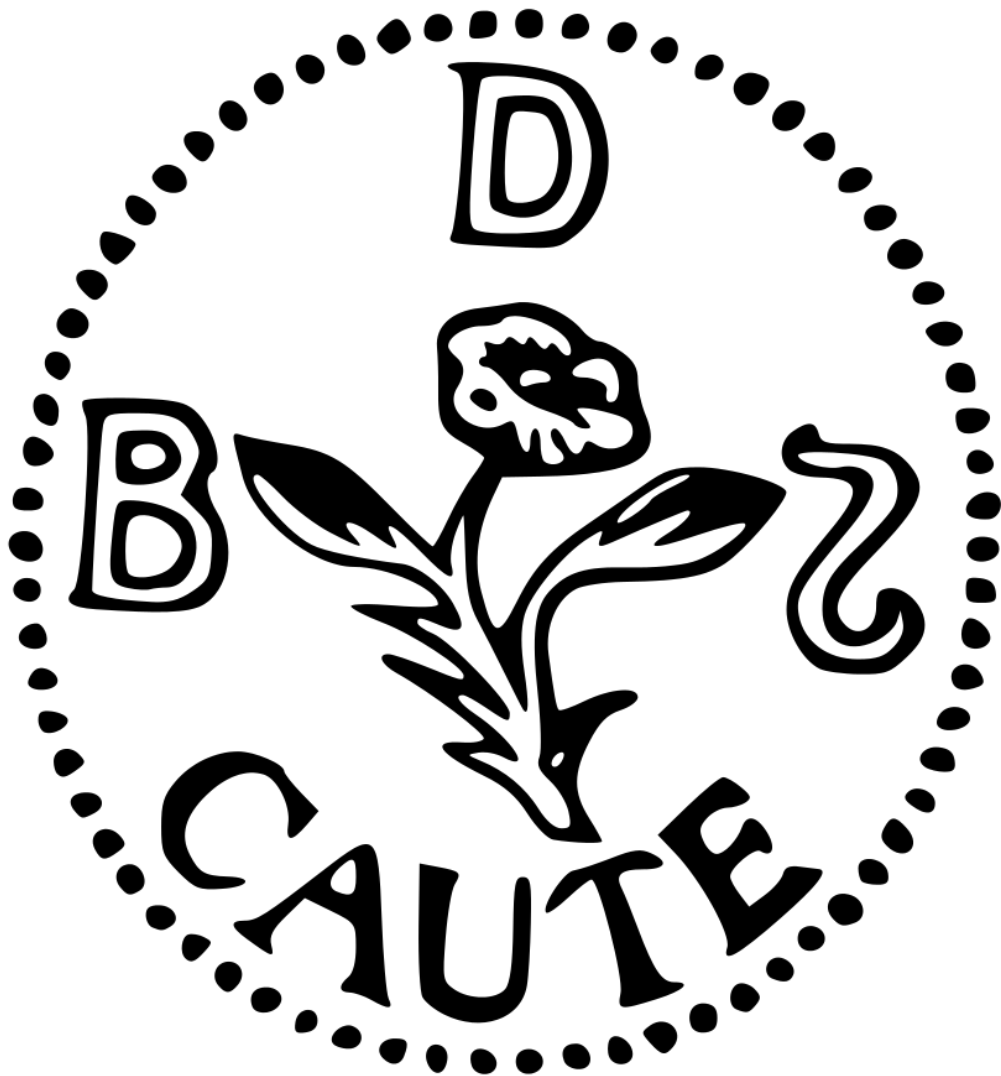


Spinoza's Philosophy & Nihilism

God, Truth, and Freedom in an Uncaring Universe



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“Spinoza has been claimed as the ancestor, founder, or originator of many things, both good and evil, among them the ruin of all religions, biblical criticism, liberalism, Jewish secularism, Zionism, the enlightenment, secularization, neurobiology, evolutionary theory, toleration, libertarianism, and modernity as such. Taken together these claims are too good to be true, and yet one can usually see why people have interpreted Spinoza’s heritage along these lines.”

Piet Steenbakkens, *Spinoza Research: To Be Continued* (2016). Pg. 19.

While writing my thesis I could not help but recall these words spoken by professor Steenbakkens in his farewell address, almost anticipating a project such as my own. The first Spinoza lecture I received was in 2009 (or 2010) and given by professor Steenbakkens when I was yet to become a student of philosophy. It seems only fitting that his words are at the beginning of the end of my philosophical path that as a circle begins and ends with Spinoza.

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Introduction

Nihilist: *We believe in nothing Lebowski. Nothing.*

The Big Lebowski (1998).

When Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (henceforth: *TTP*) was first anonymously published in 1670 it was met with strong opposition by the religious intelligentsia of the United Republic, with one of its most disturbed critics denouncing it as being a "book forged in hell"¹. These are harsh words, but Spinoza was not unaccustomed to these kinds of treatment; he was already an exile amongst exiles by having been "banned, cut off, cursed and anathematized" from the Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam fourteen years before². The perceived crime that finalized his banishment was his refusal to distance himself from his philosophy, though still in its infancy, which was regarded by the elders of his faith to be heretical and evil. From these facts it is clear that in his life Spinoza unleashed a deeply disturbing philosophy that shook the Republic and Jewish community at their very core. But were these condemnations of malicious intentions, attributed to his work and character, warranted?

The main topic of this thesis is to investigate these claims and establish whether Spinoza's philosophy contains nihilistic tendencies and sentiments, meant to alienate man from metaphysical perfection³, and

¹ Nadler (2011), Preface. All biographical details of Spinoza's life are taken from Steven Nadler's *Spinoza, a Life* (1999) unless stated otherwise. For the immediate reception of the *TTP*, see Gootjes (2017). References to Spinoza's works are keyed to the standard critical edition in Gebhardt (1925); all translations have been taken from Curley (1985) and Curley (2016).

² The exact cause of Spinoza's banishment remains the topic of a lively scholarly debate; an overview can be found in Nadler (1999), chapter 6.

³ Marmysz (2003), p. 91. Marmysz formulates nihilism as a frustration stemming from human alienation from all metaphysical perfection, such as Truth, Goodness, and Justice. This is not the exact notion of 'nihilism',

creating a situation in which everything is permitted, as his critics feared it would. In order to answer this question we will first need to understand some broad elements of Spinoza's philosophy that made him a *persona non grata* to begin with. Secondly, there has to be an established meaning for the term 'nihilism' and what it fundamentally stands for⁴. By solidifying the working elements of these two matters we have the necessary tools and methods to answer this main question of this thesis conclusively. Now that it has been made clear *that* Spinoza was a controversial thinker, it is now time to show why.

I. Interpreting Scripture and Defending Freedom

The Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century was still a deeply divided nation, struggling with its identity as a newly founded state while also trying to govern over a multitude of people with a wide range of religious affiliations. This included large groups of people that fled their homelands for fear of religious persecutions, such as Spinoza's own parents, to the relatively safe borders of the liberal Republic. However, the reigning religion of the native Dutch remained Calvinism, a form of Protestantism that emphasized modesty through frugality and contained bitter doctrines such as predestination and original sin. After fighting for their religious freedom from the Catholic Hapsburgs Empire, many Dutch Calvinists once again tried to make religion law within the United Republic, trying to use their religious influences to have a say in political affairs and to silence dissenting voices that they deemed to be dealing in improper and unchristian ideas. It was difficult to keep religious affairs outside the

in relation to Spinoza's philosophy, that will be investigated within this thesis.

⁴ Another project that interprets Spinoza as a nihilist philosopher is Skulsky (2009). However, the meaning of 'nihilism' adhered to within that work is underdeveloped since the term is simply taken to be synonymous with 'naturalism'. The notion of 'nihilism' within this project is informed by Nietzsche and emphasizes a reactionary, psychological, component not present in that of Skulsky.

political sphere, but also vice versa the magistrate outside religious affairs⁵. It is within this political and religious context that the *TTP* was released⁶.

The stated aim of the *TTP* is the following: to show that “the republic can grant freedom of philosophizing without harming its peace or piety, and cannot deny it without destroying its peace and piety”⁷. While this may be a laudable goal, Spinoza made no friends with his proposed method in convincing the Christian authorities and political powers of this ideal. He starts out building his case by countering superstitions about matters of faith, devoting large parts of the *TTP* to biblical criticism and a literal hermeneutics that aim to reevaluate the status of Scripture, its interpretation, and kind of knowledge it provides. It was exactly these first two steps that truly offended religious sentiments, since Spinoza argued that Scripture itself was not above the natural sciences and that it ought to be interpreted like any other text. The dangerous idea was that the knowledge gained by studying nature should inform the way we interpret Scripture, and not the other way around⁸.

In his attempts to convince his contemporaries of the common moral truths that all religions preached, Spinoza had to radically alter the status religion traditionally had. Not only did he proclaim that the holy texts were primarily half-truths meant to convince even the most sluggish of minds to act morally, he also claimed that the holy prophets were not endowed with heavenly knowledge⁹, and that miracles, as supernatural events, were physically impossible¹⁰. Unsurprisingly then, the *TTP* was regarded as a heretical piece of philosophy, aimed at undermining the

⁵ Smith (1997), p. 44.

⁶ Nadler (2011), Chapter 2.

⁷ *TTP* title page, (G 3:3).

⁸ One could argue that this interpretive reversal truly makes Spinoza the first modern philosopher; Van den Burg (2007), p. 11. For a discussion on the privileged position of Scripture and Spinoza’s critical evaluation of this notion, see Preus (2011).

⁹ *TTP*, Chapter 6: On Miracles. (G 3:81).

¹⁰ *TTP*, Chapter 2: On the Prophets. (G 3:29).

traditional religious power and subtly introducing atheism. But while the *TTP* contains many tantalizing philosophical statements, it is primarily concerned with establishing a political situation in which citizens should have the right to speak their minds. Because of its political ambitions, the *TTP* downplays Spinoza's most controversial philosophical statements regarding the nature of God and man and only touches on them in as far as they are needed to build his political case. The radical ideas that are at the foundation of many of Spinoza's heretical claims would eventually be argued for at length and in great detail in his posthumously published work: the *Ethics*.

II. God and/or Nature

A book about ethics is usually devoted to a notion of what it means to lead a good life, outlining rules and attitudes that one should adopt in order to become a good person, whatever the 'good' may entail. To begin such a project with a thorough metaphysical treatment regarding God seems strange, but it fits with the overall difficulties that Spinoza had to face: how to convince the reader to radically alter the way they think about the world and their place within it. Only when this change has been brought about can the reader understand what it truly means to work towards becoming a good person. This process of reeducation is reflected in the structure of the *Ethics*; first beginning with God itself (chapter 1), moving towards the human mind (chapter 2), the nature of our sentiments (chapter 3), how they affect us (chapter 4), and finally how the power of reason sets us free (chapter 5). From this itinerary it is clear that Spinoza pulls the reader along from the most abstract of notions to the apex of human responsibility: freedom.

While the *TTP* undermined traditional religious notions in its attempt to establish freedom of thought, the *Ethics* undermines the traditional notion of God in order to reeducate the reader so as to become free. In order to successfully convince the reader, the contents of the

Ethics are exhibited in geometrical form: from simple truths Spinoza leads the reader to accept more complex propositions that are each carefully accounted for and each meticulously demonstrated to show their validity. The most controversial truth is that there can only be one substance, and this substance is God, meaning that the totality of nature is to be equated with this God¹¹. This leads to one of the most powerful statements of equivalence found within the *Ethics*: God and/or Nature¹². It is obvious that this is not in accordance with traditional religious orthodoxy; not only does God not stand outside of nature, governing it in his infinite wisdom, he is completely devoid of any feelings towards human beings and their existence. The only thing that this Spinozistic God does *is* to exist, being the only necessary existence within the universe¹³.

One can imagine that this is not a God that met the expectations of the common theologian in the seventeenth century for it leaves a gutted and seemingly powerless entity that is not worthy of being called a God in the religious sense. Unsurprisingly then, one of the charges against Spinoza was that of atheism and fatalism; without a God that takes care of and looks after his flock, human existence was doomed. Not only was morality at stake, our freedom and the very reason for existence was virtually annihilated by Spinoza's proposals. This could very well lead to a situation in which nothing can be known and everything is permitted: nihilism.

¹¹ E1p16 (G 2:60).

¹² E4p4d (G 2:213).

¹³ See E1p11 (G 2:52). This is not an ontological argument as found in the works of Descartes and Anselm; these arguments infer that from a *concept* that includes necessity its object also includes this necessity, and must therefore exist. Spinoza, instead, argues that an infinite substance cannot *not exist*. Lord (2010), p. 29. For a substantial discussion on this matter, see Bennett (1984), Chapter 3.

III. Nietzsche and Nihilism

When discussing nihilism and its perceived threat to human society, it would be best to consider the philosopher most closely associated with it: Nietzsche¹⁴. According to Nietzsche, nihilism is “the situation which obtains when everything is permitted”¹⁵. But to understand his analysis and main objections to nihilism we need to dissect the topic into two parts: (1) the universe constructed by the Christians, and (2) the values that nihilists retain when the Christian theology is unmasked. Both Spinoza and Nietzsche were living in a culture confronted by an ever-growing understanding of nature via the natural sciences; these new sciences were encroaching on domains that were originally reserved for a God who was the master of nature; eventually casting him out entirely. It is within the context of this growing discomfort that Nietzsche brings us his famous expression that “God is dead, and we killed him!”¹⁶. With what we have learned about the world there seemed to be no place left for a omnipotent God, we have done away with him by trying to explain everything and succeeding. But when the conception of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient Christian God slowly breaks away we are left with nothing, and in the passage where the fool announces the death of God his audience is yet to fully grasp the full impact of this demise.

According to Nietzsche, the original conception of a God provided human life with three important things: absolute worth, a world where we belong, and the possibility of knowledge¹⁷. These three things provided

¹⁴ Within this thesis we will not consider the Spinozistic origins of the term ‘nihilism’. For a complete history, see Marmysz (2003).

¹⁵ Rosen (1969), p. xiii. Rosen presents this quote, but fails to cite a source. A suggestion would be that he is actually paraphrasing Dostojevski (2005), p. 714. This would be warranted, as an introduction to the notion of nihilism within Nietzsche’s philosophy, given that Dostojevski’s writing concerning the Russian anarchists formed Nietzsche’s initial perspective on nihilism as a cultural phenomenon. Müller (2006). For a history on the Russian nihilists, see Clemens & Feik (2000), p. 22-31.

