



SPINOZA
A Rational Mystic

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Abstract: Is Spinoza a mystic? Spinoza's philosophy clearly relates to the concept of understanding God, through the self, so it is not hard to see why it has been argued that he may have been a mystic. On the other hand, it makes no sense at all since he is considered to be one of the most rational philosophers of the Modern Age and Spinoza's God is neither transcendent nor supernatural and therefore he is considered an atheist. The problem as I see it is; how can such a rational man even be considered to have anything to do with mysticism which traditionally is considered to be a personal, subjective, emotive, religious experience of a transcendent God, which today does not qualify as being rational in any scientific sense of the word? What has prompted my curiosity is the seeming contradiction of combining the rational label with a perceived mystical sensibility. In my analysis I investigate the possibility of a correlation between the definitions of the terms rational and mystic through the understanding of rationalism and mysticism. I will delineate how they have been understood through history and discuss how they can be understood. I will explain Spinoza's concept of God and through the lens of Spinoza's philosophy see if it is possible to get an understanding of what effect a union of the two concepts can have. The purpose of this essay is not to find proof as to be able to label Spinoza as a mystic within the mysticism of his time, but rather to get an understanding of what a relationship with God, through Spinoza's monist concept of God as One Substance, can entail and thereby maybe widen the frame of what a mystic can be considered to be. My question is thus: Is Spinoza a Rational Mystic?

Sammanfattning: Är Spinoza en mystiker? Mystik anses traditionellt höra samman med en tro att förståelse och kännedom om Gud kommer till en genom en Uppenbarelse som förenar människan med en transcendent och övernaturliga Gud. Enligt Spinoza's filosofi nås förståelse av Gud genom ökad självförståelse, så det är inte svårt att se hur han kan ha tolkats som en mystiker. Men å andra sidan är det helt oförståeligt eftersom han anses vara en av de mest rationella filosoferna i modern tid och Spinoza's Gud är varken transcendent eller övernaturlig och därför anses han vara ateist. Syftet med uppsatsen är inte att bevisa att Spinoza var en mystiker av sin tid utan jag vill titta på vad en relation med Gud kan innebära när Gud anses vara Spinoza's monistiska Gud som är En Substans. Jag vill reflektera över om det går att vidga ramen för vad en mystiker kan anses vara. Min fråga är därför: Är Spinoza en Rationell Mystiker?

Key Words: Spinoza, Spinozism, rationalism, mysticism, all-inclusive, rational mystic.

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1. Introduction

1:1 Prologue

Spinoza was a name that would pop up now and again, during my first years at Lund University while studying Judaism, but it would always be in the passing. Something about Spinoza intrigued me and I made a mental note of someday looking into this philosopher more deeply. This is now the time.

After reading *Spinoza - A Very Short Introduction* by Roger Scruton I realized that my intrigue was based on a resonance with Spinoza's view of God as One Substance. I think this view of God, for me, stems from the fact that I grew up in Japan, which is a Buddhist country. For six years I attended an International school which was Catholic. My father had his office at the only Scandinavian meeting place in Kobe, which was the Christian Seaman's Church. While living on that side of the planet we also traveled extensively to countries which introduced me to the images of the Hindu religions. As a teenager I lived in, what I perceived, one of the world's most liberal thinking countries, namely Holland, where I was a boarder in a Jewish family. I attended an American school, which does not provide religious education, in The Hague, the same city in which Spinoza wrote his book *Ethics*.

In other words, I have been around many of the world religions since childhood without any specific indoctrination. I have learned religions through relations, so to speak, and it never occurred to me that they had different gods or rather that the one and only God did not cater to all of them. To my mind as a child it was obvious that the world believed that there was a God and I took for granted that there was one God which all the different religions translated as to fit their sensibilities in their culture. Just as food was food and houses were houses, but they tasted and looked different in different places, so God too was *one substance* in an *infinite* amount of varied ways of *extension*, as Spinoza would put it in his terminology.

I find it fascinating that this kind of one God view of monism can be considered to be so contradictory to the one God view of monotheism as to consider the one who holds it an atheist. I have never seen myself as an atheist and I will through this essay look at if what I consider to be my 'rational' view of God can be combined with my, often perceived by others, 'irrational' spiritual relationship with God. My thoughts are; what are the consequences of 'atheist' spirituality? How does it affect the way one leads one's life? What world view does one have? If the reflection of how to live a virtuous life is called ethics, what effect does a so called atheist God inspired reflection have on ethics?

1:2 Literature and Demarcation

For this essay on Spinoza I started with Roger Scruton's book *Spinoza - A Very Short Introduction* and continued with a more comprehensive book called *Spinoza*, which is not only about Spinoza but gives an insight into Spinoza's philosophy in the spirit of Spinoza. It is written by Michael Della Rocca who is a professor of philosophy at Yale University and who has written several books on Spinoza.

Spinoza is often considered an atheist even though his philosophy is completely concerned with God. To get some insight into this apparent contradiction I read *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* written by André Comte-Sponville, a previous professor of philosophy at Sorbonne University. Of Spinoza's own work I have read only his last book *Ethics*. I will use a 2001 version translated by W.H. White. In the introduction of this book Don Garrett, a professor of philosophy at New York University, writes about Spinoza that

he is motivated by the pure love of truth to probe the deep identity of God with Nature and, in doing so, to achieve a union with God-or-Nature that is to be supremely rational and yet also seemingly tinged with mysticism.

This quote highlighted a contradiction which gave rise to my title: "Spinoza - A Rational Mystic". I found it fascinating that rationality and mysticism could be formulated in the same sentence. Looking for material concerning mysticism in relation to Spinoza I found the article "Spinoza & Philo: Alleged Mysticism in the Ethics" by Steve Nadler, a professor of philosophy at University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Since Baruch Spinoza was a Jew I used the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* for the introduction of the life of Spinoza. I then aimed to get an understanding of a possible relationship between rationalism and mysticism, so I looked up the two concepts in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. This led to an inkling of why the title of Spinoza's book was *Ethics*, which in turn led me to look at the definition of ethics more closely using *The Encyclopedia of Ethics*.

Religion historian Karen Armstrong's book *A Case for God*, which is written with a detailed historical progression, has helped me structure my thoughts and it has been an exemplary guide in how to go about this essay venture. Another article which has given me a deeper historical insight into the aspects of Spinozism specifically is "The Secret Religion of Germany: Christian Piety and the Pantheism Controversy" written by B.A. Gerrish, who is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

I conclude my presentation of the material I have used with the main book of inspiration which has given me the audacity to write about Spinoza as a rational mystic in the first place. It is Catharina Stenqvist's Swedish book *Förundran och förändring - Mystikens teori och livssyn* (1994). There is no correlation between Stenqvist's book and Spinoza, for there is no reference to Spinoza in her book, but just as Spinoza was a gust of fresh air for me in my relation to the philosophy of God, Stenqvist's book was a gust of fresh air to my relationship with the mysticism of life. In a way it took mysticism out of the clutches of supernatural religion and put it smack in the center of natural life. Even if I may not have used her book to any great extent in my footnotes, but instead referred to her more current article "Mystikens Värld. Världens Mystik", the book has been my foundation as to believe it possible that curiosity and wonder (*förundran*) about the joint venture of two seemingly contradictory terms such as rationalism and mysticism can lead to a change (*förändring*) depending on what theory (*teori*) and worldview (*livssyn*) one applies to the one substance which I would like to call our life.

1:3 Methodology

As mentioned the only work of Spinoza I will use is his book *Ethics* and in it he uses a specific methodology called the geometric method. This method means that one's thoughts are presented in an orderly manner of propositions, demonstrations, scholiums and corollaries with a starting point of delineating definitions and axioms. The reason it is called geometrical is because it is supposed to be as clear and unquestionable as the mathematical fact that the combined angles of a triangle are always two right angles, otherwise it could not be a triangle.

I will not use a geometrical method for this essay. The essay title makes a statement about a claim pertaining to Spinoza. My presentation of material has hopefully given some insight into my method of choosing my material and an overview of how I aim to apply it in my essay. I have explained in my introduction why I have chosen the topic of Spinoza and the reason for my title. The method I use is the interpretation of the texts already mentioned and an analysis of the central concepts rationalism, mysticism, ethics and God. Next, in my outline, I will further present my method of approach by sharing the questions and the purpose of my essay by presenting the reasoning and problems as I see it.

1:4 Outline - Purpose - Problem

The focus of this essay is not Spinoza's philosophy *per se*, but rather to look at rationalism, mysticism, ethics and God through the lens of Spinoza's philosophy. I will thus not compare Spinoza's philosophy with Descartes, who came before him, or Leibniz, who came after him, as to delineate what is specifically understood as Spinoza's philosophy.

