freedom cannot exist when a man is conceived as separate from God and the infinity of the whole modal system. Human freedom is an extension a manifestation of the power of God. In this context, man's freedom is neither absolute nor constant. Rather, an individual's being active or free varies in degree. Striving to maintain one's self (conatus) can be hindered or limited by opposing the conatus of other individuals. In other words, individual things interact and each thing's conatus resists that of another in the process of interaction. However, the opposing conatus of each particular thing does not constitute external constraint per se, as seen in proper relation to God.

In what sense does Spinoza employ the term "free"? Spinoza rejects the idea of "free" as meaning uncaused or indeterminate. The matter of a "free" act, whether caused or uncaused, is irrelevant. "Freedom" is consistently employed by him within the context of a thorough-going determinism. Human liberty lies in the fact that he is an entity that wills his act and that he is not constrained by any external or internal factors to act in any given way (Ome 106). A free act is an action that freely flows from the individual being consistent with his desire and inclination.

Freedom and determinism are comparable terms, but freedom contrasts with bondage. The free agent acts in a determinate manner, but without being constrained or compelled. All acts, both those which are free and those which are bound, are caused and determined. But the crucial difference lies in the type of determination proper to each. Free actions represent adequate types of determination; bound acts represent passive instances of determination. If freedom is seen as a determined act that is devoid of compulsion or external constraint, then freedom and determinism are indeed compatible terms. Acts can thus be free, yet determined. But freedom as Spinoza intended the term, is not compatible with bondage, passivity, or compulsion.

### **Criticisms**

What type of determinism characterizes Spinoza's use of freedom? A free person is self-determining in that he actively causes his behaviour by forming adequate knowledge of passions. Adequate knowledge, and having clear and distinct ideas represent a self-directing, rational determination that frees one from bondage or servitude. In his view of freedom, Spinoza also denies that an individual could have chosen to act in any way other than he did." This denial creates some difficulties for Spinoza's moral theory.

Spinoza's unrelenting determinism obviates a normative ethic. A person's behaviour derives from two types of determination: either behaviour is self-caused through adequate knowledge or behaviour is externally caused (constrained) by passion. As William Frankena points out, a central goal of normative ethics "is to guide us in our capacity as agents trying to decide what we should do in this case and in that"(Spinoza's metaphysical determinism, however, eliminates the prescribing of moral "shoulds" or "oughts," since, whether the behavior is self-caused or externally caused, the person could not have acted other than he did. Self-causation and external causation are not determinants of choice.

The matter does not end here though. What type of moral theory are we left with, if a moral agent can perform only that action that he ipso facto performed? A prescriptive ethic, wherein moral agents are exhorted to realize ethical ideals, seems irreconcilable with Spinoza's determinism. At best, then, Spinoza is left with a descriptive ethic, wherein we observe, analyze, and describe the moral conduct of agents. Hence Spinoza's determinism truncates a traditionally important objective of moral theory. In a letter to Spinoza (Epistle LXXVII), Oldenburg warns Spinoza about this very implication of "universal necessity": (God's) inflexible fate, and . . . irresistible power does not compel us to act in a given manner, nor can we possibly act otherwise.



Consider another problem that emerges from Spinoza's determinism. The idea of moral responsibility becomes rather untenable if antecedent causes necessarily determine subsequent events. Again, Oldenburg brought this problem to Spinoza's attention: the doctrine of fatalistic necessity renders "(moral) rewards and punishments . . . ineffectual... For if we men are, in all of our actions, moral as well as natural, under the power of God, like clay in the hands of the potter, with what face can any of us be accused of doing this or that, seeing that it was impossible to do otherwise"(Oldenburg Epistle LXXVII). Oldenburg concludes his argument by saying that "Everyone may plead, 'Thy power cannot be escaped from God; therefore, since I could not act otherwise, I may justly be excused'. Spinozistic determinism precludes moral blame and praise.

Finally, Spinoza's problem intensifies when he speaks of ideals that moral agents ought to seek: . . . Every man should love himself, should see that which is useful to him . . . and should, each for himself endeavour as far as he can to preserve his being. Spinoza's advocacy of metaphysical determinism conflicts with his prescribing moral shoulds; consider the problematic alternatives this poses:

1. Spinoza cannot both advocate metaphysical determinism and prescribe moral shoulds.
2. Spinoza prescribes moral shoulds.
3. Thus Spinoza cannot advocate metaphysical determinism.

Spinoza cannot have it both ways. But he does advocate metaphysical determinism, and he prescribes moral shoulds. Accordingly, Spinoza's denying that an individual could have chosen to act other than he acted, renders his moral theory problematic.

## **Conclusion**

The study of Spinoza's freedom and determinism exposes the weakness of man to take the absolute decision of his actions. It states that man's freedom is dependent on the decision of nature or God.

Spinoza spoke of many free man's advantages, but he spoke of "free" man as a "goal" that all should approach as much as possible to be more active and perfect. It is supposed that man, in achieving that goal, can set apart for this goal no matter how much it is difficult to redirect one's own life. To put it in another way, a man to achieve that goal has to set himself apart for true good in his life many times because his infantile inertia does not allow him to resolve this dilemma once and for all. Man begins his life odyssey by being completely passive, that is, by being completely exposed to external things and depending on them. This manner of actualization of proper conatus is later, by inertia, additionally confirmed and rooted if a man by following apparent goods develops habits



of exposing and connecting himself to unstable and limited external goods. But Spinoza teaches us that this way of self-preservation and increasing power isn't good and that man should choose another way. In another word, he calls man to set apart for true goods and get closer to the model of human nature. He practically sends a message: You should set yourself apart for true good because it is truly useful for you, and you can do it.

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