¹⁶ Tongeren, van. (2012), p. 116.

¹⁷ Idem, p. 16.

human life with the means to manage itself and the world around humankind: it gave humankind a meaning in life. The world with a Christian God provides the believer with good and evil, truth and falsity, beauty and ugliness, and so on. Furthermore, this Christian God introduces the notion of a 'true' world; a world that lies behind the senses in which the true order of things lies that we can comprehend with the mind but not with the senses. Simultaneously, it denounces the world as it is experienced as false and untrue, an idea we will discuss at length in the second chapter.

When God died, Christians had no more escape from life and its hardships and nature's obvious imposed inequality; they had to accept life as it is, including that others are stronger and more capable than them¹⁸. But this is a reluctant acceptance of an ugly truth; barren human life is less attractive than human life embellished with a metaphysical escape and equality for all. As a result, to the Christian believer, nihilism is the only result when Christianity crumbles and there is no metaphysical foundation of value¹⁹, because life no longer has any redeeming qualities it had before. To the Christian nihilist, if God is dead, then nothing matters anymore, and meaning is impossible. But this is exactly where Nietzsche rejects the nihilist conclusion: the original, religious answers to nihilism crumbles, but this does not mean that the only possible result is nihilism. This is only the case when we remain faithful to the original religious answers; this theological interpretation of the world failed, but because it was seen as the *only* possible answer, existence seems barren without it²⁰. Nihilists cut God out of their world, but then looked back and saw that the

¹⁸ Marmysz (2003), p. 23.

¹⁹ "Nihilisme is de ondergang van Christendom". Tongeren, van, p. 106.

²⁰ "*Een* interpretatie ging ten gronde; maar omdat deze gold als *de* interpretatie, lijkt het alsof het bestaan helemaal geen zin heeft, alsof alles *tevergeefs* is". Idem, p. 17.

world was lacking in something that it could only lack if this absence were real to begin with²¹.

Nietzsche makes several distinctions between forms of nihilism, in the sense that their response to the death of God varies. For our considerations, the important distinction is between the passive and active forms of nihilism²². Passive nihilism is the most extreme form of nihilism and is what is left when humans keep searching for the original values instilled in us by religion and tradition²³. These individuals are tired and frustrated because they see that these values are nowhere to be found, no reality corresponds to them and they blame the world as it is for lacking it. Nietzsche identifies this kind of nihilism as a weakness, for it accepts that values disintegrate and that cultural solutions are only temporal distractions from the empty void we live in, but offers nothing in return. This passive kind of nihilism leads to pessimism, where the world as we can think it is, is better than the world as we find it truly is. The world is blamed for lacking all things humans hope for, and we find that life is not worth living because the world doesn't provide us with purpose²⁴.

The second type of nihilism is active; this reaction effectuates an increase of power because the individual realizes that he can move beyond the original motivations and purposes religion provided human existence with. We are free to do what we want and to create our own purpose, or to go even beyond stifling notions such as 'purpose'. From this it is clear that nihilism contains a duality: it can either empower humans or it can

²¹ Not only the Christians were accused of nihilism; anarchists and Socrates, and most of the Hellenistic schools that followed, are shown to introduce nihilistic traditions of thought in Western cultures. Marmysz (2003), pg. 23-24. Nietzsche also stated he himself used to be a nihilist, suggesting that he had grown beyond it. Idem, pg. 21, note 3.

²² For a discussion on Nietzsche's varieties of nihilism, including passive and active, and how he uses these terms in his work, see Reginster (2006), p. 29. Nietzschean nihilism is a complicated affair, and a complete and accurate representation cannot be given within the limited scope of this thesis. Here, we will limit ourselves solely to the distinction between the 'active' and 'passive' forms of nihilism made by Nietzsche.

²³ Tongeren, van, p. 22.

²⁴ Idem, p. 25.

weaken them. But Nietzsche tries to show us that nihilism in itself is just an intermediate stage, either because it still suffers from the old traditional values that don't correspond to our world, or because it still needs to go beyond that. It is this problem that looms over Europe and its future: where we will remain in a state of nihilism and old worthless values without creating new ones²⁵. Nietzsche doesn't count himself among nihilists when he is talking about the passive kind; he actively denounces them and wants to reveal their faulty reasoning. Rather, he thinks, we should aim to embrace the active kind of nihilism that would increase our powers²⁶.

IV. Nihilism as Method

Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism, as the downfall of metaphysical stability and the inability of man to properly confront this new dawn, provides us with a potent analysis for understanding the fears felt by Spinoza's critics. The fear was that without a metaphysical certainty, originally found in the Christian God, which provides humans with absolute worth, a world where we belong, and the possibility of knowledge, we would wander aimlessly through an indifferent universe. As such, nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and nothing can be known, leading to a situation in which everything is permitted because morals and truths are simply suggestions. Without something to give human life objective value, society would be in a state of pandemonium, where right is wrong and wrong is right, our actions standing outside all moral orders. Of course,

²⁵ Idem, p. 30.

²⁶ It is worthwhile to mention that Nietzsche was, at first, greatly enamored by Spinoza's philosophy, as becomes apparent in a letter he sent to a friend of his: KSB 6, no. 135. Source: Kaufmann (1977), p. 73. However, while growing as a philosopher, Nietzsche eventually would greatly criticize Spinoza together with other metaphysicians. For a critical study in Nietzsche's reading of Spinoza one could look into Sommers (2012). For a proposed kinship between the two philosophers, see Yovel (1989), Chapter 5. Another work that shows a relation between Nietzsche, Spinoza, and nihilism is Diken (2009).

this is an exaggerated prognosis of what could happen, and there is no reason to believe that these are the only two options that are available to us. But, as we will show in the first chapter, for the seventeenth century theologian, these objections were very serious.

However, whether this exact nihilistic thought process applies also to Spinoza's philosophy is yet to be determined, and will form the focus of the present thesis. In order to establish whether Spinozism does indeed propose these nihilistic conclusions we will employ the following method. By following the structure of the *Ethics* we will discuss three important sources of human value and meaning that, if taken away or declared impossible, would cause a nihilistic moral devastation of society as Spinoza's critics and interpreters feared. These topics are the following: the existence of a benevolent God, the existence of a knowable and objective world, and the possibility of human freedom.

The existence of a benevolent and caring God proposes a traditional view of an omnipotent creator that is involved in its creations and provides an afterlife in which everyone will be judged for their actions on earth. The topic of the first chapter will therefore revolve around the content of the charge of atheism leveled against Spinoza by his critics, in particular his first critics. This will allow us to investigate the fears of his interpreters in their historical context and whether they were justified in fearing Spinozism. In particular, this will shed light on their fears of the immoral hedonism that would accompany this supposedly heretical stance towards the church and their traditions.

The second chapter will then discuss the possibility of having knowledge of the world around us. Where the existence of a God would provide an external certainty that human lives are valuable, the existence of an external world gives human life the certainty that we aren't living a worthless lie. A denial of the existence of an external world is called 'acosmism' and could have dire consequences in how much value individuals are willing to assign to the world around them. For example, when the essential divide between mind and world is emphasized, notions

of radical mind independence will lead to the lingering doubt that our thoughts are not about some external reality after all. We could be living a world that is fabricated in our dreams, or a simulated reality with an inverted color spectrum, a completely different reality than the one we are experiencing right now. And when it turns out that we are living within a simulated reality, any original motivation to respect the reality presented by that simulation will be difficult to maintain. The main problem here is that when knowledge of the world is deemed impossible, there is no guarantee that the experiences we are having are 'true'; without some objective reality that human lives inhabit, there is no reason to believe that anything we know could be true or worthwhile.

The last chapter will then discuss the denial of freedom, commonly regarded as being hard determinism. The perceived incommensurability between freedom and determinism can be understood by looking at the following syllogism²⁷:

Major premise: Everything is determined.

Minor premise: I am only morally responsible for my actions when I am undetermined.

Conclusion: I am not morally responsible for my actions.

If we accept the premises of this syllogism, it follows that if determinism is a fact, the perceived freedom of individuals has to be false, and thus no moral blame can be ascribed to any one individual. The essential notion here is that of teleology; the idea that our actions have purpose because we imbue them with our intentions. But when these intentions are determined as well and we couldn't have acted otherwise, the basis of ascribing blame to individuals would seem to fail.

With these preliminaries in place we will be in a position to answer the main question: does Spinoza advocate a nihilistic philosophy, aimed at destroying every security that Christians held dear? As will become clear,

²⁷ This example is loosely taken from Strawson (1994).

as we discuss each topic in depth, the fears that Spinoza's contemporaries had were, to a certain degree, very fair: he did indeed radically alter many of the concepts and securities the religious community had. But, in altering and restructuring the way we think about the world Spinoza has to deal with an audience that could only envision nihilism as an answer to the change in the foundation of their beliefs. It is therefore interesting to see what alternative to negative nihilism Spinoza was providing to his contemporaries: by establishing the real powers and limitations that human beings have we can find a true way to achieve happiness and freedom within an otherwise cold and directionless universe.

Chapter 1: Pan(a)theism

Detective Martin Hart: *I mean, can you imagine if people didn't believe, what things they'd get up to?*

Detective Rust Cohle: *Exact same thing they do now. Just out in the open.*

Detective Martin Hart: *Bullshit. It'd be a fucking freak show of murder and debauchery and you know it.*

Detective Rust Cohle: *If the only thing keeping a person decent is the expectation of divine reward, then brother that person is a piece of shit; and I'd like to get as many of them out in the open as possible.*

Detective Martin Hart: *Well, I guess your judgment is infallible, piece of shit wise. You think that notebook is a stone tablet?*

Detective Rust Cohle: *What's it say about life, hm? You gotta get together, tell yourself stories that violate every law of the universe just to get through the goddamn day. Nah. What's that say about your reality, Marty?*

True Detective, Season 1, Episode 3. "The Locked Room" (2014).

Whether Spinoza's philosophy advocates a form of atheism is an important question, and one that can be answered by a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer, although not without disclosing, and agreeing to, numerous caveats to accompany ones answer. The ones that will be considered in this chapter are the following: the meaning of the word 'atheism' in the seventeenth century, Spinoza's own opinion on the matter, and his views on the spiritual dimension of religion versus his intellectual conception of God as an eternal substance. But most important for our discussion is the idea of atheism as a source for nihilism: that a disbelief in God would lead to irreparable societal anarchy leading from the belief that nothing has

meaning or is worthwhile. The question remains how Spinoza's ideas regarding God relate to this issue.

1.1. Seventeenth Century Atheism

First it needs to be established what the term 'atheism' entailed within the context of the 17th century. Broadly speaking, and at first glance, atheism had the same meaning as it has today: a disbelief in the existence of god(s). This becomes clear when early historical sources are considered, such as Francis Bacon who stated that atheism is living free from God and consequently from spiritual authority²⁸. However, in the 17th century, atheism was a larger concept that was also immediately understood as the rejection of a personal God who created the world and cared for its creations, with all implications that follow from this rejection²⁹. This included a disbelief in souls or other immaterial things, broadly meaning the aspects of our being that would continue to exist even after our death. Since the belief in an either blessed or condemned life after death was a core truth of the Christian church, catholic or protestant, doubting this dogma was simply heretical.

The idea that atheism was simply a disbelief in the existence of a God is therefore too narrow to properly understand its charge or meaning within the seventeenth century. Rather, the term atheism contains a two-fold charge that should be kept in mind when interpreting these historical sources. Not only was atheism the disbelief in the existence of a God, which itself is an obvious core belief of any monotheistic religion, but it was also any deviation or denial of orthodoxy in general³⁰. This deviation from the norm could take any form, ranging from extremely petty customs to essential dogmas³¹. Furthermore, the spread of beliefs that contradicted

²⁸ Sheppard (2015), p. 21.

²⁹ Israel (2006), p. 164.

³⁰ Sheppard (2015), p. 21.

³¹ Within the seventeenth and the new Republic there was much school rivalry between accepted orthodox customs; this manifested itself in

the church, as well as the practices that accompanied them, lead to a great deal of anxiety for the men and women that survived the religious crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries³².

The second significant distinction that was made within the atheism debate, during and before the seventeenth century, is that of practical and speculative atheism³³. Practical atheism amounted to living a godless life and thus living within a situation in which everything is permitted. The common opinion was that these atheists gave themselves a free ticket to indulge in unrestrained hedonism and other immoral behavior. Because of this unrestrained behavior, the possibility of forming social contracts was deemed impossible for practical atheists, and this became a particular source of anxiety for theological scholars active within the seventeenth century. Thus, due to the perceived lack of guidance of a higher power, the social, political, and moral implications of the denial of God were believed to be much larger and threatening for the seventeenth century scholar than we in modern times would suspect.

This moral species of atheism should be contrasted with its intellectual parallel: speculative atheism, a philosophical stance or reflection on the non-existence of God or higher power. Historically, speculative atheism was often collapsed into practical atheism; it was deemed to be impossible for serious speculative atheists to exist. They either had to be incredibly ignorant of the obvious facts of God's existence surrounding them, or else they must have abused reason in order to arrive at a conclusion that supported atheism³⁴. Hobbes, for instance, denounced atheism as resulting from faulty reasoning and ignorance, claiming that one could not arrive at atheism via reason³⁵.

discussions regarding the kinds of wigs men could wear or if woman were permitted to knit on Sundays. However, these discussions weren't about atheism but were rather concerned with the appropriate piety that one needed to show according to Scripture. Spaans (2011), p. 22.

³² Sheppard (2015), p. 18.

³³ Idem, p. 19.

³⁴ Berman (1988), p. 41. Chapter *passim*.

³⁵ Idem, p. 57.

However, even though Hobbes did not consider himself an atheist, he himself was accused of secretly concealing speculative atheistic sentiments within his philosophy³⁶. This was due to Hobbes' philosophical commitment to a strict reductionist system of science in which everything could be described in terms of material extension, even the mind and also God³⁷. This deviation from the orthodox views on God's metaphysical nature meant that both Spinoza and Hobbes were classified as being deists; a philosophical position that did contain a belief in a higher supreme being, although this belief did not entail the kind of creator that is immaterial or intervenes in the natural order of things. Hobbes' materialism and Spinoza's slogan '*deus sive natura*' made them both representatives of this position in the eyes of their opponents; firstly because of their dismissal of religious supernatural entities (angels, souls, etc.); and, secondly, because of their rejection of the views contained in traditional religion³⁸. According to their critics, deism keeps the name of God but subverts what it means or stands for.