I start with a short biographical presentation of the man Spinoza and his works, followed by an overview of the historical context in which Spinoza's philosophy developed. I continue with a presentation of definitions for some of the terminology Spinoza uses in his work *Ethics* and I also give a short summary of his philosophy that is relevant for this essay. I then end the descriptive part of the essay with an explanation of what Spinozism entails with some extra focus on the Pantheism Controversy.

The purpose of my chosen essay title, "Spinoza - A Rational Mystic" is to clearly frame my intent with the essay. In other words, I wish to research and reflect on the possibility of Spinoza fitting into the frame of rational mystic. My main question then is; what is a rational mystic? That Spinoza can be called rational may not seem like an issue, since he is one of the first philosophers within the already established category of rational philosophers that started what is called the Modern Age, but that he is called a mystic can be considered a problem since he is often considered to be an atheist, and mysticism has to do with God. Mysticism is traditionally viewed as the union with God and Spinoza has been called the 'God intoxicated man' by the German poet Novalis. But on the other hand University professors who have studied Spinoza have claimed that Spinoza is 'The' rationalist since he pushed rationality to its limits by claiming that there are no limits to what can be explained. Since mysticism is considered to fall within the brackets of that which cannot be explained, it has therefore been stated that Spinoza has nothing to do with mysticism. I will explain Spinoza's concept of God and through the lens of Spinoza's philosophy see if it is possible to get an understanding of what effect a union of the two concepts can have.

The problem as I see it is; how can such a rational man even be considered to have anything to do with mysticism which traditionally is considered to be a personal, subjective, emotive, religious experience of a transcendent God, which today does not qualify as being rational in any scientific sense of the word? What has prompted my curiosity is the seeming contradiction of combining the rational label with a perceived mystical sensibility.

My purpose with this essay is to create a foundation for the possibility of being able to refer to Spinoza as a rational mystic. I therefore investigate the possibility of a correlation between the definitions of the terms rational and mystic through the understanding of rationalism and mysticism. I will delineate how they have been understood through history and discuss how they can be understood. I will then reflect on the fact that Spinoza's last book is called *Ethics*, which starts and ends on the topic of God. I will shed some light on issues which I find are related to my purpose by contemplating if it is possible to get a deeper understanding of the workings of ethics by relating to mysticism rationally? Or is it maybe a mystical approach to rationalism that is of value for the workings of ethics? In other words, what is ethics according to Spinoza?

In my analysis I discuss rationalism and mysticism with Steven Nadler and compare our understandings of what kind of knowledge Spinoza is referring to when he claims that it is possible to know God. The purpose, problem and question of this essay thus all relate to the inquiry of what a rational mystic can mean and if Spinoza can be defined as such.

Even though I am aware that I by no means can provide answers qualified by the empirical standards of our day to prove that Spinoza is a rational mystic, my hope and aim with this essay is that it will trigger questions and inspire not only philosophical thought but also ethical reflection and mystical contemplation.

2. Main Material

2:1 Spinoza - A Very Short Introduction

Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza (1632-1677) of Portuguese Jewish ancestry was born in Amsterdam. His father Michael (d.1654), who at an early age fled Portugal to escape the Spanish Inquisition for a more tolerant Dutch Republic, was a successful merchant and a warden of the Amsterdam Jewish school and synagogue. He had six children with three wives of which he buried all except for Baruch and his half-sister Rebekah. Baruch attended Jewish school and the synagogue and his father hoped that his son would one day become a rabbi.¹ At age 20 Baruch Spinoza was introduced to scholastic philosophy, natural science, Latin and the new philosophy of Rene Descartes (1596-1650) by his teacher Franciscus Van den Enden. Contact with secular ways of thinking and a growing independence of mind led Spinoza to an increased dissatisfaction with the biblical interpretations he received from the rabbis. In 1654, the same year his father died, Spinoza changed his name from Baruch to Benedict and started to teach at Van den Enden's school which was notorious as a centre of free enquiry, and by 1656 Spinoza's life was so great a scandal that he was accused of heresy and excommunicated from the synagogue.² Spinoza's views that were perceived as heretical included "the denial that the Torah is of divine origin, the denial that the immortality of the soul is a biblical doctrine and a 'philosophical' concept of God incompatible with that of popular tradition."³ Spinoza's philosophy can be considered to have a rare objectivity and impersonality concerned solely with the clarity of 'truth' and his life can be regarded as having no apparent connection with his work. He had no immediate family and being Jewish he had little connection with his Dutch neighbors and being an expelled Jew he had little connection with his Jewish neighbors. But, even if Spinoza lived and thought in relative isolation it would be inaccurate to claim that he was not influenced by his rabbinic education or that he did not react to other philosophers of the time. His first work was on the contemporary philosophy of Descartes and he also wrote *Tractatus Politicus*, which was a reaction to the current Dutch political situation, and his letters show that though he seemingly had a limited circle of friends he had extensive correspondences with other philosophers and scientists.⁴

¹ Scruton, *Spinoza*, p. 1ff.

² Scruton, *Spinoza*, p.8f.

³ Smend & Fraenkel, "Spinoza, Baruch", p.112.

⁴ MacIntyre, "Spinoza, Benedict", p.531.

In 1676 Spinoza's health declined and suffering from consumption, aggravated by the dust caused by his profession as a lens grinder, he died in 1677. He was buried in a rented grave at the New Church on the Spuy. Spinoza appeared to his contemporaries as the greatest heretic of the 17th century but he did not use his philosophy as a weapon, instead to him it was a way of life.⁵ Spinoza's close friends held him in high esteem and have through later writings testified to the simplicity and naturalness of his life.⁶ In the Jewish and National Library in Jerusalem, Spinoza's writings are not placed among the Jewish philosophers but instead between the writings of Descartes and Leibniz. Spinoza is regarded as one of the most important representatives of the rationalist movement in the early modern period.⁷ In 1673 he had been offered a position as professor of philosophy at Heidelberg University. Prince Karl Ludwig guaranteed extensive freedom of philosophy but because of the clause that there must be no disturbance of established religion, which for Spinoza seemed like a contradiction to the concept of freedom, he therefore declined and thus missed the opportunity of being regarded as one of the most important philosophers in the early modern period.⁸

2:2 Spinoza's Works

As I have mentioned I will only use Spinoza's work *Ethics*, but I choose here to present all of Spinoza's works in a short summary as to clearly delineate my demarcation. First, between 1650-1660, he wrote *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* which was an outline of his metaphysics, anthropology, epistemology and ethics but which he left unfinished. In 1663 he published *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* which was an exposition of Rene Descartes metaphysics, based on the notes he used for teaching Cartesian Philosophy to private students. In 1670 he anonymously published *Theological-Political Treatise* which contained a defense of secular and constitutional government arguing for the freedom of thought and religious tolerance needed for a functional state. In 1675 he had finished *Ethics Demonstrated According to the Geometrical Method*, which was the full title of the book referred to as *Ethics*, but he did not even attempt to publish. This was because of all the controversy and the 1674 prohibition of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, "a work that articulated a radical

⁵ Scruton, *Spinoza*, p.1.

⁶ Scruton, *Spinoza*, p.17f.

⁷ Smend & Fraenkel, "Spinoza, Baruch", p.111.

⁸ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p.27f.

theory of biblical interpretation, according to which the Bible is to be treated [...] and interpreted as any other text”.⁹ Spinoza can thus be claimed to be a forerunner in relating to sacred scripture as literature. The work *Compendium of the Grammar in the Hebrew Language* was left unfinished when he passed away in 1677. His close friends and followers published his unfinished work of *Tractatus Politicus* and *Ethics* together in *Opera Posthuma* that same year.¹⁰

2:3 Spinoza’s Philosophy in *Ethics*

Spinoza’s philosophy includes a great deal more than what I am able to delineate within the scope of this essay. I will here give some background and a short overview of the aspects of his philosophy that are relevant for an understanding of the purpose of this essay. I have already mentioned that I will not compare Spinoza’s philosophy with that of Descartes and Leibniz. I want to mention also that I am aware that Spinoza’s terminology is not exclusive to him alone, but I will here only give his specific definition of the few terms that I choose to present from his book *Ethics*. References to the *Ethics* will be by part (I-IV), proposition (p), scholium (s) and definition (d).