We now have four categories of atheism at our disposal: a denial or disbelief in God, a deviation of orthodoxy, godless/immoral behavior, and an intellectual reevaluation of the nature of God. These categories often overlap with each other, and this is most obvious in the case mentioned above where speculative atheism and a deviation of orthodoxy coincide. The act of rethinking the nature of God and its relation to the world means that one is speculating on alternative interpretations contrary to orthodox dogmas, consequently one is committing atheism in two categories of the concept. But these categories also allow for notions of atheism that don't overlap; for instance, from a present day perspective we

³⁶ Idem.

³⁷ Duncan (2005).

³⁸ A historical review on the similarities and differences between Spinoza's and Hobbes' view on religion, within the larger context of Spinoza's reception by the early English Deists, can be found in Colie (1959). A discussion can also be found in Berman (1988), p. 55. For a more contemporary discussion on Spinoza's views on religion as a natural phenomenon, one should look into De Dijn (2012).

would think that a speculative atheist doesn't necessarily have to be a practical atheist of the immoral kind. With these crucial varieties of atheism in mind we have the tools to better understand the charges of atheism leveled against Spinoza by his contemporaries.

1.2. The Charge of Atheism

The suspicion of atheism hounded Spinoza throughout his life and he repeatedly denied the charge³⁹. This can be seen in one particular correspondence between one of Spinoza's friends, Jacob Ostens, and one of his critics; it also provides insight into the reception of the *TTP* when it was just being released and discussed, the contents and background of which were mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. The critic in question was Lambert van Velthuysen, a physician living in Utrecht who promoted the new Cartesian philosophy which was gaining popularity in the Republic⁴⁰, and also sent a letter on January 24 (1671) to Ostens containing a critical summary of Spinoza's *TTP* in regards to its contents, scope, and aim. From the letter it is clear that he respects Spinoza's, or "the Author's", intellect, understanding that he is dealing with a philosopher that understands his craft well⁴¹.

However, Van Velthuysen also criticized Spinoza's attempts to approach religion without superstition, stating that he had gone too far

³⁹ In a complaint by church members from Voorburg in 1666, where Spinoza at that time resided, we see that the local rumor circulated that he was an atheist. This was even before the publication of his ideas, this can be seen in Steenbakkers (2016), p. 11. However, even earlier records from the Spanish Inquisition show that as early as the 1650's, the decade of Spinoza's excommunication, he already promoted dangerous ideas that others would have considered to be atheistic or unorthodox. Curley (2015), p. 12.

⁴⁰ Nadler (2011), p. 143. In the beginning of chapter 7 Nadler explains the general familiar relations between the parties involved.

⁴¹ Letter 42, §2 (G 4:207). The *TTP* was released anonymously, so Van Velthuysen did not yet know for sure who the author was. However, not long after its appearance, Spinoza's name was already being connected to the work; see Nadler (2011), p. 219-22.

and instead, misguidedly, renounced all religion⁴². In the penultimate paragraph leading to the conclusion, Van Velthuysen sums up his arguments for branding Spinoza as an atheist: he destroys and subverts all religion, imagines a God that cannot perform miracles, shatters the authority of Scripture, and makes no attempt to denounce Mohammed as a false prophet⁴³. The letter then ends with this concluding remark: “So I think I am not deviating very far from the truth, or doing the Author any injustice, if I denounce him for teaching pure Atheism, by disguised and counterfeit arguments”⁴⁴. What stands out from this passage is the idea that, according to Van Velthuysen, Spinoza taught atheism by means of counterfeit arguments, supporting our previous observation that, within the context of the seventeenth century, speculative atheism was deemed to be impossible due to its assumed intellectual dishonesty.

We are now very near a complete account of the content of the charge of atheism Van Velthuysen makes against Spinoza, but there remains one other important remark that was not yet mentioned before: “At any rate, [Spinoza] doesn’t rise above the religion of the Deists, of whom we have quite enough everywhere – such are the wicked ways of our age...”⁴⁵. Here is the mention of ‘Deism’ again, a position that advances a worldview consisting of scientific materialism, but excludes the spiritual dimension that religion vehemently defends. Van Velthuysen voices three things in this passage: firstly, he thinks that what Spinoza is proposing, after his complex biblical criticism within the *TTP*, doesn’t amount to anything more than Deism; secondly, this is apparently a bad thing because he condemns it for being “wicked”; and, thirdly, he is lamenting its widespread acceptance and advance in his time. In summary, Deism is bad news and its spread is even worse.

Van Velthuysen was not alone in these opinions; the growth and success of scientific materialism was often equated with the rise and

⁴² *Idem*.

⁴³ Letter 42 (G 4:218).

⁴⁴ *Idem*.

⁴⁵ Letter 42 (G 4:207).

spread of Deism and other unorthodox philosophies⁴⁶. This caused panic amongst theologians who were hastily either trying to defend theology against the encroaching ideas of materialism, or were trying to absorb these insights into their own faith⁴⁷. But the reason for this widespread unrest was not exclusively because these unorthodox beliefs drove believers away from ecclesial authority. Rather, when we examine Van Velthuysen's critique and other historical sources, we see anxiety resulting from the idea that Deism would lead to practical atheism. This confirms Nietzsche's observation that when the traditional religious authority stemming from God and church are destroyed, Christians fear that everything is permitted, not considering other answers aside from pessimistic nihilism. To further understand how an individual living within the seventeenth century thought about relation between theoretical and practical atheism, one needs to understand the successful trope of the Epicurean atheist that circulated wildly in the seventeenth century⁴⁸.

Epicurus was an ancient Hellenistic philosopher who was primarily preoccupied with the question of what human beings should do in order to obtain a state of happiness⁴⁹. His advice was to live a life guided by negative hedonism in which we try to lead a simple existence surrounded by friends, occupying ourselves with philosophy and indulging only in sparse and reserved pleasures. Epicurus also advocated atomism, a form of materialism, with which he abolished all explanations based on higher powers and teleology. He even claimed that death ought not to be feared; it did not matter to the dead because they would cease to be, whereas the living had nothing to fear because they were still alive and well.

Because the common views on happiness are often related to immoral hedonism, Epicurus was generally interpreted very unfavorably; even during his own life rumors circulated about the kind of sexual

⁴⁶ Sheppard (2015), p. 36.

⁴⁷ Idem, p. 37.

⁴⁸ Idem, p. 90. Chapter three in its totality delves into the historical character of the atheistic Epicurean.

⁴⁹ Popkin (2006), p. 83.

exploits he and his students habitually indulged in. But his philosophy was further discredited with the rise of Christianity; the Christian, *memento mori* oriented, philosophy was incompatible with materialism and the Epicurean stance on the absolute end of death, hence the works of Epicurus were often vilified. This development led to the point where Epicureanism became the highest defamation⁵⁰; the cliché being that it only proposed a material view and no spiritual dimension to human life, linking happiness to pleasure instead of virtue, and then opening the door to unfiltered debauchery⁵¹.

The derogatory baggage of being labeled an ‘Epicurean’ lay in its equivalence of meaning an immoral person, whose behavior is the product of one’s views on philosophical materialism, thus linking speculative and practical atheism within the minds of the seventeenth century intellectual⁵². This then related the philosophical views of the Deists with the immoral behavior of the Epicureans. The God that Deists envisioned was one that was unconcerned with human affairs, and even incapable of intervening. This is hardly a God worth worshipping. Furthermore, these Deists also assumed total determinism, undermining morality in its commitment to fatalism⁵³. The full charge of Van Velthuysen is thus that Spinoza undermines orthodox Christian beliefs by introducing Deism, and then leaves the door wide open for behavior associated with practical atheism.

⁵⁰ Berman (1988), p. 57.

⁵¹ The interpretation of Epicurus as a positive hedonist is fundamentally wrong; not only because it ignores the Stoic virtues Epicurus promoted, but it also assumes egoism even though Epicurus valued friendship as one of the highest virtues in life.

⁵² This fear of speculative atheism leading towards godless and immoral behavior can also be seen in the correspondence between Spinoza and van Blijenbergh. Reijen, van (2015).

⁵³ Rosenthal (2012), p. 816. “First and most importantly, he thinks that Spinoza is committed to fatalism and that fatalism is doctrine that undermines morality”.

1.3. Spinoza's Response

Spinoza had read Van Velthuysen's letter and was clearly upset with what he found to be an inaccurate caricature of his work⁵⁴. But he becomes livid when he reads of his inclusion among the ranks of the atheists, so when Van Velthuysen states that he doesn't know any biographical details concerning the author's life⁵⁵, Spinoza retorts: "But of course if he had known he would not so easily have persuaded himself that I teach Atheism. For Atheists are accustomed to seek honors and riches immoderately. But I have always scorned those things. Everyone that knows me knows that"⁵⁶. His rejoinder is that, if Van Velthuysen had known of Spinoza's exemplar moral and mindful character, he wouldn't have dared accuse him of advocating atheism. We cannot simply accept Spinoza's own account of his character as being sufficient for his case; however, there are also other sources that corroborate his testimony and indeed solidify the claim that Spinoza led a virtuous life⁵⁷. It is evident from this passage that he feels that he is being accused of practical atheism, but given his past conduct this accusation was baseless and unwarranted. This then concludes the angle of interpreting Van Velthuysen's accusation as constituting practical atheism, and later in this chapter we will come to understand Spinoza's own ideas on morality and dismissal of atheism more intimately.

This brings us to the charge of speculative atheism, or in this case Deism. From the overview of Spinoza's philosophy that we already gave in the introduction, it became clear that he equates God with nature. Before we conclude that Spinoza was a Deist, it needs to be clear what the correct technical term for his position is. Within the nomenclature of philosophy

⁵⁴ Letter 43 (G 4:219b). Spinoza calls Van Velthuysen's letter a "*libellum*", suspecting that, due to its length, it was meant for wider circulation. See Curley (2016), p. 385, footnote 2.

⁵⁵ Letter 42, §2 (G 4:207).

⁵⁶ Letter 43 (G 4:219b).

⁵⁷ A contemporary view on the facts and fictions surrounding Spinoza's life and conduct can be found in Steenbakkers (2016).

the simple equivalence of God and nature would be called ‘pantheism’: the idea that God is everywhere and anything⁵⁸. However, Spinoza’s metaphysics is slightly more complicated and deserves a term better tailored to this position. Spinoza identifies God with the infinite substance, which in turn is identified with its infinite attributes⁵⁹. Nature is substance expressed within the Cartesian attributes of thought and extension that we have knowledge of, which are but two attributes among the infinite amount of others. Therefore, Spinoza rather argues for panentheism: God is within every being. The subtle difference is that in panentheism nature is a finite subset of God’s infinity, whereas ‘pantheism’ rather asserts a total overlap between both concepts⁶⁰.

An important consequence of Spinoza’s conception of God is that it indeed subverts the traditional grounding of morality that Van Velthuysen believes in: a God that is *directly* involved in the wellbeing of human lives⁶¹ and has an active system of punishments and rewards to balance everything out⁶². Denying this but accepting God’s existence is clearly a form of Deism because, like the Epicureans, it explicitly denies God’s providence and protective powers⁶³. Does this make Spinoza an atheist? In the sense that atheism means that he doesn’t accept the Judeo-Christian orthodoxy of his time, then yes; Spinoza is clearly a Deist rather than a theist⁶⁴. But is he also an atheist in the Baconian sense: living free from God and consequently all spiritual authority? If this is taken to be synonymous with immoral behavior, the answer is negative. Yet we must

⁵⁸ Definitions of ‘pantheism’ and ‘panentheism’ are taken from Lord (2010), p. 4.

⁵⁹ E1p4, E1p19 & E1p20c2. (G 2:47) & (G 2:65).

⁶⁰ Lord (2011), p. 16.

⁶¹ Rosenthal (2012), p. 822. “Velthuysen claims either theoretical atheism - the belief that there is no God - or theoretical deism - the belief that God is not *directly* involved in human affairs - will lead to practical atheism - that is, immorality, or acting as if no God existed”.

⁶² Letter 42 (G 4:218). “His God is subjected to fate; no room is left for any divine governance or providence; the whole distribution of punishments and rewards is destroyed”. Curley (2016), Pg. 385.

⁶³ Sheppard (2015), p. 35.

⁶⁴ This phrasing is taken from Nadler (2007).

consider what Spinoza's Deism has to offer human life in terms of value and meaning. This may become clear when we come to understand Spinoza's own ideas on morality and his own motivations of rejecting atheism.

It is clear that Spinoza disliked atheists, and it would seem this is due to the same reasons that his contemporaries did: atheists are immoral Epicureans. Furthermore, we established that Van Velthuysen was justified in interpreting him as a Deist, but Spinoza did not share his view that this would lead to immoral behavior. Apparently, there has to be something more to Spinoza's Deism in order for it to withstand the decline into nihilism, something that is fueling the disagreement between him and Van Velthuysen concerning the grounding of morality in religion. The central question that we now face then is the following: why, according to Spinoza, is it better to live the life of a pious/moral Deist rather than that of an immoral atheist?

The simple formulation of the answer to this question is that atheists live a life that is unguided by a true idea of the highest good, something that runs counter to Spinoza's ethical ideals⁶⁵. But this is the answer in its barren analytic form; to understand it we must consider it in a more developed and justified synthetic structure. As we will see, the reasoning behind the answer is very much intertwined with Spinoza's political and religious considerations, ultimately accrued from the highest ethical ideals demonstrated in the *Ethics*. Therefore, we will first consider the political system meant to constrain devious atheists. From this we will understand the difference between the personal piety that Spinoza teaches and the social corrective form of piety taught by religion.

⁶⁵ "As Spinoza sees it, the life of an atheist – that is, a life that lacks a true idea of the highest good, that is ruled by fleeting pleasure and passions, and that delivers itself up to political servitude – is objectively inferior to the life of a deist – that is, a life governed by the quest for the intellectual love of God, ruled by reason rather than by passions, and requiring participation in a republic of free men". Rosenthal (2012), p. 839.