To understand Spinoza’s philosophy it can be beneficial to view Spinoza in his historical context. As already portrayed Spinoza lived in the 17th century. This was the age that came after the Renaissance, which can be recognized as the age that started to reflect upon organized religion and to rekindle the ancient Greek philosophy of reflecting on life as a coherent whole. Spinoza was a contemporary with scientists like Galileo, Kepler and Newton. This Early Modern Age, which is recognized as the Scientific Revolution, entailed the realization that ‘man’ was not the centre of the universe and that there seemed to be laws in nature which could imply that there was not a transcendent God but rather an immanent force running the show of life. All the ‘mechanics’ of life, including religion, had to now be understood through scientific reasoning.¹¹ This can perhaps help explain the reason and purpose of why Spinoza uses the rationality of axioms and the geometrical method for the presentation of his philosophy in *Ethics*.

⁹ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p.30.

¹⁰ Smend & Fraenkel, “Spinoza, Baruch”, p.111f.

¹¹ For more detail about the progression of history before, during, and after Spinoza’s time, see Karen Armstrong, *A Case for God*, chapters 6-9.

Spinoza is often viewed as an atheist, since his understanding of God is that of an immanent God or Nature, compared to the theist belief in a transcendent Divine God, which was the tradition within his Jewish heritage. But, Spinoza clearly states in *Ethics* that “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each one of which express eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.” (I p11). In other words, he clearly states that God exists, so how can he be an atheist? Even if Spinoza does not seem to conceive of God as a Divine transcendent Being, a view for which he was excommunicated, he does speak of divine nature and he also refers to God as He. The use of the terminology divine nature can be viewed as an expression of the magnificence of the essence of the natural phenomenon of being. This divine nature is thus in contrast to what is referred to as the supernatural phenomenon of a Divine Being. I understand the use of He as an aftermath of the traditional view of God but, I also think that it exemplifies that ultimately Spinoza is not eliminating the traditional God but rather reframing Him untraditionally.

According to the contemporary philosopher Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s philosophy is characterized by perhaps the boldest and most thoroughgoing commitment ever to appear in the history of philosophy to the intelligibility of everything”.¹² In a sense one could say that his attitude to life is comparable to that of a curious child who wonders about the seeming mysteries of life and asks why and always expects there to be an answer. In other words, the ‘belief’ is that if the question exists then the ‘object’ in question exists and so then must also the answer. Much of philosophy seems to take the limitations of human reason for granted. Just as within religion, it is not unusual to use the phrase ‘God works in mysterious ways’ to fill in the gaps we cannot fill with our limited reason. This is not so for Spinoza for he insists on the intelligibility of everything, by all, at least in principle. Spinoza’s *Principle of Sufficient Reason*¹³ is the foundation of his philosophy and it proclaims that everything has an explanation. If something does not have a sufficient explanation it is in principle not in existence until it can be sufficiently explained. But, important to keep in mind is that for Spinoza, to conceive of a thing is to explain it. To continue that thought rationally, the conceived exists to the degree of its explanation, meaning that the clearer the explanation is the more the conceived exists. The reason that intelligibility of everything by all is possible, according to Spinoza, is because it ties in with his intelligibility of *naturalism*, which can be

¹² Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p.1.

¹³ Even if the content of the term relates to Spinoza, the term itself was coined by Leibniz.

explained as his philosophical system. Spinoza's naturalism entails that everything follows the same universal principles or plays by the same rules of Nature. His claim is thus that everything has an explanation and all explanations are necessary, which can be referred to as his thesis of *necessitarianism*, that is, that the world is exactly as it has to be.

Spinoza is mostly known for his reference to God as *One Substance* or rather the concept that there is only One Substance which is *God or Nature*. Spinoza's definition of substance is "that which is in itself and is conceived through itself" (I d3). This substance is thus not dependent on anything for its existence and since it is a cause of itself it is the essence of existence. In regards to God as One Substance he states "besides God no substance can be nor can be conceived" (I p14). This concept of One Substance can be called *monism*. This term is applicable to any doctrine which claims that there is only one thing, or only one set of true beliefs. It is thus opposed to the concept of dualism and pluralism. Spinoza does not hold the view of there being two substances, traditionally thought of as mind and matter, instead he maintains that everything is One Substance.

Spinoza's definition of *God* is "Being absolutely infinite, that is to say, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence" (I d6) and he explains that *attribute* is "that which the intellect perceives of substance, as belonging to its essence" (I d4). Spinoza also claims that a human being can conceive of this One Substance as two of the infinite amount of attributes, called *thought* and *extension* (II p1-2). These two terms can be viewed as representing a kind of dualism, especially since they are often used synonymously with the terms mind and matter, but Spinoza does not view them as separate substances but rather as two expressions of the One Substance, as is explained in II p12-13. I think it is important to remember that even though Spinoza was excommunicated from Judaism the most fundamental to both Spinoza and Judaism is the concept of One God. For Spinoza it is his philosophy of One Substance and within Judaism it is expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4 with the *Shema Israel*; "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One".

So far we have dealt with the first two parts of *Ethics*, where Spinoza demonstrates God's existence through what could be said to be Spinoza's ontological proof of God, since he claims that God must necessarily exist because God is the One Substance that necessarily exists. In the second part he explains the epistemology of the mind's cognitive powers through the distinction between the *three kinds of knowledge*; imagination, reason and intuitive knowledge (II p40). The criterion for truth is explained through the concepts of

inadequate and adequate ideas (II p41-43). Both of which I will go into in more detail further along in the essay.

In the third part of *Ethics* Spinoza explains the psychology of human affects and points out the importance of understanding affects since they are what Spinoza considers to be that which provides the ingredients for the insight of our power of action (III p1). This power of action, according to Spinoza, is the human desire to preserve oneself and which is the human essence (III p6). With this preservation of the self, called *conatus*, I understand it as if he means that the core essence of a human is to preserve the divine nature of intellectual reasoning that a human is capable of, and therefore it is important to understand human desire, i.e., to value human affects. This is because Spinoza uses the experience of the affects, joy to exemplify the increase of power and sorrow the decrease of power, to be able to understand the desires that a human has. The three major affects in Spinoza's philosophy is thus desire, joy and sorrow. In a sense they can be regarded as a compass to be used on the journey of life.

The fourth part of *Ethics* can be said to pertain to ethics since it discusses good and evil. It can be argued to be an egotistical ethics since the preservation of the self is its core virtue (IV p24). It can also be said to be an intellectual ethics since what is to be preserved is understanding itself (IV p26-27). According to Spinoza there is no good or evil in itself. It is good or bad depending on its degree of utility for attaining the desire of the person itself. But as Spinoza points out in IV p26-27 the only virtuous desire is understanding itself. The virtue is the desire of intellectual understanding, or as Spinoza would say, the greatest good is the intellectual love of God. Another reason the focus of self-preservation is not necessarily egotistical is basically the concept of the Golden Rule, because based on IV p37 and 46 Spinoza summarizes that "everyone who is guided by reason desires for others the good which he seeks for himself" (IV s73).

The fifth and final part of the *Ethics* speaks of the power of the intellect. Spinoza states that "he who clearly and distinctly understands himself and his affects loves God, and loves Him better the better he understands himself and his affects" (V p15). Scruton explains that it is this love, which stems necessarily from the pursuit of knowledge, which is the intellectual love of God that Spinoza's philosophy is all about.¹⁴ In other words, it is a rational intellectual

¹⁴ Scruton, *Spinoza*, p.92.

relationship with the experience of the mysteriously infinitely varied One Substance which lies at the foundation of everything experienced. The emotions can thus be seen as a necessary aspect of knowing God, and if eliminated that opportunity of knowledge will be missed.

2:4 Spinozism

When it comes to the concept of God, Spinoza has been understood in a variety of ways and after Spinoza's death in 1677 almost a century passed during which his work was neglected. The term 'Spinozism' is thus not used as referring to a continued development of Spinoza's philosophy through other philosophers, but rather it refers to the philosophy attributed to Spinoza himself. In the following years after his death the only account of Spinoza's doctrine, apart from his own works, was an article by Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) in the 1697 publication of *Bayles Dictionnaire Philosophique*, which described Spinoza's philosophy as "the most absurd and monstrous hypothesis that can be envisaged [...]"¹⁵ With the intellectual reorientation during the Enlightenment in 18th century Germany, Spinoza was re-examined and his image changed. The understanding of his monism altered in the reframing of the concept as to incorporate the concept of pantheism and instead of being absurd it started having correlations to the effect that the progression of science was having on the understanding of theology in relation to the cosmos. Spinoza's reputation was greatly lifted by the factor that the well renowned German philosopher Gotthold Lessing (1729-81) saw Spinoza's philosophical system as "the most rigorous and consistent intellectual enterprise" and his claim "that the orthodox conceptions of deity were no longer satisfactory for him and that, if he were to call himself after any master, he knew of no other than Spinoza."¹⁶

Another German philosopher Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) spoke for German philosophers in general with the statement "we have in fact outgrown deism."¹⁷ He did not mean that God was dead but rather that the image of God had shifted from deism to pantheism. It was this so called Pantheism Controversy in Germany that brought Spinozism back into the ongoing philosophical dialogue of the Enlightenment. The controversy did not only deal with the Spinozist view of God but also to the presumed consequence of such a view, which was

¹⁵ Barnard, "Spinozism", p. 541.