1.4. Atheists & Religion in the Political State

The lives of atheists, in the seventeenth-century sense of the term, are informed by momentary bodily impulses and they only favor moral above immoral behavior when it suits them. These individuals are rightfully feared when a magistrate has to consider the wellbeing of his polis, their behavior posing a direct threat to the sustainability of his society. This fear justifies harsh measures: social contracts and political loyalties need to be coerced from atheists, they need to be pummeled into submission and servitude because their short-term interests allow for no other options. This is a Hobbesian account of the nature of man, in which there is no *Summum Bonum*⁶⁶ and where the ruler of society is established solely on the motivation of security in light of the evil deeds of others.

Just as Spinoza's *TTP*, Hobbes' political theory is an attempt to replace the conventional theological foundations of political powers, based on belief in revelation, with a secular foundation based on rationally motivated social cooperation⁶⁷. Hobbes convincingly argues that this social cooperation is within the self-interest of an agent by presenting a very bleak picture of human beings as selfish, hedonistic automatons that would kill each other at the drop of the hat. Their rational powers, however, allow them to understand the mutual threat of 'the other', form a social contract with others, and finally appoint a king that wields absolute power through total subjugation and a monopoly on violence⁶⁸. This would then rationally be a better alternative to the natural state of total anarchy. Clearly, this is a secular justification of political power that follows from a negative portrayal of human nature, which, not incidentally, neatly aligns with the account of the selfish hedonistic Epicurean. But when the state reflects its subjects, this Hobbesian state

⁶⁶ Hobbes (1968), p. 160. "Felicity is a continual progresse of the desire, from one object to another".

⁶⁷ Malcolm (1991).

⁶⁸ Hoekstra (2007).

could hardly be called a republic of free men, and would rather be a repressed group of slaves cowering in fear from each other.

Spinoza clearly rejects this Hobbesian political state whose sole aim it is to assure security to its inherently violent citizens⁶⁹; he himself instead proposes a state whose aim is true freedom⁷⁰. This brings us to the highest ethical ideals Spinoza defends and the reason he isn't an atheist, as we see in the following statement he made against Van Velthuysen's "slander": "Has someone who holds that our greatest happiness and freedom consists only in this [love of God] irreligious?"⁷¹. The most important claim here is that the love of God entails freedom and happiness, but Spinoza also states here that this means he is not irreligious. Why is this? Concerning the first claim, it should be understood that the goal of the *Ethics* is to instill a personal intellectual understanding regarding our individual relation with the eternal substance (God/nature), this then will grant us our greatest power which consists of freedom⁷². In particular: the freedom from our controlling emotions which when followed blindly will not serve us in our best interests, an idea that will be thoroughly explored in the last chapter below. Someone who is controlled by his lower appetites is not free and it is exactly in this notion that Spinoza pities the Epicurean atheist: he will never be able to live an ethically fulfilling life consisting of true freedom, but will rather be guided by his ignorant passions to act counter to his own happiness.

⁶⁹ Political Treatise, 5.5. §3 (G 3:296). "When we say, then, that the best state is one where men pass their lives harmoniously, I mean that they pass a *human* life, one defined not only by the circulation of the blood, and other things common to all animals, but mostly by reason, the true virtue and life of the Mind". Curley (2016), p. 530. For a comparison in regards to Hobbes' and Spinoza's political views, see Malcolm (1991).

⁷⁰ TTP, Chapter 20, §6 (G 3:241). "So the end of the Republic is really freedom". Curley (2016), p. 346.

⁷¹ Letter 43 (G 4:220b).

⁷² Kisner (2011). p. 3.

This individual, ethical, sort of freedom is the same as the freedom that the state should aim to achieve⁷³. The citizens of the Hobbesian state are unable to guide themselves and instead need a strong monarch to rear them. But Spinoza is not proposing a state that constrains its unruly citizens only to guarantee security, but rather a republic of free men that aims to enhance the total freedom of each of its citizens. His political proposals, based on psychological considerations, are very optimistic regarding the positive powers that the state can have on stimulating the behavioral patterns of its citizens, providing a striking contrast to Hobbes' bleak psychological realism. There is an essential difference in the possibility of freedom in the oppressive Hobbesian state and the virtue-stimulating state of Spinoza. This then allows us to understand the second claim of Spinoza's statement better: his rejection of being called "irreligious".

Let us shortly look back at Spinoza's views on religion. Interpreting Scripture with scientific tools shows us that many of its supernatural elements are simply false. Because of Spinoza's critical and radical dissection of religion as an institute, Van Velthuysen feared the possibility of nihilism in the form of social anarchism; by weakening the religious authority Spinoza was also weakening the very foundation of morality. As we observed with Nietzsche, this is a predictable response to the death of God as a supreme legislator, an anthropomorphication that Spinoza vehemently opposed. However, this did not mean Spinoza didn't find religion useful; as was stated before, the notion of heavenly rewards is just good storytelling, meant to instill obedience in those that are not capable of understanding the moral perfection found in intellectual freedom. Furthermore, the moral truths contained within all holy texts are valuable and socially relevant; these truths were not distinct from the moral truths found by philosophy. The problem for Spinoza was simply that the

⁷³ Steinberg (2009) shows this fairly conclusively and also discusses other interpretations of Spinoza's claim that "the true aim of the state is freedom".

ecclesial authorities weren't too happy about this recasting of their religion as a Machiavellian socio-political tool, including their diminished power and role within political affairs⁷⁴.

But what we observe here is an essential divergence between the notions of 'religion' as the typical seventeenth-century god-fearing theologian understands it, and the notion of 'religion' as Spinoza uses it. As Steven Nadler aptly puts it: "there are religions, and then there is religion"⁷⁵. In the first sense Spinoza is indeed deflating the status of organized religion when it concerns the collective acceptance of dogmas and the specific rites and ceremonies. But Spinoza is clearly not undermining or criticizing the moral truths contained in all these religions, just that they are essentially the same truths that are found with philosophical reasoning. This is what Spinoza reacts against when he reads the charge of being "irreligious": not adhering to the moral truths contained within religious texts. Spinoza promotes piety as an ethical ideal whose resulting moral behavior is not outwardly that different from the kind of piety, excluding religious practices, that organized religions demand from their pious congregations, but in the psychological motivations producing them they are nothing alike. Within Spinozism, religion as an institute is relegated to being a social tool that promotes piety through servitude. What this means for traditional practices is clear: they fall outside the scope of moral considerations. But what does this mean for other religious notions?

1.5. Spinozistic Spirituality & the Afterlife

Two important religious notions and Spinoza's treatment of them are interesting to consider here shortly: spirituality and the afterlife. When the formal aspects of religion, such as their rites and ceremonies, are cast off, we are still left with some spiritual feelings that tie us to

⁷⁴ Sheppard (2015), p. 36.

⁷⁵ Nadler (2011), p. 144.

considerations that lie outside the realm of human knowledge. Does this religious feeling still have a place within Spinozism? Not really. The language Spinoza uses at times is perfectly capable of instilling some religious and spiritual sentiments within the reader, one can be rightfully feel humbled and feel reverence towards the totality of nature. But this feeling isn't spiritual in the sense that it transcends, or can inform, our standard model of knowledge of the universe. This is because Spinoza's rationalism doesn't allow for any gaps in knowledge and nothing stands outside nature; this will become more clear when we consider his epistemology in the following chapter. What we are left with is spirituality as a simple psychological phenomenon that happens within the totality of nature, but it doesn't inform us of anything outside it. More importantly: the feeling itself doesn't constitute true knowledge of anything outside yourself and has therefore no place within science, or perhaps only as a motivation.

This leaves us with the religious notion of the afterlife. There is some notion of the afterlife in Spinozism, but it doesn't contain the standard features that most religions decorate it with. Usually, these monotheistic religions paint some heavenly realm in which all our human desires are fulfilled, spinning a fable of a land of milk and honey. But, just as Spinoza's God, the afterlife only exists philosophically, meaning that it will disappoint almost everyone who isn't a philosopher. At face value there is no possibility of an afterlife in Spinozism because the mind is the idea of the body, meaning that when the body is destroyed the mind is destroyed as well⁷⁶. Life after death is then impossible because there cannot be any transition of identity after the body ceases to be. However, with this step only the notion of immortality in the form of human life after death is destroyed, but not our existing identity within eternity. Due to the necessary nature of substance and every effect that follows from it, our existences are necessary as well. This means that our identities are

⁷⁶ E2p7 (G 2:89).

eternal: we exist and will always necessarily have existed, and this fact is indestructible⁷⁷.

Even though our bodies and minds are destroyed, something of our identities will remain within eternity, and in this sense we are eternal as well. When spirituality and the afterlife are conceptualized in this way, we see the kind of impersonal philosophy that Spinoza teaches us. It seems to validate his ideas regarding religion and how it must be used to convince those that are not able to properly incorporate these impersonal truths regarding the relation we have with the world. We are now in the position to tally up all the considerations discussed in this chapter in order to reach a final conclusion on Spinoza's nihilistic atheism.

1.6. Keeping Score: Spinoza's Atheistic Nihilism

As an aspect of nihilism, atheism would lead to a situation in which everything is permitted exactly because there is no supreme parental figure to judge us. Spinoza's speculative atheism, in the form of panentheism, did away with these traditional anthropomorphic religious notions and it was therefore deemed incapable of sufficiently preventing Epicurean behavior. In a sense this is correct: there is nothing preventing the Epicurean atheist from behaving against his own interests, and the socio-political institutions are only there to guard the moral citizens against the immoral ones. But this was the classical nihilistic response to the death of God; however, Spinoza argues in favor of a personal morality that doesn't perish alongside an outside source that enforces it. So we can conclusively determine that Spinoza doesn't propose a situation in which everything is permitted: he is not irreligious.

In another sense, atheistic nihilism arises when we feel like we don't belong and our existence is inconsequential. As we observed with Spinoza's treatment of the afterlife, spirituality, miracles and prophets,

⁷⁷ This interpretation of E5P23 is in line with Curley's (2001) treatment of it. Israel's (2001) and Nadler (2006) both also have commentaries on the last puzzling propositions of the *Ethics* and their meaning.

there doesn't seem to be anything important or meaningful about our existence, further fueling these feelings. Spinoza would argue we should embrace this; we can see this in two important statements. Firstly: "He who loves God cannot strive that God love him in return"⁷⁸. And secondly: "[...] I do not presume that I have found the best philosophy, I know that I understand the true philosophy"⁷⁹. In the first statement he urges us to realize that God is incapable of harboring any feelings towards us; we as humans can aspire to understand and know God, but to demand any special privileges because of this love is absurd and a misguided attitude towards God. This minimalism is further defended in the second statement; many would feel as if what Spinoza is proposing is insufficient. Many would want more from God and life and would feel that Spinozism is too barren. But to demand anything more, in his view, is philosophically unsustainable. As a whole, this is Spinoza's philosophical outlook on our expectations and what we can reasonably ascertain.

When we accept Spinoza's views we are left with a philosophical system that maybe only Spinoza truly would have been content with, from his logical necessitarianism to his minimalism⁸⁰. This bare system would resemble atheism, providing even less than the bare essentials humans are accustomed to with religions. But in an important sense Spinoza proposes a positive form of atheism: our lives may not have meaning imparted from above, but our personal values and meaning are directly related to our intellectual understanding of nature. The modern translation of this idea would boil down to a humanitarian ideal, in that sense it would be atheistic because it is essentially a secular ideal. What this means is that in every modern sense of the word Spinoza was an atheist, his God is only philosophical in nature. All the non-philosophical

⁷⁸ E5P19 (G 2:292).

⁷⁹ Letter 76 (G 4:320a).

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, who often related the psyche of the philosopher with their respective philosophies, also noted that only a person such as Spinoza could find peace in the strict logical necessity that came with his metaphysics. Tongeren, van (2012), p. 18.

elements of God and their inherent spiritual meaning are cast off and for many believers any reason to worship this God is destroyed with it. But in this chapter we came to understand the liberation that Spinoza aimed to instill in his reader and students: not to be controlled from above but to be liberated from within. The atheism that his contemporaries envisioned was hedonistic and unrefined, and it is not the liberating humanitarian atheism that Spinoza teaches.

1.7. Conclusion Chapter 1

This concludes the discussion of this chapter. The question that we aimed to answer was if Spinoza's philosophy could be understood as being atheistic in the nihilistic sense, where a loss of human meaning would have terrible social consequences. What we found that the historical perspective was that Spinoza's philosophy was regarded as dangerous, in the first place because it undermined the traditional grounding of morality, and in the second place because this could lead to practical atheism. But for Spinoza this second step proved not to follow; practical atheism only resulted when individual freedom was not properly achieved, this could be seen reflected in the human nature of the citizens within the state. The dangerous element of nihilistic atheism was that it didn't provide us with the proper metaphysical securities needed to deal with life's hardships; Spinoza doesn't change this. In the end it is left to the reader to accept this barren world as it is, or to try to go beyond Spinoza's borders of inner peace. However, in the following chapter we will come to doubt even this barren world.

Chapter 2: Knowing God, Knowing Nature

Most of all, the world is a place where parts of wholes are described within an overarching paradigm of clarity and accuracy.

The context in which makes possible an underlying sense of the way it all fits together,

despite our collective tendency not to conceive of it as such.

The Books, *Smells Like Content* (2011).

Just like the other two aspects of nihilism that were mentioned in the introduction, acosmism is not so much a philosophical position on its own, but rather the negation of the traditional paths that philosophers took in order to establish a transcendent certainty within our lives. In the case currently under discussion this certainty is provided by the world around us, and acosmism would then be a heavy scepticism regarding the world and the human possibility to understand and know it. When considering this position one could be baffled by how Spinoza would fit into it; he is a textbook case of rationalism, holding truth and knowledge of God (and/or nature) in the highest esteem. Because it is exactly the legitimacy of these two core concepts that are cast into serious doubt when considering acosmism, we should delve into the usage of these concepts within Spinoza's philosophy.

As stated in the introduction, acosmism was the denial of the existence of a(n external) world. Besides figuring out what this exactly means, the question underlying this chapter will revolve around asking 'knowledge of what?' This is because an acosmistic conclusion can be arrived at in several ways, but the driving force behind it is always the doubt regarding the knowledge we have about the world. And when we look into the origin of the term 'nihilism,' it was exactly this problem that first moved Jacobi to denounce Kant's Idealism as a "march towards

nothingness”⁸¹. But, it remains to be seen if Spinozism also, rightfully, instils this fear of living in an illusory or unknowable world.