¹⁶ Barnard, "Spinozism", p.542.

¹⁷ Gerrish, "The Secret Religion of Germany", p.438.

pointed out by yet another German philosopher Freidrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819). He claimed that “Spinozism leads to determinism, and any system that logically entails the denial of free will has to be mistaken, however flawlessly reasoned.”¹⁸

It can be argued that the Pantheist Controversy was a controversy because of the consequence of the understanding of what Spinozism entailed. Determinism does mean that each event is determined by a previous event, but determinism in reference to Spinoza does not necessarily mean that there is a ‘determinator’, it rather implies that everything is determined in itself. So the individual’s free will is not taken away but rather it is pointed out that free will is determined. As I understand Spinoza this is actually what gives us our freedom because it pertains to the laws of living. Free will is only free if we are aware of what causes us to make the choices that we perceive to be free. Spinoza claims that only when our will is no longer effected by outside sources, but rather affected by inner understanding, can they be considered to be free. Spinoza is claimed to be a pantheist since he claims that God is one substance and pantheism is understood as meaning that God is all of reality. But can Spinoza actually be called a pantheist? One reason for confusion here is that Spinoza claims that God is not a separate Being that can be in something or have something in it, but rather Spinoza’s God is being itself, i.e., the essence of everything.

Heine took pantheism and deism to be mutually defined terms differing only in reference to how God ruled. I understand this as meaning that he viewed God as a separate Being but instead of ruling from afar God ruled from within. He differentiated the deism with the notion that “the Hebrews think of him as a thundering tyrant; the Christians, as a loving father; and the Genevan school, as a clever artist who made the world”.¹⁹ Heine thought that the consequences of this kind of deism was degrading to the nature of the body and therefore he embraced what he perceived to be Spinoza’s pantheism for then God was within everything in nature and thereby the nature of the body got its value back, so to speak.

Another German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) summarized and tried to set the record straight by claiming that “we cannot think any longer of God as a being who acts from outside the world of other beings, nor can we represent the divine activity as arbitrary. Rather, God is precisely the luminous, rational necessity that discovers itself within

¹⁸ Gerrish, “The Secret Religion of Germany”, p.442.

¹⁹ Gerrish, “The Secret Religion of Germany”, p.444.

nature to scientific inquiry.”²⁰ As a Neo-Spinozist Herder wrote in his own work *Conversations* that empirical science will one day exclude the last vestiges of divine arbitrariness but this by no means excludes religion.²¹ Could this prediction possibly be in line with my thoughts on the relationship between the concepts of rationalism and mysticism? What this retracing of Spinozist German philosophers show is that what Spinoza stands for is that “God is not the external, transient cause of things, working arbitrarily by free choice, but the internal cause that proceeds necessarily according to its own rational nature, so that the true revelation of God must be sought after in the eternal laws of the world order.”²² In other words, the being in the world, instead of the transcendent Being, can be understood as the mysterious ‘other’ that we need to rationally explain. Herder made Spinoza’s God into a World Soul and thereby “nature was no longer a machine but an organism.”²³ For the Neo-Spinozist, the notion of divine interference is simply impossible since the course of nature is nothing other than the necessary activity of God.

The German philosophers of the 18th century might have reinterpreted Spinozism, but the idea of a World Soul was not new because it can be found as far back as in Plato’s cosmology. It is also not anti-religious because it can be found within Thomas Aquinas Christian theology and it is also not exclusively European because it can be found within the religious thoughts of India and within the philosophies of Asia.²⁴ Through history ‘Spinozists’ continuously emerged in England and France during the 19th century and in Russia Spinoza’s political doctrines appealed to the Marxists and he was one of the most read western philosophers during the early 20th century.²⁵ For example, Spinoza was the philosopher most admired by the scientist Albert Einstein (1879-1955) who made headlines in 1929 with his statement; “I believe in Spinoza’s God”, stemming out of a cable correspondence with Rabbi S. Goldstein.²⁶

Michael Della Rocca, a current professor and Spinoza specialist at Yale University, proclaims that “few top-notch philosophers today would identify themselves as ‘Spinozists’.” This, with the explanation that “Spinoza’s philosophy functions as a challenge: almost all philosophers

²⁰ Gerrish, “The Secret Religion of Germany”, p.448.

²¹ Gerrish, “The Secret Religion of Germany”, p.448.

²² Gerrish, “The Secret Religion of Germany”, p.450.

²³ Gerrish, “The Secret Religion of Germany”, p.451.

²⁴ Gerrish, “The Secret Religion of Germany”, p.452.

²⁵ Barnard, “Spinozism”, p.543.

²⁶ Jammer, *Einstein and Religion*, p.43ff.

want to avoid his conclusions [...] Spinozism is thus, in many ways, the specter that haunts all subsequent philosophy.”²⁷ The reason Spinoza can be perceived as haunting, I think, is because his philosophy is all-inclusive. If there only is One Substance this means that all is God and God is all. This then implies, for example, that all that is claimed to be evil also is God. I will not go into the theodicy problem here but only reflect that it can be difficult to relate to such a notion since God traditionally represents that which is even beyond that which we perceive as good and evil. So in a sense it is not only Spinoza’s view of God that is different but also the concept of good and evil that is related to differently, since it does not contain any evaluative judgment. As I understand Spinoza, God cannot be coupled with either good or evil because there is no good or evil in itself. Spinoza’s God is all that can be perceived as good and all that can be perceived as evil by us humans, but God is not involved as a judge, so to speak.

Another reason I think Spinoza can be considered challenging is because philosophy in general is often concerned with deductive reasoning, whereas Spinoza’s philosophy specifically is more of what I would call a reductive rationality. By this I mean that the goal of a general deductive mindset seems to want to find and establish a truth by using general principles as to be able to reach a specific conclusion. It can be said to be a way of gaining knowledge through a logic which eliminates because it is based on the principle that if a conclusion necessarily follows from a set principle it is considered valid, and if it does not it is not valid and therefore eliminated. In other words, only specific parts are preserved which in turn means that only exclusive truth is judged to be of value. The problem with Spinoza’s philosophy is then that it is all-inclusive since he has the *Principle of Sufficient Reason* as its foundation. If everything is potentially explainable then everything must have value. The value can be reduced in importance depending on its level of adequacy, but it cannot be eliminated completely since it is of value for the purpose of being able to find an explanation and an understanding of *a* truth rather than a conclusion of *the* truth. My referring to Spinoza’s rationality as all-inclusive should not be understood as pertaining to a view implying that everything is included because it has the same value, but rather to a view in the sense that everything is taken into consideration. It can thus be considered reasonable to make the statement that what can be considered to be rational can invariably vary.

²⁷ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p.275.

3. Three Specific Topics

3:1 Rationalism

Using *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as my source I will now review different concepts of rationalism. The term rationalism is from the Latin word *ratio* which means reason. Today in general one tends to regard natural sciences as the model for grasping truths about the world. But in history rationalism has traditionally referred to the 'belief' that there is a reason for everything and that that reason can be worked out. It can be argued that the knowledge reached by rational reasoning is a contrast to the faith reached by the experience of revelation and thereby in opposition. But it can also be argued that it is the suspicion of reason that questions the rationality of faith. The central contrast then embodied in the term rationalism can be said to be that of reason versus experience. Which one has the credentials of providing rationally qualified knowledge? That brings up the question of what is considered to be rational knowledge. If the natural sciences are the model for grasping truth, is empirical knowledge then the only rational truth? *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states that

...many general theoretical concepts of mathematics and the sciences do not admit of total reduction to empirical concepts. The intellectual grasp of these concepts and truths involved in them is seen as an insight into an existing and unique structure of the world. Two consequences of this outlook is that there is a unique set of concepts and unique set of propositions employing these concepts that adequately express the nature of the world and these propositions form a system and could ideally be recognized as a set of necessary truths.²⁸

The problem as I see it is if the empirical rational framework is not specifically defined then how do we know what the criteria are for what can be considered to be rational knowledge? Who decides what is rational? Is it possible to be reasonable human beings without the guidelines of logical limitation? What were the boundaries before the scientific age of empiricism? According to Karen Armstrong, the boundaries were pushed already long before the 18th century Enlightenment, for she claims that "by the end of the eleventh century, philosophers and theologians in the west had embarked on a project which, they believed, was entirely new. They had begun to apply their reasoning powers systematically to the truths of faith."²⁹

The theologian Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) can be considered as one of the first rationalists with an aim to apply the God given rational power for the purpose of understanding religious beliefs through faith: "He had no illusions about human reason, which

²⁸ Hirst, "Rationalism", p.71.

²⁹ Armstrong, *A Case for God*, p.129.

he knew was incapable of understanding the unknowable God.”³⁰ The empirical criterion, so to speak, was thus framed in what is called the ‘ontological proof’. If faith implies a belief in God, then the reasoning is that for faith to be rational there must be a God. And the rational argument for the proof of God was according to Anselm ‘that God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived’. In a sense he filled the gap of rational reason for faith in God with the reasonable rationality of the existence of God. Not only was God transcendent but so was the proof of God. One could then argue that Anselm was a rational mystic based on the fact that he applied rationality to explain that a personal relationship with God was not only reasonable but nothing could be more rational. The difference that occurs when referring to Spinoza’s rationalism is the contrast between rationality and faith since Spinoza’s view of God is seemingly so different compared to Anselm’s. For Spinoza God is not transcendent so a ‘transcendent’ rationality will not suffice. The rational power Anselm refers to as God given is rather part of who we are for Spinoza, since there is only One Substance, which is God. In other words, for Spinoza God is immanent and there are no gaps to fill with abstract rationality but rather mysteries to be rationally explained and understood, and with mysteries I mean that which is still not understood. Using Spinoza’s terminology the purpose of rational power is not faith but rather to turn inadequate ideas into adequate ideas. One could say that Anselm is an example of the traditional rationalism which used rationality to explain what otherwise could not be related to because it was transcendent, whereas Spinoza is an example of the kind of early empiricism which used rationality to relate to all of what was immanent.

One could then argue that Spinoza is not qualified to be called a rationalist in the context of what the term theologically and historically entails, but instead he is a rationalist because he meets the criteria of being rational in the context of the empirical framework of science. This is not hard to understand since he is contemporary with the development of the Science Age, which I have already mentioned. So if Spinoza can be considered rational according to at least the concept of today’s standards, why do I want to add the concept of mystic into the framework? Am I not then dragging Spinoza back into the medieval ages with its ‘transcendent’ rationality and stripping him of his newly earned scientific credentials?

³⁰ Armstrong, *A Case for God*, p.130.

3:2 Mysticism

Mysticism derives from the Greek word *muein* which means `to close one's lips` and/or `to close one's eyes'.³¹ I perceive this to refer to the tradition of the vow of silence and the aspect of looking within rather than without, which are so often associated with mysticism.

However, modern scholars within the comparative study of religion tend to agree on only two phenomenological characteristics of mysticism: 1) The endeavor to gain access to mysteries beyond human intellectual apprehension, which generates a new understanding of the world, and 2) the experience of union with divine nature, the deity or a transcendent principle.³²

The union which is referred to is called *unio mystica* and is traditionally thought of as an experience of something transcendent and supernatural and therefore not possible to express with mundane words, or as Anselm could have put it, it is beyond that which can be thought. Mysticism can be found in all religions but there is no agreement on what criteria is needed as to qualify it to be called mysticism. It has been claimed that "Gershom Scholem was the first to emphasize that there is no mysticism as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system."³³ In relation to this claim one could then say that religious mysticism entails three parts: first, the religious rituals or ascetic behavior which is perceived to be needed as to achieve *unio mystica*, secondly, there is paradoxically the `gap` of the union experience since it is with the supernatural and therefore cannot be expressed, and thirdly, there is the description of that which is indescribable using the language of the religion or culture in which one wants to make oneself understood.

As already mentioned a religious mystic is typically a person who experiences an unexplainable *unio mystica*, but a mystic is also a person who experiences profound insight and understanding through contemplation, meditation, or immediate illumination. The 3rd century Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus (205-270) holds that "all being emanates from the One, and the goal of the philosophically enlightened individual is to attain contemplative return to the One". He envisions the divine life as "free from passion, transcending all material constraints."³⁴ To me this sounds very much like Spinoza, even though they appear to be referring to the concept of the One differently. There has always been a fascination with mysticism and "philosophers are particularly interested in whether such experiences constitute

³¹ Schleicher, "Mystical Midrash", p.152.

³² Schleicher, "Mystical Midrash", p.152.

³³ Schleicher, "Mystical Midrash", p.164.

³⁴ Davis, "Mysticism", p.876

a 'way of knowing' and whether they provide any support for either traditional religious beliefs or unusual metaphysical claims."³⁵ I cannot claim that Spinoza as a philosopher was interested in mysticism but what I am implying is that I perceive a similarity between Spinoza's philosophy and what mysticism as a concept can be argued to contain.

Catharina Stenqvist explains mysticism as pertaining to something that alters one's perspective, and not necessarily providing a new reality, but rather providing a new understanding of one's reality.³⁶ Traditional religious mysticism has always had to do with God. But, is an experience of God only qualified as mysticism if it pertains to a Divine supernatural God? Is it only mysticism if it is a subjective, personal, exclusive, unfathomable, inner-circle secret that 'happens' to you? Or can the term mysticism also pertain to a general, inclusive clarity of understanding accessible to everyone because we as humans are capable of 'doing'? By 'doing' I am not referring to asceticism but rather to the 'doing' of human thinking and experiencing. In an article on mysticism³⁷ Stenqvist uses the term contemplation as to delineate the type of thinking that I am implying. Contemplation is the Latin word for the Greek word *theoria*, which means "consideration" or "to watch".³⁸ Contemplation in relation to mysticism can then mean the 'doing' of watching one's thinking and thus experiencing an understanding of knowing. The 'happening' in this case is thus the experience of an explanation through the self, which according to Spinoza is experiencing God, since there is only One Substance. The 'doing' I am referring to is then not the cognitive intellectual thinking *per se*, but rather the listening, the watching, the consideration of one's thoughts and experiences. One does not necessarily actively have to think but instead one has to actively be attentive and open to explanations relayed to us through our thoughts. It is an *Aha* moment of knowing the essence through understanding, instead of an *Ahh* moment of experiencing a knowing by understanding. To know the essence is a different aspect of knowing and understanding and which is what goes 'beyond' what we know cognitively. This is what I perceive Spinoza demands for anything to be considered an adequate idea and therefore existent, which I will go into further along in the essay when presenting Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge.

³⁵ Payne, "History of Mysticism", p.606.

³⁶ Stenqvist, *Förundan och Förändring*, p.9.

³⁷ Stenqvist, "Mystikens Värld. Världar av Mystik".

³⁸ Stenqvist, "Mystikens Värld. Världar av Mystik", p.37.

Stenqvist highlights that contemplation is often thought to pertain to something which excludes any stimulation of the senses and which also excludes the use of words in, for example, the act of prayer or mantras in meditation.³⁹ This view of contemplation then has no 'doing' associated with it. The knowing that can be obtained through contemplation is then conceived as being a 'happening' because it is received from 'something other' than the self. The reason this does not apply in relation to Spinoza is because there is no 'something other' but rather only 'something else' which is immanent and that needs to be explained, understood and known. In other words, the concept of mysticism that I am referring to in relation to Spinoza does not have to do with knowing God through the revelation of a separate Divine Being, but rather Spinoza's Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) has to do with explanations and understandings as to know being, which is God. One could say that the PSR is the principle and foundation of Spinoza's rational philosophy and the Intellectual Love of God is the theory and core concept. And it is this core concept that I view as having the potential of providing a correlation point between Spinoza's philosophy and mysticism since mysticism ultimately has to do with loving God.

Stenqvist introduces another term in relation to the concept of contemplation which helps to expand understanding and also explain the 'doing' part of contemplation that I am referring to in relation to Spinoza. It is the term awareness, and she writes that according to Simon Weil; "to be aware or to contemplate pertains to a mental state of inner gathering and silence. This provides a human being with a consciousness that is God's."⁴⁰ Stenqvist highlights that there is a difference between reached and received understanding through contemplation.⁴¹ Traditionally the reaching involves the doing of an ascetic or ritual act and the receiving is that which is given almost as a reward when a certain point of fulfillment has been reached. This is often viewed as a Western attitude. Within the traditions of the East the reaching has more to do with a doing of 'nothing' and the receiving is an attitude of unattachment when a certain point of emptiness has been reached.