2.1. Truth in the History of Philosophy

When discussing the notion of illusion, one should first consider its antonym: truth. This chapter will therefore start with a historical analysis of the development of the concept of truth; this will provide us with a solid background to consider the most convincing arguments for interpreting Spinoza as an acosmist. From there, counterarguments to this reading will be discussed that require us to take a closer look at Spinoza’s epistemology. This epistemology will illuminate his ideas regarding the true nature of the world, but also how we are to develop true knowledge from it. This chapter will therefore further investigate the essential link that connects Spinoza’s metaphysical and epistemological considerations.

Undoubtedly, the concept of truth is one of the most important concepts within western philosophy and a brief discussion regarding its significance can’t be avoided. So let us begin this daunting investigation of acosmism with a preliminary historical overview of how the philosophical notion of truth fuels acosmistic sentiments. According to the Eleatic school of Hellenistic philosophy, comprised of famous philosophers such as Parmenides and Zeno, truth lies behind the observable and physical world, as an unchanging transcendent order⁸². But, as a consequence, *this* changing world has to be something *untrue*. The first seed of doubt that leads to acosmism is this perceived divide between the thinkable truth

⁸¹ Jacobi in a letter to Fichte wrote: “Kant’s representational philosophy led towards a de-objectification and a de-realization of knowledge; a march towards nothingness”. Possenti (1998), p. 4. That Jacobi’s fear was particularly related to the spread of Spinozism can be seen in Giovanni, di (2011).

⁸² Goudsblom (1960), p. 125. “Het loont de moeite de werkelijkheid te onderzoeken; wie verder ziet dan de altijd veranderende verschijningen, ontdekt een eeuwigdurende orde, het wezen der dingen”. To be clear: this was the standard within most of the Greek schools of philosophy. This is simply one of the earliest sources to our disposal.

and the observed reality, and the position of the monistic Eleatic philosophers leads exactly to this idea: they rejected the experienced finite reality of change and diversification in the world in favour of the unchanging eternal world behind it⁸³. Hence, this unchanging world is *more* real than the observed world we experience. This also casts doubt on the senses: our senses only give us temporal knowledge, but the rational mind is capable of establishing the eternal truths that shape our world.

The philosopher Thales was the first to search for the unifying monistic source behind our reality; he concluded that all changing things are apparitions or manifestations of the same thing: water⁸⁴. Afterwards, his follower Parmenides was inspired by his teacher to go and find more unifying principles hidden within the world. He was the one that spurred the idea that our rational faculties are the only rightful tools to unearth these deepest concealed truths, and the whole Greek tradition of philosophy continued with the idea that truth can be found by uncompromising rational contemplation rather than sensorial observation⁸⁵.

This establishes the first metaphysical step of acosmism: *this* world isn't real, in the sense that it isn't a source of true knowledge. However, the second arm of epistemological acosmism also needs to be established: even though truth can exist as an unchanging order behind the observed world, it doesn't mean that humans are capable of finding it. It might very well be that Parmenides was overly optimistic in thinking that the truth was within the reach of the grasping educated philosophers. This brings us to Socrates.

⁸³ Melamed (2010), p 77. "Soon after Spinoza's death, several writers were already suggesting that Spinoza's philosophy was a revival of ancient eleatic monism, which rejects the reality of change and diversification".

⁸⁴ Goudsblom (1960), p. 125. There are multiple ways to understand what Thales means with his primary principle "everything is water" and how he came to this conclusion. But for our current interests it suffices to interpret Thales simply as a monist.

⁸⁵ Idem. Goudsblom discusses this continuation throughout the chapter "*Het waarheidsgebod in de cultuur*". However, within this chapter and book, he emphasizes the status that truth held within our western culture.

In the early development of Hellenistic philosophy there existed a group of educators that taught oratory skills to the sons of wealthy nobles, skills that were essential in order to thrive in the Athenian judiciary environment⁸⁶. These educators were called Sophists and were denounced by Socrates because they were not interested in enlightened and pure philosophical knowledge⁸⁷. Instead, these charlatans practised philosophy only to teach the art of persuasion, concerning themselves only with opinion and deceit⁸⁸. Eventually, this allegation put forth by Socrates was not to be limited to the professional orators; each and every citizens living within Athens who professed to know anything was not to be trusted to *truly* know anything.

By starting a dialogue with the citizens that was meant to draw out the presumptions behind their thoughts and to eventually establish the truth, a technique now known as the Socratic method, Socrates discovered that no one was able to sufficiently fortify their opinions against the berating torrents of his questions and demands for justification. In trying to go beyond opinion, Socrates found feeble impressions instead of the stability of truth, and he was crowned the wisest man in Athens, but only because he was the only one that knew that he actually knew nothing⁸⁹.

This process of how truth and physical reality became increasingly detached from each other and created an insurmountable divide can be seen in a wide range of Hellenistic philosophers that came after Socrates, like his student Plato and the eccentric philosopher Diogenes the Cynic, who each defended a position that can be interpreted as being acosmistic. But, as was stated before, nihilism goes even beyond heavy scepticism and

⁸⁶ Kerferd (1981), p. 17.

⁸⁷ In his own time Socrates himself was probably counted among the Sophists; however, Plato, via the literary character of Socrates, tried to distinguish himself as well as his teacher from the moneymaking practices of the Sophists. See *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Goudsblom (1960), p. 129.

⁸⁹ This phrase is found in the *Apology* by Plato (1982), passage 21d. Socrates could claim this because he was the only one that knew that his own convictions were baseless, unlike the other wise individuals in Athens that proclaimed to know all kinds of things.

instead plunges into the total negation of certainty. Our original concerns were limited to the second leg of acosmism: the very possibility of finding the truth. Therefore, let us lastly consider a Hellenistic school of philosophy that dared to cast doubt on the last bastion of certainty that Socrates clung to: rationality.

The philosophical school in question was established by Pyrrho; a philosopher who advocated a form of radical scepticism that can be considered a direct reaction to the Eleatics⁹⁰. The Eleatic school still accepted the dogma that knowledge existed and could be reached, just not by the senses as we normally would. Pyrronism, however, even doubted the special authority that rationality usually had in establishing truth and knowledge. What is left is a full egalitarian stance towards information that is gained via empirical and rational channels. The result of this position can be seen in the subsequent ideal of the philosopher. The Pyrronistic ideal of the philosopher is of someone who rises above the common opinions regarding good and evil, truth and untruth, in the realisation that humans are incapable of establishing these matters with certainty. Hence, truth is unreachable and every effort to reach it is in vain. With this final defeatist step, the last human possibility of obtaining knowledge is exhausted, resulting in a situation where nothing can be known and nothing should be said⁹¹.

When looking back at this historical development of the conception of truth it becomes clear that, in this case, acosmism is the result of

⁹⁰ Goudsblom (1960), p. 138.

⁹¹ “Als Diogenes een dolgeworden Socrates was, mag Pyrrho een stilgeworden Socrates heten: iemand die de waarheid onbereikbaar weet, en alle inspanning, ook het zoeken naar de waarheid, als ijdel heeft afgeschreven”. Idem, p. 139. According to Goudsblom, however, this doesn't mean that the term 'nihilist' applies to Pyrrho; if all options are equal in light of reason, every individual should do what he thinks is right and leave each other alone. This is a moral message that follows from the acknowledgement that humans are incapable of truly understanding the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong. Pyrrho remained impartial to all suggestions and suggested silence instead, but this is not the same as “the situation which obtains when everything is permitted”, as Goudsblom understands nihilism.

overzealous and demanding criteria for truth that were sown by the Eleatic school and were further nurtured by Socrates' search for true justified opinions. But the physical world could never satisfy these stringent notions of truth, convincing rational minded philosophers that this world is illusory and false. This historical development is important when we take the next step towards understanding acosmism as an aspect of nihilism, and want to answer the question if Spinoza also denounces the reality of the world in favour of the reality of a transcended metaphysical order.

2.2. Eighteenth Century Acosmism

The relation between Spinoza and the Eleatic school is not trivial; in the late 18th century many philosophers considered Spinoza to be a revivalist of the Eleatic school due to his monism and his denial of the reality of finite things⁹². It was exactly this interpretation of Spinoza's monism that led to the suspicion that Spinozism was almost synonymous with acosmism and pantheism⁹³. However, this does not mean that the acosmistic reading is the only correct interpretation, and we should remain mindful of Spinoza's own philosophical ideals in interpreting his work. With this in mind let us investigate the following question: can Spinozism be interpreted as promoting the view that our world is, in some sense, an unreal illusion? We begin with the philosophers that were most influential in this debate.

The acosmistic interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy was mostly advanced by Hegel and other contemporary philosophers, such as Maimon and Jacobi, who were critical of the reigning philosophy of their time:

⁹² Melamed (2010), p. 77.

⁹³ Copleston (1946), p. 44. Citing Hegel: "Spinozism might really just as well or even better have been termed Acosmism (than atheism), since according to its teaching it is not to the world, finite existence, the universe, that reality and permanency are to be ascribed, but rather to God alone as the substantial".

Kant's transcendentalism⁹⁴. For these philosophers, the notion of a *ding an sich* was highly problematic, for this noumenal realm of 'things as they are in themselves' is simultaneously taken to be the causal source of the content of our cognitive states while nevertheless also standing outside the realm of all our possible experiences⁹⁵. While this formulation of the relation between metaphysics and epistemology is highly specific to Kant's philosophical system, some of the same concerns also come forward in their reading of Spinoza. The way this problem expresses itself in their reading is via the following problem of monistic systems: traditional monism identifies Being (existence) with eternity, but then denies the reality of the visible, heterogeneous world of finite things⁹⁶. So according to this reading, the source of the suspicion of acosmism in Spinoza becomes apparent in the relation between infinitude and finiteness, echoing the philosophy of the Eleatic school.

Hegel's treatment of Spinoza, as it relates to our current interests, can be found in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1990) and *Lectures on Logic* (2001) where he emphasises the following statement, the underlying idea of which can be found in several places of Spinoza's collected works⁹⁷: "*Omnis determinatio est negatio.*"⁹⁸. The context of this statement is that Spinoza is clarifying to a friend that, because when we consider some object as a geometrical figure/form, this determination

⁹⁴ For the discussion and treatment of the topic of acosmism in German Idealism I am heavily indebted to Melamed (2010), Melamed (2012a), and Melamed (2012b).

⁹⁵ Lord (2011) explores the critiques of Jacobi and Maimon against Kant's transcendentalism. For Hegel's critique on Kantian metaphysics, and his specific qualms regarding the distinction between the *ding an sich* and how it appears to us, see Longuenesse (2007), p. 18.

⁹⁶ Rosen, p. 88. "Traditional monism identifies Being and the world with eternity; but this is in effect to deny the reality of the visible heterogeneous, and "moving" world of things". Rosen himself also refers here to Hegel's treatment of Spinoza's monism in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.

⁹⁷ This idea can be found in his letter to Jarig Jelles: Letter 50 (G 4:240b). But also in E1p8s1 (1:49).

⁹⁸ Translation: Every determination is a negation. Hegel (1990), p. 154.

doesn't relate to the essence of this object⁹⁹. Rather, it denotes its non-being instead because matter considered without limitation can't have an exact geometrical shape. Because all determinations are limitations, and limitations are negations, it follows that all determinations are negations.

To properly understand the significance of this statement we first need to recall that Spinoza unified the Cartesian categories of thought and extension under one underlying substance, whose essence (or concept) necessarily contains existence¹⁰⁰. Only *this* absolute substance truly exists: all other metaphysical categories are existentially contingent and can only exist by grace of this first necessary existence. According to Hegel, this unity provides us with two determinations, meaning ways of understanding substance; first that of the universal that has being in and of itself, and, second, that of the determination of the particular and singular which amounts to individuality¹⁰¹. Furthermore, it should be made clear that Spinoza defines attributes as epistemological categories¹⁰²; meaning that they are defined in terms of how human beings perceive the world and are able to gain knowledge from it. In this epistemological sense, attributes are simply two ways that the human mind is capable in knowing substance¹⁰³. As will become clear shortly, this epistemological angle is important in understanding the German Idealists' reading of Spinozism as acosmism, while also exposing its limits.

⁹⁹ Letter 50 (G 4:238).

¹⁰⁰ E1p19 (G 2:64). For a more thorough discussion of the history and possible interpretations of the relation between substance and its existence one should consult Melamed (2012b).

¹⁰¹ Hegel (1990), p. 154. "We have before us two determinations, the universal or what has being in and for itself, and secondly the determination of the particular and singular, that is, individuality".

¹⁰² E1d4 (G 2:45).

¹⁰³ A modern reformulation of this definition can be found in Della Rocca (1996), p. 157-171. This incarnation of Spinoza's famous definition also neatly connects to Van den Burg's (2007) attempts to unite Davidson, a self-professed 'modern Spinozist', and Spinoza. In this case, the emphasis has shifted to a more propositional account that is more in line with modern, analytic sentiments.

This brings us to the acosmistic interpretation of the statement “*omnis determinatio est negatio*” spearheaded by Hegel: the unreality of the finite that Spinoza’s philosophy seems to be implying, in the same way that the Eleatics did. The Eleatics emphasized the true reality of one unifying substance, just as Spinoza posits God as the one true substance, and both schools arrived at this unity via rational thought. The essential step then is that attributes are only related to the human intellect and have no true ground in reality¹⁰⁴. The essence of thought and extension only relate to what the human mind can understand, and the same holds for modes, meaning that all metaphysical categories are unreal because of their epistemologically defined character.

The relation between negation and determinations is thus that all finite determinations leave something out from the one real substance, and their derivatives don’t deserve the same ontological status as reality. In this characterization of Spinozistic thought, we don’t have true knowledge of the world, but only of what our mind is able to make sense of. In this process Hegel is echoing his, and his contemporaries’, critique of Kant’s *ding an sich*. In conclusion, Hegel argues that Spinozism denounces the finite world as a mind-dependent illusion, legitimizing an acosmistic interpretation of Spinoza’s legacy¹⁰⁵.

It is clear that Spinoza demonstrates a grand reversal that is not unlike some sort of magic trick; where an atheist would bring a metaphysical God down to the level of nature and then cast him out, Spinoza, rather, elevates nature to godly status. Hegel’s reading then implies that in this reversal nature is actually cast out and that the perceived plurality of things is an illusion that is linked to our intellectual powers of understanding. An acknowledgement of this reversal, and subsequent result, is also found in other German Idealists; Maimon insisted that Spinoza was unfairly interpreted as an atheist and should

¹⁰⁴ Melamed (2010), p. 80.