The way I am hoping to frame what I perceive to be the mysticism of Spinoza is that the reaching is towards an all-inclusive fullness of understanding and not towards emptiness or a reward from an exclusive Divine God. It can be done not only through a ritualistic

³⁹ Stenqvist, "Mystikens Värld. Världar av Mystik", p.39.

⁴⁰ Stenqvist, "Mystikens Värld. Världar av Mystik", p. 40 (my translation from Swedish to English).

⁴¹ Stenqvist, "Mystikens Värld. Världar av Mystik", p.42.

contemplation such as for example, fasting, isolation, prayer or meditation, but also through awareness. What is received is not something given through the union with and from a transcendent other of another realm, which is beyond human understanding. What is received is reached through the experience of the relationship with and from the immanent others around us in this realm, which has the potential of being understood. In other words, Spinoza's mysticism is the experience of the One Substance, God or Nature, instead of an experience of no substance or of the other substance which is the One.

Stenqvist asks how any personal subjective understanding can be of use and objectively applicable and relevant to others.⁴² This is the key question that is asked when trying to unite the outer and inner worlds, whatever one may perceive them to be. I think that if one does not relate to the personal information as the finite truth for all, but rather as a part of all the infinite truth, it might be easier to accept enough to at least consider it as valuable information. This could imply an inclusive attitude of giving everyone the valued benefit of the doubt instead of an exclusive attitude of doubt which automatically implies that there is no value to the information.

Stenqvist refers to the theologian Bernard McGinn, who writes in one of his works (*The Foundations of Mysticism 1991*) that mysticism is a process; so in other words it can be said to be a way of living.⁴³ And since we are all in the process of living, be it either with religious or non-religious beliefs, it can be implied that we are all potential mystics, because as Spinoza claims, we are all capable of understanding the One Substance God or Nature, because everything that exists is necessarily explainable. The reasoning and conclusion that if there is only One Substance, which is God, then we are all God, does not have to be problematic since Spinoza's God is not a Divine God, in a supernatural sense, so Divine humans or Divine nature, with a capital D is not an issue. In other words, when Spinoza uses the word divine, without a capital D, I conceive him as referring to the mysteriously infinitely varied aspect of the 'union' with the natural phenomenon of God through the contemplative process of understanding life and not the union with a supernatural phenomenon of God through revelation.

⁴² Stenqvist, "Mystikens Värld. Världar av Mystik", p.41.

⁴³ Stenqvist, "Mystikens Värld. Världar av Mystik", p.44.

The correlation that I see between the process of mysticism and Spinoza's philosophy can be understood as similar to the concept of ethics. If mysticism has to do with the contemplation of the process of a way of living and the concept of ethics pertains to the reflection of how to live life, can they not then be conceived as being the same or at least alike. For me this provides an inkling of why Spinoza's last book is called *Ethics*.

3:3 Ethics

The word ethics comes from the Greek *ethos* meaning character, and morality comes from the Latin *mores* meaning custom or habit. These two words are often used interchangeably, but it has been argued that there is a theoretical distinction and the attitude is that ethics lacks the 'narrow' features of the do's and don'ts of morality while still being concerned with how we should live and what we should do.⁴⁴ It could be argued that ethics within its meaning of character holds the concept of virtues, i.e., it can be said to pertain to who you are. Morality, on the other hand, within its meaning of custom or habit, then pertains more to what you do. But even with that seemingly clear distinction, the philosophy of ethics has always been concerned with ways of living which naturally includes our ways of acting.

It can be argued that "all ethics come down to us from the past: for society they are rooted in history, and for individuals, in childhood"⁴⁵ This shows that ethics can be related to via history and psychology. According to some, ethics is related to via culture and religion because it is viewed as having to do with the laws of cultural tradition or the Law of the traditional God. Still others may view ethics through sociology and say it has to do with environmental and situational circumstances. Spinoza's ethics can be viewed as scientific and I suggest that it can even be viewed as mystical, but the common goal of ethics is "the question of what makes for a human life that is good for the person living it and it has been at the heart of ethics since the Greek philosophers enquired into *eudaimonia* (happiness)".⁴⁶ Ethics can thus be said to have to do with the theories of what is considered good and the criteria for what is considered good has to do with what makes us happy.

⁴⁴ Annas, "Ethics and Morality", p.329f.

⁴⁵ Comte-Sponville, *Atheist Spirituality*, p.24.

⁴⁶ Crisp, "Ethics", p.257.

Eudaimonia is the Greek word for “having a good guardian spirit”, which refers to the state of having an objectively desirable life which is considered to be the supreme human good.⁴⁷ But Spinoza does not speak of having a spirit for it implies dualism. Spinoza being a monist speaks instead of essence. The preserving essence of *eudaimonia*, framed in Spinoza’s philosophy, could be understood to be that a human does not have a guardian spirit but is a guardian spirit. The word inspiration here then does not imply any receiving of any Divine Spirit to help you make good choices as to be rewarded with happiness. Spinoza’s inspiration is rather the joy of the pursuit of self-preservation, i.e., the joy comes from the preservation of the capability of understanding who you are and why you do what you do. Its goal is to gain the knowledge of the laws of living, which is the good, because it is useful to us.

Some understand “the good” to pertain to pleasure, others claim that the good life rather refers to fulfilling our human nature, and still others may argue that prioritizing our own pleasure is our human nature. These different viewpoints highlight the complexity of different aspects within ethics pertaining to different value systems of different groups of people. The question then becomes; is there an ethics or one value or one character trait that holds the secret to living a good life? Or, is it the valued morals which are applied to guide ones actions that lead to a good life? Does one need a good character to make good choices or is it good choices that lead to a good character? Is it about who chooses or is it about what there is to choose from that pertains to the result of a good life? And also how do we choose or do we actually choose at all? Is it reason, emotion, Nature or God that runs the show of life? As we can see; “a philosopher’s theory of the good will almost always be closely bound up with their views on other central matters”.⁴⁸

If metaphysics is the attempt to understand the whole world, Spinoza’s philosophy can be argued to pertain to metaphysics, but since the understanding is reached through the understanding of the self, I perceive Spinoza’s philosophy as concerned with ethics. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) can be said to be one of the philosophers that mainly dealt with ethics. He can be understood as reflecting on how experience becomes knowledge, or rather how metaphysics can be rationally explained. As I understand the problem that Kant wanted to solve was, how an analysis of anything could be synthesized into a meaning which was valid as an explanation of everything for everyone. So in a sense one could say that Spinoza’s

⁴⁷ Taylor, “Eudaimonia”, p.260.

⁴⁸ Crisp, “Ethics”, p. 257.

philosophy is a statement of what ethics is and Kant's philosophy is an analysis of how ethics works. The difference between them is Spinoza's certainty that the essence of everything can necessarily be explained, and Kant's uncertainty in regard to the explainability of everything since he held the belief that reason had its limits, and that therefore the Categorical Imperative of moral laws was necessary.

The philosophy of ethics, or the reflecting on how to live a good life, can be traced as far back as to the philosophers of Greek antiquity and in the *Encyclopedia of Ethics* it is stated that

though it has sometimes been denied, all ancient ethical theories, indeed all ethical theories, contain a notion of moral duty or obligation. Theories are often called ethical rather than moral whose base notion is that of the agents good or happiness, since this is often thought to exclude concern for the non instrumental good of others.⁴⁹

But it is also stated that this is a mistake, because even if ethical theories without moral can be considered self-centered, the good of others becomes part of the agent's self-concern, even if it is not instrumentally. Within Kantian ethics the demand of non-instrumental use of others for the good of some, can be seen as a moral duty, but ethical theories which accept the reality of instrumental use of others for the good of most, like Utilitarianism, cannot be considered to be free from morality.

The most clear and stringent ethical guidelines have traditionally been provided by religion. But ethics was contemplated in ancient Greece even before it was framed within religion. Even if it is still hard to separate ethics completely from the particular clutches of an overprotective mother or rather an overbearing father religion, it is today viewed possible to relate to ethics as a religiously independent practical Applied Ethics pertaining to specific issues of life in general. But it is important to remember that even if the ideal might be to have a global ethics, which is the same for all, which would be very scientific, 'how to' ethics will always be framed in different cultures and thereby infinitely varied. So the concept of ethics as a religion free enterprise is not new. It is also not necessarily because of any evolutionary progression of mind that we in the 20th century perceive ethics outside the box of religion. The difference between then and now can be argued to be that, in the past, if you expressed a worldview without the established religious framework you could be excommunicated, as was the case with Spinoza in the 17th century, whereas today we have the human rights of self expression, at least in some parts of the world.