¹⁰⁵ For a more theoretical and systematic treatment of Spinoza’s acosmism, see Hübner (2015).

rather be considered an acosmist¹⁰⁶. He goes on to argue that, in Spinozism, only the unity of the world is real while the perceived diversification is unreal; this, according to Maimon, makes Spinoza the exact opposite of someone who only considers nature and all finite things within it as real, as an atheist would¹⁰⁷.

This acosmistic reading also seems to be hinted at in other passages of Spinoza's work, further bolstering the strength of the position in general¹⁰⁸, however, this position has been made clear enough and we must now turn to its counterarguments. And powerful counterarguments they are¹⁰⁹. As we had seen before, the acosmistic interpretation was primarily argued for along epistemological lines. This is not completely unfair, considering that Spinoza explained his essential definitions, used within this debate, through epistemological lenses, such as that of essence and attribute. This epistemological angle was then interpreted as a human shortcoming, and the perceived plurality of the world was denounced as an unreality. However, in order to identify Spinozism with Eleatic monism, Hegel overemphasized any element regarding diversification and finiteness found in Spinoza's texts¹¹⁰. The reason for this (mis)characterization, shortly put, was to fit Spinozism logically within a teleological historical narrative in which Hegel's own philosophy of dialectics was the ultimate conclusion¹¹¹.

But if "*omnis determinatio est negatio*" is not stating a negative relation between our epistemological powers of understanding and our

¹⁰⁶ Melamed (2010), p. 79.

¹⁰⁷ This is different from the moral notion of atheism discussed in the preceding chapter, but it does not diverge from the notion of atheism in the sense of Deism that was also discussed.

¹⁰⁸ Melamed's articles investigate these other key passages, and their validity as advocating for an acosmistic position, in greater depth.

¹⁰⁹ A short, but comprehensive, list of all the delegitimizing reasons against the acosmistic reading can be found in Melamed (2012a), p. 187-189. Here we will limit ourselves to the ones that are epistemological in nature.

¹¹⁰ Melamed (2010), p. 80.

¹¹¹ Melamed (2010), p. 81.

perceived heterogeneous world, which would be tantamount to acosmism, what is the true meaning, and relevance, of this statement? A more faithful interpretation of this statement can be found when we take a much-needed look at Spinoza's epistemology; from this we will also better understand what we have knowledge *of*, which was one of the guiding questions within this chapter. So let us first look at Spinoza's epistemology, which is primarily featured in the second part of his *Ethics*.

2.3. Spinoza's Epistemology

The first mention of 'knowledge' in the *Ethics*, within the geometrical exposition, is right at the beginning, contained in the fourth axiom of the first part¹¹². The axiom itself simply states that having knowledge of an effect means that one must have knowledge of its cause. In the first part, the axiom is essential in leading the reader to Spinoza's substance monism. To give an example of how it is used: in E1p3 (G 2:47) the axiom is used to show that its inverse is untrue, namely that if two things are unrelated in every sense they cannot be understood through each other. From this Spinoza ultimately chains onto the idea that, logically, only one substance can exist. But this substance monism also brings us to the following epistemological requisite: if there is only one substance, true knowledge, in the sense that it is knowledge of something necessary and not contingent, of anything is knowledge of this substance¹¹³.

There are two epistemological considerations, or ideals, at work in Spinoza's overall philosophy: the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), which is implicit, and the perspective from eternity, which is made explicit. We will briefly consider these ideals in order to solidify some essential mechanics within this epistemological system. The PSR simply states that everything has a minimal reason, cause, or ground for its

¹¹² E1a4 (G 2:46). "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause". Curley (1985), Pg. 410.

¹¹³ E2P44. (G 2:125).

existence¹¹⁴. In the preceding paragraph we found that each of these terms can be understood to be coextensive with each other: everything is grounded, or caused, and conceived through the self-causing substance¹¹⁵. The PSR is the rationalistic formulation of the Spinozistic ideal that there are no theoretical gaps in our knowledge of nature: everything that is has a definite cause that we can have knowledge of. From his earliest work onwards Spinoza's philosophy is riddled with allusions to this rationalistic principle¹¹⁶. However, it is never explicitly stated in the *Ethics* as a principle as such, although E1p11d2 is often taken to be the closest exact formulation¹¹⁷. It is the usage of this principle that further solidifies Spinoza as a metaphysical rationalist, so the importance of this principle for his philosophy cannot be understated¹¹⁸.

This brings us to the second epistemological ideal, which also entails the preceding one: the perspective from eternity. Broadly put, this means one should aim to comprehend the world from the perspective of the eternal: *sub specie eternitatis*¹¹⁹. Humans have many ways of knowing and understanding the world, utilizing countless of perspectives. However,

¹¹⁴ On the PSR, see Della Rocca (2012). It should also be noted here that the PSR is most closely associated with the work of Leibniz, who named it and formulated the principle in a general logical form.

¹¹⁵ The relation between Spinoza's epistemology and causality is obvious, following from E1a4 (G 2:45). 'Conceived/understood through' and 'caused by' are thus equivalent to each other.

¹¹⁶ Principles of Philosophy, part 1, axiom 11 (G 1:158): "Nothing exists of which it cannot be asked, what is the cause, *or* reason, why it exists". Curley (1985), p. 246.

¹¹⁷ E1P11d2 (G 2:52) states: "For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, both for its existence and for its nonexistence". Curley (1985), p. 417. Both Lin (2010) and Della Rocca (2008) argue that the PSR is already build into the axiomatic structure of the *Ethics*, E1P11 is simply the crown that combines them.

¹¹⁸ There is plenty of scholarly debate regarding the exact manner that this principle is active within Spinozism. For a general overview on discussion on this matter I recommend Lin (2010). For a staunch defender on the vital importance of this principle for Spinoza I recommend Della Rocca (2008) and for critique on this interpretation one should look into Garber (2015).

¹¹⁹ Translation: "under the species or aspect of eternity". E2P44c2 (G 2:126).

only through the rational perspective of the eternal do we acquire knowledge of substance as a necessary and self-causing thing. Given that knowledge of an effect contains knowledge of its cause, knowing the ultimate and self-causing source of everything is as good as knowledge is going to get. Furthermore, knowledge of the infinite substance is the truest kind of knowledge because it contains all possible perspectives on substance and the knowledge that they produce, be it limited in their own way.

By using words such as ‘finite’, ‘limited’, and ‘truest’ one might reasonably suspect that some degree of Eleatic acosmism is creeping into Spinoza’s epistemology, but this is not entirely the case. Knowledge from the eternal perspective has to be contrasted with two other kinds of knowledge, of which the eternal is only the last step¹²⁰. The first step, or kind, of knowledge, is the natural way that humans perceive the world, namely via our senses¹²¹. This level is not yet governed by rational organization; producing ideas that do not convey adequate and true knowledge of the world, but only a relative, partial, and subjective picture of how things presently seem to be to the perceiver¹²². In short, knowledge from this level is inadequate because it is produced by faulty imagination and consists of anthropomorphifications of its explananda, thus constituting mutilated knowledge of nature¹²³.

The second level does provide us with adequate knowledge, as opposed to the inadequate of the first kind, because these ideas are formed in a rational and orderly manner, their subject matter relating to the essence of things rather than how they seem to us¹²⁴. By shifting our perspective from our limited subjective perspective to the eternal we can form universal concepts that denote the law-like necessity of nature. The second intellect already understands the necessity of its own being as

¹²⁰ E2p40s2 (G 2:22).

¹²¹ E1p29s (G 2:114).

¹²² E2p25 (G 2:111).

¹²³ E2p29c (G 2:114).

¹²⁴ E2p40s2 (G 2:122).

constituting a thinking thing and as such it is already a perspective from eternity. The final level of knowledge, however, goes even beyond it and from this perspective that we intuitively understand substance as it is completely, including everything that follows from its necessity¹²⁵.

2.4. Acosmistic Illusions Shattered

Now that this epistemological framework has been put into place, we are in the position to better critique the acosmistic interpretation of Spinoza's work. When we ask ourselves the question again of *what* we have knowledge of in Spinozism it will become clear that acosmism is an unlikely position to endure. The first problem arises with the three different levels of knowledge; they are not mutually exclusive, in the sense that levels of knowledge can usurp each other. Even if knowledge is derived from a limited perspective, if it is rationally ordered and adequate, it is still legitimate knowledge of the eternal substance. Each step is integral for the next and only the inadequate ideas are capable of being false¹²⁶. This means that we do not have knowledge of some illusion, being the antonym of truth, but rather some true part of the whole. This last step is not something the Eleatic monists would adhere to, since it explains away all possible acosmistic suspicions leading from the relation between unreal finite beings and the real infinite substance.

This also brings us the correct interpretation of "*omnis determinatio est negatio*". The charge of acosmism came from the idea that the world of plurality, containing finite objects, had to be illusory because they are limitations stemming from our epistemological shortcomings. However, a more accurate interpretation would be to understand the remark as stating the relationship between finite things and the maximally

¹²⁵ Concerning truth and the distinction between 'adequate' and 'inadequate' knowledge, Spinoza adheres to an otherwise unremarkable correspondence model of truth in which one has a true thought when the object of this thought corresponds to its object in extension. That Spinoza employs a correspondence theory of truth is apparent from E1a6 (G 2:37).

¹²⁶ E2p41 (G 2:122).

determined Being¹²⁷. In comparison with the acosmistic interpretation, this reading agrees with the idea that finite things are limitations, but the limitation is one in which concepts only disclose a degree of infinitely many facets of substance. Thus, it disagrees with the idea that *only* the totality, *only* when considered completely, is *truly* real. Within Spinoza's epistemology we are capable of obtaining true knowledge of the essences of modes, not in spite of, but exactly *because* the attributes are part of God. So the kind of limitation that *is* expressed in "*omnis determinatio est negatio*" is rather one between substance and its attributes, and not, as Hegel and others would try to convince us, an ontological relation between actual objects¹²⁸.

We now have a conclusive answer to the question how acosmism fits into Spinozism. The first line of argument we followed was that of the illusory existence of diversity and finiteness within Spinoza's monism. The primary source of this acosmistic interpretation was from Hegel in combination with the German philosophical tradition of Idealism. The acosmistic reading emphasized our epistemological capacities and concluded that the perceived diversity of the contingent physical world was less ontologically real compared to the intellectually conceived metaphysical unity of substance. However, by overemphasizing the discrepancy between our experienced world and the unity of the world Hegel tried to convince us that we didn't have true knowledge of a true world. But this was not the case; within Spinoza's optimistic epistemology we have knowledge of substance, but in order to access this knowledge we have to turn away from the inadequate knowledge provided by our first impressions.

¹²⁷ Melamed (2010), p. 182.

¹²⁸ Melamed (2010), p. 183. "In the lines that follow this passage, Kant stresses that we remain in complete ignorance regarding the existence of such a being and that the limitation relation is merely a relation between an idea and certain concepts, and not a relation between actual objects". This formulation is also related to Melamed's compelling point that Kant's ideas regarding this matter are more in line with Spinoza's original intention within the text than Hegel's reading.

We should, therefore, not forget that Spinoza, does, in a certain sense, denounce our standard experience of the world. In our natural state, in the sense that it is pre-rational, we gain inadequate knowledge of the world because of its sensorial rather than intellectual origin. Certainly, we observed that this doesn't mean that the world is an illusion, but we should keep in mind that many of the standard ways that we observe the world doesn't show us the world as it really is. This is in line with the common theme found within Spinoza's philosophy, one that was introduced within our general introduction and later resurfaced in our discussion regarding Spinoza's atheism: Spinoza appropriates many ideas, concepts, and terms, but he changes their content so radically that they hardly seem to resemble their original meaning¹²⁹.

2.5. Conclusion Chapter 2

This leaves us with an answer that is both affirmative and negative in regards to Spinozism representing nihilistic tendencies in the form of acosmism. Considered as a whole, but especially Spinoza's epistemology, his philosophy is incredibly optimistic in the idea that we can truly grasp and understand the universe and our place within it. But this doesn't mean that there is a place to be understood. Furthermore, Spinoza does deny that humans, as we naturally are and experience the world, have true knowledge of the world. This is made clear with the distinction between adequate and inadequate knowledge; inadequate knowledge is related to the original way that humans perceive the world. What we gain, however, is the certainty of adequate knowledge when we adjust our perspective from the subjective towards the eternal. Again, Spinoza has given us an answer that guts the concept of the world of its original meaning, but what we gain is something stronger and in its own way comforting in its knowability.

¹²⁹ An excellent example of this is Spinoza's reappropriation of the scholastic terms *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*; see Steenbakkers (2004).

Chapter 3: Freedom in Necessity

Bojack: *Hooray! Everything is meaningless! Nothing I do has consequence!*

Bojack Horseman, Season 1, Episode 3. “Prickly-Muffin” (2014).

In this chapter we will explore the notoriously difficult notion of freedom within Spinozism. Freedom is important because it is regarded as a prerequisite for our behavior to belong to ourselves, and consequently for our self-directed intentions to matter at all. When freedom is denied, as an aspect of nihilism, we do not only exclude our own autonomy, we also exclude our moral responsibility and agency, opening up the way to a situation in which everything is permitted because we are not responsible for our own actions. This *moral nihilism*, the claim that no moral responsibility can be ascribed to anyone¹³⁰, is a dangerous belief that is a threat in the same way that deism was seen as a menace in the seventeenth century: it threatens the stability of a society that is built on accountability. We will therefore investigate the mechanics of this denial of, in particular moral, responsibility, in relation to determinism, the notion that every decision and causal chain of events within the universe is fixed and inevitable¹³¹.

¹³⁰ Shier, O'Rourke & Campbell (2004), p. 1.

¹³¹ To be clear: we are only considering causal determinism, a common form of determinism found in the seventeenth century. In this strain of determinism ‘being predestined’ and ‘being externally caused’ are synonymous because there is only one possible causal reaction to any preceding action. A larger overview on the discussion of free will, autonomy, and determinism in the seventeenth century can be found in Sleight, Chappell & Della Rocca (2000).