⁴⁹ Annas, "Ethics and Morality", p.330.

4. Analysis

4:1 Spinoza's ethics in *Ethics*

One of my questions is why Spinoza's last book is called *Ethics*. This is not odd since ethics is a part of philosophy and Spinoza is a philosopher. But what I find curious is that since ethics has been shown to be so intertwined with the morals of how to live a good life, which ultimately includes guidelines of do's and don'ts, then why does Spinoza not provide such moral guidelines in the book *Ethics*? The most characteristic proposition of the *Ethics* can be said to be concerned with a world view for the purpose of awareness of what we do rather than an evaluating view of what we should do in the world.

As already described Spinoza lived in a time of great transformation from the medieval feudalism and traditional religious beliefs, to the social reconstruction of industrial democracy preceded by the Reformation and Galilean revolutions. Spinoza was part of the times reconstruction of philosophy and he was a contemporary with Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) by whom he was influenced. This can be seen in Spinoza's concern with the concept of universal striving of self-preservation. The concept of self-preservation was the cornerstone of Hobbes philosophy and the preservation of life was the paramount goal of human action. His conviction was that knowledge could be modeled on Galileo's universal science through the method of Euclid's geometry.⁵⁰ This is what I perceive that Spinoza presents in *Ethics* (III p6-7) with the statement "each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavor to persevere in its being". The difference from Hobbes was Spinoza's underlying inspiration of Aristotelian virtue ethics. It can be argued that Spinoza's ethics is like Kant's deontological moral theory with its sense of duty since Spinoza seems to imply that one's only duty is to understand oneself as to understand what is 'right' and that this duty is the universal maxim that Kant's Categorical Imperative principle demands. But whereas Kant's ethics theory is based on the duty of respect for others, Spinoza's philosophy or ethics in *Ethics* is an egoistic ethics theory more in line with the Aristotelian ethics theory pertaining to an individual's virtue. Aristotle argued that happiness, the good life of man, could only be discovered through reason, but he claimed that it "depends upon his establishing such an order in his emotions as to be led always in the path that reason advises".⁵¹

⁵⁰ Abelson, "History of Ethics", p.90.

⁵¹ Scruton, *Spinoza*, p.27.

Spinoza agreed with Aristotle in that man was a rational being and that reason was a kind of discipline which was used both theoretically and practically in relation to emotion. “This in turn can be achieved only by developing certain dispositions of character – the virtues – which lead a man to do and to feel spontaneously that which is in accordance with rational nature”.⁵² Then again the difference from Aristotle was Spinoza’s conceived relationship between reason, emotion and virtues. For Spinoza there are no virtues that have the power over emotions, but rather virtue is the power to understand emotions, and power is freedom, and freedom is happiness. In other words, “freedom is not freedom from necessity, but rather the consciousness of necessity. The free man is the one conscious of the necessities that compel him”.⁵³ Spinoza writes in *Ethics* that “in so far as the mind understands all things as necessary, so far has it greater power over the affects, or suffers less from them” (V p6). This is the platform on which Spinoza develops his concept of freedom. Free will thus correlates to the wisdom of accepting the necessity of the emotions which are part of human nature.

When it comes to emotions in relation to God what differs Spinoza’s love of God from traditional religious love of God is his claim in *Ethics* that “God is free from passions, nor is He affected by any affects of joy or sorrow. He who loves God cannot strive that God should love him in return” (V p17-19). In other words, God is not a judge and there are no virtues or moral rules or actions that will guarantee God’s love for you. This might be shocking at first glance but when one remembers that Spinoza’s God is not that of the traditional separate transcendent Divine Being (even if the word He is used), but rather being itself, then one can see that “Spinoza’s rationalist emphasis on intelligibility generates an ethical system that is fundamentally egoistic-centered on the interests and power of the self”.⁵⁴

So the moral philosophy, which usually delineates what is considered good or bad, is framed a bit differently when it comes to what can be considered as Spinoza’s moral philosophy. Spinoza means that our judgment of goodness is based on our desires and not located in the things or acts themselves, so therefore theoretically there is no good or bad: “Our evaluations of things in nature are really evaluations of things as successful or unsuccessful realizations of

⁵² Scruton, *Spinoza*, p.27.

⁵³ Scruton, *Spinoza*, p.91.

⁵⁴ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 175.

nature's goal of aiding us."⁵⁵ One alternative around this arbitrary way of reasoning is the Utilitarian perspective of evaluating the goodness by the standard of the overall happiness resulting from a thing or action. But according to Spinoza even if this standard is inclusive it is not all-inclusive and therefore disqualified. Spinoza's rationalism demands that something can only be considered good if it is good in itself, therefore intelligibility of the thing itself becomes the issue at hand and not the evaluation whether it is good or bad according to arbitrary human standards and desires.⁵⁶

A non-arbitrary way of evaluating goodness has to do with results and not with purpose, as in the case of the consequentialistic Utilitarian aim for happiness for most. And it is thus the result of the preservation of the essence of the self and not the purpose of personal happiness that Spinoza has as a standard to determine goodness. So for Spinoza, responsibility refers to the joy of oneself and not to the happiness of others. Spinoza claims that everything we do is for the increase of power of the self. So in other words, the determining factor is the positive and good in correlation to the extent that it increases one's power, and bad to the extent that it decreases one's power. Spinoza clearly states that "by good, I understand that which we certainly know is useful to us, and, by evil, I understand that which we certainly know hinders us from possessing anything that is good" (IV d1-2). He also explains that "by virtue and power, I understand the same thing; that is to say, virtue, in so far as it is related to man, is the essence itself or nature of the man in so far as it has the power of effecting certain things which can be understood through the laws of its nature alone" (IV d8). Spinoza's determining system is thus correlated to the goodness of the thing itself and not to the evaluation of the value of the cause or the consequence. As I understand Spinoza, the level of goodness, or rather degree of virtue, has to do with the extent of knowing one's own nature, i.e., the more I know the more I am able to consciously work with what I know as to know more about what I do not know. The most perfect virtue according to Spinoza is then the power to know oneself and the more one knows one's essence or nature the more power one has. The purpose is then not the amount of happiness *per se*, but knowing why and how the situation has occurred, which Spinoza claims results in a joy of understanding. The purpose as I understand it is thus not to give life a meaning but instead to strive to reach an understanding that provides your life with meaning, which is part of the whole and thereby an insight into the laws of living.

⁵⁵ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p.177.

⁵⁶ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p.178f.

Since for Spinoza good and evil coincide and therefore there is no good or bad, then to be able to determine what is right and wrong, one needs to understand that it has to do with one's own perspective. What is right and wrong then does not pertain to the essence of a thing but to the situation at hand, which ultimately means that what is right and wrong always varies and this can be the reason why Spinoza's book *Ethics* does not contain set moral rules. Della Rocca suggests that "perhaps because Spinoza does not see rightness as in any way separate from goodness, he has few pronouncements specifically on what one ought to do."⁵⁷ As I understand Spinoza, the good and the right that we ought to do is to increase our own power by understanding and this in turn provides knowing joy. In other words, "for Spinoza, knowledge is the object of morality."⁵⁸ It can then be argued that it is not responsibility but rather respons-ability that is the focus of Spinoza's morality. Spinoza seems to mean that it is the knowledge we have that provides us with a good ability to respond, and this in turn provides the power of a right responsibility. Della Rocca means that "it is this kind of objective evaluation – the kind of evaluation that can be applied to ourselves and our actions – that, for Spinoza, is the only way to redeem ethics itself and to put it on a secure, rationalist footing".⁵⁹ So just as power is the only "good" virtue, according to Spinoza, so also "right" virtue is the only power, and "[e]thics, from this perspective, has the task of establishing order within the individual, and the community, with a focus on living the virtuous life of the wise man."⁶⁰ I think we by now safely can say that Spinoza's philosophy is a metaphysics which includes ontology of God through the power of human knowledge which in turn can be understood as Spinoza's ethics. But this brings up the question of what kind of knowledge we are referring to?

4:2 Three Kinds of Knowledge - Inadequate and Adequate Ideas

There are according to Spinoza three kinds of knowledge. The first kind of knowledge, imagination, is our day to day knowledge. It is formed by sense experience through the encounter with the external world which gives us ideas but not necessarily knowledge of the

⁵⁷ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 185.

⁵⁸ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p.186.