3.1. Libertarian Freedom

The standard way of defining freedom, and how many people intuitively think about it, is as being undetermined. Let us explore this idea with two concepts: spontaneity and free will. Freedom as spontaneity entails being the sole cause of one's behavior, unprompted by foreign influences. This notion emphasizes self-determination in contrast to other external determinations, the idea being that only behavior that originates from the agent itself is truly authentic. This is also related to our intuitions about free will: the capacity to make authentic choices. When external determinations influence our choices we wouldn't consider them to be our own authentic decisions; our intentions were meddled with and, in a certain sense, corrupted. Both spontaneity and free will point out self-determination as an important component belonging to freedom, but more importantly these conceptions of freedom also assume causal independence in order to properly function. The moment that other sources can be pointed out as being causally relevant for the outcome of our authentic decisions, neither spontaneity nor free will can be considered to have been solely self-determined, undermining their status as being free.

These two examples are instances of the more general philosophical position of libertarianism, a position that argues that an agent is only truly free when he could have acted differently¹³². Freedom as spontaneity is libertarian because spontaneous actions are unprompted and contain an element of randomness: a spontaneous action could have been different in regards to its content, time or place. The same holds for free will; a free decision is prompted and guided only by our own volitions, the action could have been different if we felt like it. We can now understand why libertarians perceive determinism as being a threat to freedom: when everything is determined, we couldn't have acted otherwise, undermining

¹³² Kisner (2011), p. 46. The examples of 'spontaneity' and 'free will' are also taken from his work.

their core libertarian ideal. In order for our actions to be free we need to be self-caused and causally separated from external influences, but within a determinist system this is simply not possible.

What is at stake here is our autonomy, and consequently our moral responsibility¹³³. As we stated in the beginning of this chapter, freedom is often regarded as a necessary prerequisite in order for our actions to be considered our own. This means that if one couldn't have acted otherwise the moral responsibility for their actions does not solely rest with the one committing these acts. If causal determinism is true, none of our actions could be considered to be the sole product our own volitions and intentions; it places our bodily actions outside the sphere of our own influence. This displacement, instantiated by determinism, between self-determination and any subsequent action, therefore heavily undermines the possibility of holding anyone accountable, opening up a situation where no one can be blamed and nothing can be controlled. Now that the nihilistic mechanic between determinism and the subsequent loss of freedom has been put in place, we can look for traces of the same mechanics within Spinozism. The question is then in what particular way or form determinism presents itself from his core philosophical considerations.

3.2. Spinoza's Necessitarianism

Spinoza's commitment to causal determinism is initially revealed in the first part of the *Ethics*, but its consequences and arguments reverberate throughout the whole book, shaping many of its key passages. We can see the notion of causal determinism, which itself is the result of many other of Spinoza's definitions, lemmata and postulates, very clearly in the following proposition: "Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite

¹³³ In this discussion we are only concerned with the meaning of these terms as they relate to Spinoza and his time period. As a result we will consider 'autonomy' to be sufficiently synonymous with 'self-directness' and/or 'self-causing'.

and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause [...]’¹³⁴. This is clearly a commitment to a system of strict causal determinism. Every singular object within Spinozistic nature has a definite cause and is destined to produce a subsequent result.

Furthermore, it clearly follows from this passage that nothing within nature can be causally independent; everything is caused by something preceding it and then causes something else *ad infinitum*. It should also be recalled that Spinoza doesn’t treat causality as a metaphysical primitive and instead provides an account of causation in terms of something else¹³⁵. This ‘something else’ is the first cause: the self-causing substance whose essence contains existence. With this fact in mind let us turn to the next proposition.

A system of strict physical causal determinism is rigid enough, but Spinoza goes even further by stating the following: “In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way”¹³⁶. The first proposition is limited to physical determinism and only concerns the relations between finite objects within nature. But this proposition equates physical causal determinism with metaphysical necessity: nothing in nature could have been different and is therefore necessary. This encompasses every single trivial fact or seemingly inconsequential detail of this universe, including the color of the very shirt you are wearing and the current contents of your pockets. The world of possibilities and chance we experience is not the world as it truly is, for nothing is actually contingent.

¹³⁴ E1p28 (G 2:69). Curley (1985), p. 432.

¹³⁵ Newlands (2010), p. 474.

¹³⁶ E1p29 (G 2:70), p. 433.

It should be further noted that Spinoza makes no distinction between logical necessity and physical inevitability¹³⁷, providing a philosophical system in which nothing can be different than what is the actual case. What all this amounts to is necessitarianism: a form of determinism that entails that nothing is logically or metaphysically possible except that which is actual¹³⁸. This is a very strong claim, going even beyond standard claims made by most positions of determinism. But it also leaves us with some confusion regarding the modal status of the finite modes, something that is worth appreciating because it can help us understand the notion of freedom later on. As we discussed before, the essence of substance contains existence, and the above proposition clearly states that everything that follows from substance follows necessarily. This establishes a strict causal nexus that is necessary, but only due to its first cause. Because Spinoza doesn't distinguish between logical necessity and physical inevitability, the existence of every mode is at the same time contingent in its essence, but also a necessary existence in its actuality.

This framework of Spinozistic determinism shows that we aren't free in the libertarian sense. Not only could we not have acted differently in the absolute sense, spontaneity and free will are both made unattainable by the impossibility of causal independence, aspects that both only belong to substance. However, we are not yet done. We have not yet found any hints of the nihilistic mechanics between the loss of freedom and its subsequent loss of moral responsibility. What we have discussed so far of Spinoza's literary corpus is the *TTP*, for his views on religious and political matters, and the first two parts of the *Ethics*, which were concerned with metaphysics and epistemology respectively. But we have yet to delve into the last three chapters, whose contents are decisively

¹³⁷ Parkinson (1971), p. 543. "However, this cannot be so; for it will be remembered that, according to Spinoza, causal necessity *is* logical necessity".

¹³⁸ Garrett (2000), p. 213. A larger discussion of necessitarianism and its assumptions can be found in Koisten (2003).

more ethical in nature and are related to our direct concerns in regards to freedom.

3.3. Spinozistic Freedom

The goal of the *Ethics* is to sketch an intellectual and moral kind of freedom, which first explores the nature of God, how we come to know it, and then how to live our lives informed by these truths. This last step brings us decisively into moral territory for it is concerned with living a good life. In chapter one we, briefly, established the strong relation between morality and freedom within Spinozism, stating that both our greatest happiness and freedom consisted of a love of God. This was given as the answer to the question why it was better to live the life of a virtuous Deist rather than the immoral atheist. We simply concluded that it went counter to Spinoza's ethical ideals, but we have not conclusively shown why this is the case, just that the absence of a traditional parental-like God in speculative Deism did not immediately lead to the immoral life of atheistic Epicurean.

We find two notions of freedom in the *Ethics* that we already discussed: (1) being causally independent, and (2) being self-caused¹³⁹. Both notions of freedom obviously belong to substance. In the first place because nothing can externally influence it, and, furthermore, it is entirely self-causing and thus self-determinate. But this is not the case for finite modes: finite modes are necessarily un-free since they are not causally independent, so this possibility is conclusively closed. Following the libertarian conception of freedom we also would expect that the second notion is impossible as well, but this is slightly more complicated and actually accounted for in the *Ethics*. The central idea is that we are self-caused, or autonomous, relative to our causal independence of external things. The biggest shift that has to be made is not characterizing freedom

¹³⁹ E1d7 (G 2:46). Here Spinoza introduces his definition of 'free', which entails both mentioned notions.

as a prerequisite for our actions to belong to us, but rather understanding freedom as a quality belonging to an individual in the same way that a mode belongs to its substance. It is with this kind of freedom that Spinoza proposes a model of personal freedom that acknowledges the stringent laws of nature while also accounting for how one can be considered to be self-determining within a system of necessity. But before we explore some objections to, or impossibilities of, this idea we need to construct it as faithfully as we can from the source itself. First we construct the ethical ideal of freedom, afterwards we will discuss the attainability of this model.

As is often the case with Spinoza's philosophy, many terms that he deploys are coextensive with each other, building a series of equivalences. So in order to understand the main concepts of freedom and autonomy we need to explore the way that they interact and, in a large sense, denote the same things but in different terms. This is best understood via the concept of *conatus*, a concept that lies at the intersection of ethics and freedom. In the third part of the *Ethics*, which is concerned with the power of emotions, Spinoza introduces the notion of *conatus* as being the aspect of one's being that strives to persevere in its own existence¹⁴⁰. The reason that this notion has to be introduced is because our identity is not some metaphysical entity in the form of a soul but rather something impersonal: we are the composite of many different bodies that move in an organized way¹⁴¹. The *conatus* is the aspect of this composite whole that strives to remain a whole; if there were no *conatus* any singular body would form new relations with other composite bodies. When we eat or drink we take bodies outside ourselves into ourselves and make them our own, overcoming the *conatus* of these simpler bodies. But at the same time, other bodies try to overtake us; when we die we are not persevering anymore and are taken over by the *conatus* of other creatures, becoming parts of their composite bodies.

¹⁴⁰ E3p6 (G 2:146).

¹⁴¹ Parkinson (1971), p. 532.

With the notion of *conatus* in place we turn to the important equivalence between our essence and power of activity. In a somewhat confusing proposition after the introductory proposition of the *conatus*, Spinoza states that our *conatus* is our “actual essence”¹⁴². What this simply means is that, at any given time, we are our essence actualized in time and space, further meaning that our state of being at a given time is the direct result of our endeavor to exist. Less confusingly formulated: our *conatus* is always resisting the strivings of other beings, so our current state is the direct result of the success of our own *conatus*. This actual essence is then our power of activity; it is the present actual situation from which all our subsequent actions can follow. When we have a “successful” *conatus*, we have a large degree of freedom in our actions, while a down beaten and overwhelmed *conatus* has limited actions to its disposal.

The power of activity is our first definite step towards understanding the notion of freedom within Spinozism for it entails an essential aspect of freedom: self-determination. Initially, it seemed obvious that Spinoza portrayed a bleak prospect of human freedom, depicting a libertarian nightmare where human beings are tossed about by all kinds of external factors¹⁴³. But when we don Spinoza’s terminology the issue is that, in this situation, our *conatus* is primarily determined by outside causes, imposing their striving over our own. Ideally, what we want is to act in our own self-interest: choosing for those actions that agree with our *conatus*. To further elaborate on this problem in Spinoza’s terminology, we should remember the distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas, where to have knowledge of an effect is to have knowledge of its cause. Adequate knowledge is characterized as being guided and constituted by the dictates of reason and rational investigation, aimed at the true metaphysical causes of things; in contrast, inadequate knowledge was

¹⁴² E3p7 (G 2:146).

¹⁴³ E3p59s (G 2:188). “From what has been said it is that we are driven about in many ways by external causes, and that, like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds, we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate”. Curley (1985), p. 529

limited to our individual human perspective and as such did not contain knowledge of essences. When this idea is applied to acting agents, one is self-determinate when an agent itself is the adequate/sufficient cause of its own subsequent action, but when he is acted upon he is the inadequate cause because the action cannot be understood from his activity alone.

This brings us to an essential conclusion of equivalence: freedom, as being self-determined, is to be guided by adequate ideas. Since our *conatus* is our nature, we are acting fully on the grounds of our own necessity when we act as being our own adequate cause. Hence, in this case we are self-determined because an action follows from our essence. But this does not mean that we can act in accordance to our whims! These impulses are but temporary and only occur when we are enticed by the influences of external things, as such the actions following these causes don't belong to our essence and we cannot be considered to be their sufficient cause. In an important sense, when guided by our uninformed passions we are acted upon, our *conatus* is overwhelmed and diminished by the striving of others. This is a more positive interpretation of Spinozistic freedom as being self-condoned activity aimed at preserving our being.

3.4. The Model of Human Excellence

We can now consider the model of human excellence: the free man who is led by reason¹⁴⁴. Spinoza's moral philosophy is a species of eudemonism: living well is achieved through virtue and understanding, aimed at attaining human perfection (blessedness)¹⁴⁵. The simple moral message is

¹⁴⁴ E4p66d (G 2:260). "A free man, that is, one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone [...]". Curley (1985), p. 583.

¹⁴⁵ Nadler (2015). p. 105. Eudaimonism is a Hellenistic moral philosophy that was also proposed by Epicurus, a position that was synonymous with immoral hedonism. However, a subtle difference between Spinoza and Epicurus would be that Epicurus does indeed defend the view that all our happiness is essentially a function of our appetites, linking happiness to pleasure. In contrast, Spinoza is more in line with the Stoic tradition in which virtue is related to the rational understanding of one's appetites. Stoics propose that our rational motivations are stronger, more causally

that we ought to pursue those ends that promote and enhance our *conatus* i.e. powers of activity, whilst shunning those ends that would constrain us and make us passive means. Only by having adequate knowledge of ourselves, and the universe, could we act according to our own volitions and essence. Then, we should choose those actions that have the highest probability of achieving the goals that bring us closer to our perfection. As such, the model of human perfection is the rational man because he chooses those actions that are most useful to him in achieving his perfection, and this striving is best achieved through understanding and virtue exactly because he understands their utility. The model of the free man exemplifies our maximal power and activity, only acting on the basis of adequate ideas.

When this psychological model is accepted one should agree, on the basis of its arguments, that living a virtuous life is within our own best interests. However, it cannot be denied that this psychological model is very much an egotistical defense of virtue. Normally, we would distrust those that only seek to increase their own powers, suspecting that they would even go to immoral lengths to exploit others and use them to their own advantage. Spinoza does not deny that this is the common way of thinking about rational egocentric-driven individuals, but explicitly states that this self-serving attitude is actually the foundation of virtue instead of immorality¹⁴⁶. In Spinoza's own words: "The desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason, I call morality"¹⁴⁷. The reason for this is the following: the rational man is virtuous because it increases his power, and he chooses those actions and ends that are the most advantageous to him, but also because it agrees with the nature of

effective, than our emotions. A Stoic would act on the basis of what he knows is in his best interests, not what would provide him with the most accumulated pleasure over time.

¹⁴⁶ E4p18s (G 2:283). "I have done this to win, if possible, the attention of those who believe that this principle - that everyone is bound to seek his own advantage - is the foundation, not of virtue and morality, but of immorality". Curley (1985), p. 599.

¹⁴⁷ E4p37 (G 2:235).

all of man¹⁴⁸. What we desire through reason is related to God and our knowledge of him, and this is also the case for other individuals. We will therefore act on our own egotistical desires, but these desires are in accordance with the whole of nature and mankind, leading to a system of morality that is egotistically driven and aimed at increasing the powers of mankind in total¹⁴⁹. Let us now return to the main topic of this chapter.

3.5. What Human Freedom Is and Isn't

The nihilistic mechanic between determinism and the loss of freedom has been partially dispelled by examining Spinoza's moral ideal of the rational man. Even though "freedom of the will" seems to be impossible due to the unbreakable laws of nature, the free man can act rationally and self-determined because his essence is directly a mode of God. The positive message is that in acting according to his own essence the rational man is free. But there is a problem that should be considered: the attainability of being a rational man guided only by adequate knowledge¹⁵⁰. A model is just a model: an idealization that itself does not exist. A nihilist can be convinced by showing that acting virtuous and rationally is in his best interest and will provide him with the greatest happiness, but this activity has to be at least possible in order to be valuable. What worth does a moral philosophy have when it lies outside our reach?

¹⁴⁸ E4p37 (G 2:235). "The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater". Curley (1985), p. 564.

¹⁴⁹ It should come as no surprise that this excludes animals. In contrast to Descartes who denied that animals have mental sensations, Spinoza doesn't deny this but does still argue that, on the basis of differing natures, we may "use [animals] at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us". E4p37 (G 2:237). Curley (1985), p. 566.

¹⁵⁰ Interpretations of Spinoza's proposed model of the free man that present it as an unobtainable ideal can be found in Bennett (1984), Kisner (2010) and Garber (2004). Nadler (2015) and Smith (2003), p. 78, are the only source mentioned here that offer contrary views and favorable interpretations of the model.

Let us then consider two-part evidence for why we should believe that this ideal is unobtainable. Firstly, there is the problem of the practical implications that prevent us from living like the ideal man. This problem is best exemplified by the common meaning of the word ‘stoic’: a person who is free from passions, unmoved by joy or grief, and submits without complaint to unavoidable necessity. In Spinozistic terms, the Stoic is free because he acts in accordance with his own nature, uncorrupted by external sources that would lead him to act counter to his best interests and diminish his powers. He is guided by reason, doesn’t fret over those things that lie outside him and which he has no power over. Therefore, the stoic would seek to rid himself of all external sources, as best he could, that would tempt and entice him to act contrary to his own needs.

It seems that, ideally, the Stoic would then place himself outside society, unmoved and unfazed by all temporary things that pass him, shunning intimacy and all human affairs. But what kind of life is this? This does not seem like an ideal worth striving for, as it seems to be decidedly un-human. More importantly, it seems to be impossible: no human being is born outside some form of society, we cannot become a society of socially disconnected hermits, and our emotions are an essential part of our daily experiences. In summary: according to this view, becoming a free man would demand that we cease to be human.

The second problem extrapolates this impossibility to Spinoza’s overall metaphysical and epistemological scheme: the free man is guided by adequate ideas, but as a finite being he will inevitably be motivated by inadequate ideas. Man does not stand outside nature and, as such, cannot be entirely self-causing¹⁵¹. The possibility of having true knowledge of substance, explored in the preceding chapter, cannot be achieved at every moment all the time, so even this assurance does not dispel all problems found with the model. We cannot always be our own adequate causes, once again placing responsibility outside ourselves. This forces us to consider the plausibility and utility of Spinoza’s proposed model of human

¹⁵¹ E4p4 & E4p4C. (G 2:212 & 213).

excellence, as it seems we are yet again at risk of standing at the borders of moral nihilism.

In the same way as we considered the practical challenges against the possibility of flourishing into a free man we should now consider objections to its assumptions: the ideal of the free man entails a person who is free of all passions, seeking to stand outside all interactions with external things. There is textual evidence that Spinoza did not view the human ideal as someone who is passionless or disengaged with the world¹⁵². The core difference between the free man and the unfree man does not lie in that the free man has no emotions, but rather that he understands his emotions in as far as they influence him, as is referenced in the title of the fourth chapter of the *Ethics*¹⁵³. As such, emotions and other external seductions don't have their usual causal power or influence as they have on the un-free man, but this does not mean that the free man has no passions at all.

The role of reason is instrumental in seeking out sources of joy, and because reason provides us knowledge of the world as it truly is, it is better equipped in doing so than our uninformed passions are. Even the rational free man has to seek nourishment in order to continue his existence, but reason will guide him towards those goods that will best help him achieve his goal and not, for instance, mindlessly overeat¹⁵⁴. The same holds for love and marriage; when we are guided by the love of raising children and educating them to be exemplar citizens, our reason will most certainly agree with this desire¹⁵⁵. Many of these passages can be found in the *Ethics* in which Spinoza clearly presents the free man as one that seeks pleasure moderately, not as someone who is completely detached from the world. This would run counter to the goal of any ethical theory: to provide guidance in dealing with our hardships in life, something that cannot be done by avoiding or ignoring them.

¹⁵² Nadler (2015). p. 117.

¹⁵³ The title of the chapter is "On Human Bondage".

¹⁵⁴ E4p45s (G 2:244).

¹⁵⁵ E4app20 (G 2:271).

In regards to the second objection, we should seriously wonder if what Spinoza is proposing is a model of human perfection that is aimed at achieving perfectly human activeness. In this model ‘self-determining’ means ‘being perfectly active’ as opposed to being passive in any way. However, it is more reasonable to believe that Spinoza proposes a model of human perfection aimed at achieving the highest *degree* of freedom, implying a scale rather than an absolute notion of freedom¹⁵⁶. This can partially be seen in the structure of the *Ethics* itself: the fourth chapter is aimed at understanding human bondage, while the final fifth chapter is concerned with techniques for loosening these bonds. It is never implied that we can fully escape these bonds, but the goal is always to show how we can best live with them and achieve the highest possible freedom and happiness within the constraints of necessity.

Clinging to an absolute libertarian notion of freedom will not help improve the quality of our lives; it only shows that this kind of freedom is unobtainable for humans. We should therefore be more concerned with a practical and obtainable kind of freedom that is related to our happiness: acting on the basis of our own constitution rather than that of others¹⁵⁷. As such, the model of the free man is not an unobtainable goal or an incoherent concept, but a method in which one tries to live according to the guidance of reason with as goal happiness within the highest degree of freedom. When this reading is taken seriously it is clear that the *Ethics* does not dangle freedom in front of the reader as a carrot on stick, perpetually outside our reach, but instead teaches us methods to reach for what *is* within our grasp and will serve us to *our* greatest extent. Instead of reading the *Ethics* as a book that teaches strange and foreign morals we should understand it as a guide to becoming free, or as Smith formulates it: “the *Ethics* is, above all, a great work of moral pedagogy”¹⁵⁸. The relation between freedom and virtue is fundamental for understanding

¹⁵⁶ Sleigh, Chappell & Della Rocca (2000), p. 1231.

¹⁵⁷ Nadler (2015), p. 116.

¹⁵⁸ Smith (2003), p. 201.

this message within the *Ethics*, for it doesn't teach a form of freedom as a condition, but rather teaches virtue as a way of becoming free as self-perfection, in which an individual works towards increasing one's happiness.

3.6. Conclusion Chapter 3

With these core issues discussed we can conclude this final chapter. The main question of this chapter was if the nihilistic mechanic between determinism and a subsequent loss of autonomy and moral responsibility could be found in Spinozism. Considering the fact that Spinoza proposes a strong form of causal determinism, it seemed plausible that the loss of moral responsibility due to the impossibility of freedom could be found. However, it became clear that these mechanics were absent from Spinoza's moral philosophy; freedom, in the sense of self-determination, is perfectly accounted for in his metaphysics because acting in accordance with our *conatus* means that one is its own adequate cause of that act. More importantly, however, we found that Spinoza makes a profound shift in the conception of what freedom entails for human agents. The libertarian conception of freedom, which was taken as the intuitive base at the start of our discussion, presents freedom as a necessary prerequisite for any authentic behavior to be possible. It is this conception that suffers from the acceptance of determinism and leads to the possibility of moral nihilism. The subtle shift within Spinoza's philosophy is that freedom is no longer characterized as an absolute prerequisite for one's behavior, but rather an aspect of it; acting on the basis of one's own nature *is* acting freely.

Afterwards, we explored the feasibility and obtainability of this model of freedom. It became clear that Spinoza neither proposed a model of the free man as someone that is inhumanly detached, nor did he propose an unobtainable goal of freedom. Instead, we found that the *Ethics* teaches an understanding of passions and the external things that

influence us. By understanding these controlling bonds we are not tempted to fall into nihilistic despair or free-for-all, but are rather taught a method to find any possible way of diminishing those powers that could stand in the way of human, and consequently our own, happiness.

Final Conclusion

I'm better than your brother. I'm a version of your brother you can trust when he says "Don't run." Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody's gonna die. Come watch TV.

Morty to his sister Summer

Rick and Morty, Season 1, Episode 8. "Rixty Minutes" (2014).

The main goal of this thesis was to investigate whether Spinoza's philosophy contains nihilistic tendencies and sentiments, leading to a lawless situation in which nothing is true and where everything is permitted. This analysis of nihilism was provided by Nietzsche's insights on the death of the Christian God and the possible negative consequences of this death when emancipation from Christianity was not fully realized. Furthermore, he also provided us with a fruitful distinction between a pessimistic and optimistic interpretation of nihilism, corresponding to a passive and active reaction towards the new freedom, and terrifying emptiness, found within nihilism.

The fears of Spinoza's critics, as explored in the first chapter, clearly aligned with the pessimistic form of nihilism: as Christian minded individuals, the death of God would entail the demise of their entire theologically centered world. However, Spinoza's perceived atheism did not advocate the kind of lawlessness that his critics thought it would: morality and the state were still needed, but functionally grounded on humanist and secular ideals rather than an anthropomorphic God. As such, the function of the Republic was reflected in the active ambitions of the citizens that the state was comprised of, presenting a symbiosis in which everyone that is acting in their own interests should act virtuously for the totality of humanity.

However, these considerations only allowed us to conclude that Spinoza is not a pessimistic nihilist as his critics were, and a case was

made that he is rather a positive nihilist. As we have seen in the last chapter, the notions of freedom and morality were explained by referring to the metaphysical notion of *conatus* that aims to persevere in its existence. By establishing the clear limitations of finite beings living in the confinements of nature and its laws, Spinoza provides us with a (meta)physical basis for morality, freedom, and happiness. As such, he could be considered a positive nihilist: his philosophy does away with divine providence and strict religious truths, leaving a completely knowable but cold and directionless universe for humans to wander in. This confrontation with our unavoidable natural limitations is meant to increase our powers of acting, constituting positive nihilism and an active affirmative stance towards the world.

This unflinching acceptance of the fact that the universe is not a human-friendly place is essential for the human capacity to reasonably guide itself through life and its challenges. The acosmistic sentiments within Spinozism were therefore important to investigate; when the world is not taken seriously, in the way of being denounced as ‘illusory’, we run the risk of not conducting ourselves to the best of our abilities in relation to the world. Spinoza’s epistemology showed us that we have the capacity to understand nature, in particular ourselves as natural beings, allowing for an informed and mindful evaluation of our own behavior. Any action by the free man is appraised by himself, and this rational endorsement will make an action truly his own.

When these elements are considered, we can certainly state that Spinoza was a nihilist thinker, in an uncompromisingly realistic sense. By opening us up to true philosophical knowledge we have been given the tools to achieve freedom and happiness, although it will not be the kind of freedom and happiness that many of us would’ve hoped to have. We are asked to accept the world as it is, and not abandon it for some unreachable ideal that lies outside it. Undeniably, it takes a certain bravery to accept the truths contained within Spinoza’s philosophy, but we are shown good reasons not to cower away. Rather, we are shown reasons to rejoice, to

compose ourselves, and to be transformed into courageous Spinozists: we possess the means to light a bonfire, a solitary source of warmth and security within a cold abyss, and to create a world worth living in.

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Summary

The main thesis is that Spinoza's philosophy can be understood as being nihilistic in the positive sense, rather than the negative sense as his critics accused him of promoting.

The distinction between the two forms of nihilism, informed by Nietzsche's analysis, sketches two reactions to the realization that human existence is meaningless. Positive nihilism acknowledges human meaninglessness and transforms it into a life-affirming stance, in which the human relation to the world around him is reassessed in favor of the individual. However, it does not, as negative nihilism does, propose that, as a result of the meaninglessness of the universe, life is worthless and everything is therefore permitted. My research shows that, although many of the critical, historical, assessments regarding Spinoza's philosophy were, to a certain extent, justified, the anticipated, negative, nihilistic consequences related to these assessments were not.

Three nihilistic aspects of Spinoza's philosophy are explored. The first aspect is Spinoza's atheism, through which he proposes that traditional conceptions of god are false. However, in reaction to the death of a parental-like deity, Spinoza does not suggest atheism, as per the definition upheld in the seventeenth century, nor the subsequent social unrest that was feared would result from his atheism. Instead, Spinoza proposes an intellectual understanding and rational appreciation of nature, which constitutes a love of a philosophical god, which opens the possibility to an individual and political species of freedom.

The second aspect is acosmism, the belief that the world, as humans know and understand it, is false. By emphasizing the unchanging and eternal nature of truth and substance, it seems that Spinoza is denying the changing world encountered within human experience. Within this clash between truth and experience, human experience is denounced as being an illusion; consequently, human meaning, grounded in this

experience, perishes, resulting in nihilism. However, acosmism, as a criticism, relies on a misconstrued interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy; it overemphasizes the relation between substance and mode as an epistemological relation between pre-conceptualized reality and a conceptually interpreted human world.

The final aspect is determinism, which entails a denial of free will and the subsequent impossibility of moral blame attribution. If the libertarian notion of freedom is maintained, the inevitability of external causal intrusion results in the impossibility of personal autonomy. Though Spinoza maintains that we act within a system of strict causal determinism, this is not presented as a reason for moral nihilism. Rather, by introducing the metaphysical notion of a *conatus* he is able to state equivalence between autonomy and the wellbeing of an individual. This represents a change in conceiving freedom as a prerequisite for autonomous behavior, to freedom as an attribute belonging to an agent acting in its own self-interest. Furthermore, Spinoza proposes a version of eudaimonism; being rationally directed leads us to a virtuous life, in which we understand the power of our passions, and use these powers to achieve the highest state of happiness: freedom.

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