⁵⁹ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p.183.

⁶⁰ Davis, "Mysticism", p.876.

essence of the things encountered. It contains a multitude of misinterpretations and misunderstandings which Spinoza would refer to as inadequate ideas.⁶¹

The second kind of knowledge, reason, is the knowledge based on cognitive rationality and which I would call 'scientific' knowledge. Using Spinoza's terminology it involves grasping a thing's causal connections, not just to other objects but, more importantly, to the attributes of God or Nature. In fact, it is these that render those mechanistic relations which are lawlike and necessary. An adequate idea shows not just that it is, but how and why it is necessary. A sense experience alone cannot provide an adequate idea, it needs to be synthesized with reason.⁶² But maybe there is something more that is necessary for the rationally and reasonably synthesized sense information to be fully understood and thereby become an adequate idea that we know. What makes Spinoza differ from a scientist is the idea of necessity. The knowledge of adequate ideas does not provide an understanding or explanation of cause and effects that can be controlled, but instead lays bare its necessary outcome. It exposes the essence which is what I conceive to be what Spinoza means by truth. Truth is thus not something that is perfect and unchangeably applicable to all, but rather truth is what is when the necessity of it is understood or at least accepted as it is.

This understanding of what is can be described as the third kind of knowledge called intuition. It pertains to the understanding of the inner essence and not the outer stimuli. As Spinoza writes in *Ethics*, "the third kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essences of things" (V p25). Intuition is thus the synthesis of sense stimuli and intellectual reasoning through an understanding of the affects, which becomes a knowing of the essence of infinite attributes. It is through this intuition that I perceive that Spinoza experiences a *unio mystica*, so to speak. It is not a union with a supernatural God but a union of understandings that become a knowing of God as a natural phenomenon. That is why Spinoza's God is synonymous with Nature. The reason Spinoza is called an atheist is because he does not believe in the Divine supernatural God. But Spinoza has not denied God *per se*, he conceives of God as being all there is and thereby a divinely natural phenomenon that can be understood and known by all. The union with God is not something that happens to you through a religious revelation of the unknowable God, which needs to be believed in a specific way as to have meaning. Instead the union is that

⁶¹ Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p.244.

⁶² Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p.244.

which becomes known by you through the awareness of the knowable God right here right now which needs to be understood as to know it's meaning. So, why is this third kind of knowledge of intuition, the power and the virtue for Spinoza? Della Rocca explains;

For Spinoza our ideas are confused, inadequate and uncertain to the extent that they are caused from outside our mind, i.e. to the extent that they manifest our passivity and not our power. But to the extent that our ideas are caused from within our minds, i.e. to the extent that our ideas are a manifestation of our power, they are unconfused, adequate, and certain. Given that it is good and right for us to increase our power, it follows that – on the mental level – it is good and right for us to increase our knowledge.⁶³

Now, one could stop there and translate this as I perceive Steven Nadler does, as referring to a comparison between the first and the second kind of knowledge i.e., imagination and cognitive intellect. But, I wish to continue to pursue what I perceive Della Rocca implies, which is that Spinoza is rather referring to the second and third kind of knowledge, i.e., cognitive intellect and intuition, since my aim is not to frame Spinoza as a rational intellectual, but rather as a rational mystic. I conceive that the knowing of the cognitive intellectual knowledge is something we think we know in relation to others, and the knowing of the intuition is what we know in relation to ourselves. They are thus both mental, so to speak, but related to differently and it is this difference that I perceive makes Spinoza an intellectual rational mystic instead of 'only' a rational intellectual.

4:3 Is Spinoza a mystic?

Steven Nadler begins his article called "The Alleged Mysticism in the Ethics" with the statement "there is no mysticism in Spinoza's philosophy."⁶⁴ He claims that this is obvious since Spinoza is an arch-rationalist. For some reason though when it comes to the scholarship of Spinoza, from the earliest commentators down to our current time, there has been a persistent trend towards framing Spinoza within mysticism instead of seeing him as the inheritor of distinct reasoning of the Cartesian philosophy. As I have already shown mysticism both historically and traditionally pertains to the concept that it is through the union with God that one receives the faith and understanding of God. And since Spinoza clearly relates to God in his philosophy it is not hard to understand how his relationship with God can be perceived as being of a mystical nature. But the purpose of this essay venture is

⁶³ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p.186.

⁶⁴ Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p.232.

not to find proof as to be able to label Spinoza as a mystic within the mysticism of his time, but rather to get an understanding of what a relationship with God through Spinoza's concept of God can entail, and thereby maybe widening the frame of what a mystic can be considered to be. To exemplify how differently a relationship with God can be defined, I here refer to two contemporary Spinoza scholars that Nadler also mentions. Richard Mason states that according to Spinoza "the love of God is to hold chief place in the mind, but it is clear and distinct understanding, not mystical illumination, which is to be the route to that love."⁶⁵ And Ze'ev Levy states that "the pivotal concept of Spinoza's metaphysics - the intellectual love of God- derives its origin [...] from mysticism."⁶⁶ Nadler finds it curious that such an idea can persist and writes that "this temptation to see in Spinoza's metaphysics a mystically inclined pantheism, perhaps deriving from Kabbalah, has remained despite Spinoza's own harsh dismissal of kabbalists as *triflers whose madness passes the bounds of my understanding*".⁶⁷ Nadler seems to be satisfied with this quote from Spinoza himself as proof that Spinoza did not consider himself as a mystic and this places Spinoza back in what Nadler considers to be his proper rationalist context. It is commonly agreed that Spinoza is a very difficult philosopher to understand, and Nadler warns against trying to fill 'the gap' of our challenged understanding of Spinoza with mysticism.

As I have already shown, rationalism pertains to the concept that it is through a rational reason of God that one receives the understanding of God. So what rationalism and mysticism have in common is the conceived notion of having a 'proof' of God. They both present reasons for the unexplained. What I mean that Spinoza does differently is that he is not satisfied with a reason, he demands an explanation! He is not seeking proof of God but rather he is seeking an understanding of God. Spinoza is an arch-rationalist all right but I do not perceive that he tries to fill 'gaps' with his rationality because he does not conceive there to be any 'gaps'. As already explained I understand Spinoza's rationality to be all-inclusive not exclusive. I perceive that Spinoza's negative comment about the Kabbalists has more to do with their presumed exclusivity than with mysticism. Nadler's definition of a mystic is "someone who argues that the human intellect of reason cannot, by itself and through its own natural devices, provide one with a knowledge of God - neither of God's existence nor of

⁶⁵ Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p.233.

⁶⁶ Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p.232.

⁶⁷ Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p.232f. This statement is made in Spinoza's *Theological – Political Treatise*, Chapter 9; Gebhardt vol. 3:135-6.

God's essence - or of the higher metaphysical truths that derive from God.”⁶⁸ So clearly since Spinoza claims that the human intellect can know God he is therefore not a mystic. But, as I understand Nadler he translates the `fact` that mystics have claimed through history that it is impossible to describe the mystical experience with consistent rational words, with the understanding that the human intellect cannot understand a mystical experience rationally. He also seems to translate the intuitive knowing gained with something received through supernatural aid or arrived at through non-rational means. Nadler claims that “the mysticist believes that a direct experience and knowledge of God essentially transcends natural reason”.⁶⁹ I agree that such mystics exist within religious mysticism and I agree with Nadler that “Spinoza's philosophy is as far away from [this kind of] mysticism as a philosophy can get”.⁷⁰ But as my essay title states I am not referring to Spinoza as a mystic in the traditional sense but as a rational mystic in a new sense.

Nadler points out that “Spinoza's conception of adequate knowledge reveals an unrivaled optimism in the cognitive powers of the human being.”⁷¹ I agree, but I would suggest that it is not only the cognitive powers of the human intellectual understanding that Spinoza perceives that a human is capable of, that is astonishing and provides optimism, but instead it is the intuitive courage of the human being not to judge that understanding that is what provides the optimism. I do not perceive that it is only the rational cognitive ability that is involved in this process towards the sense of knowing God. For then all rationally thinking people would know God. But then again, according to Spinoza we do, because he writes in *Ethics*, “the more we understand singular things, the more we understand God” (V p24). It can be argued that if the human rational cognitive intellect is all that it takes to know God, and if we as humans are considered to be cognitive beings, it is not hard to come to the conclusion that it is the rational degree of the intellect that is the issue. In other words, if we only had a bit more intellectual rationality then we would surely know God. But Spinoza ends his book *Ethics* with this passage;

If the way which, as I have shown, leads hither seem very difficult, it can nevertheless be found. It must indeed be difficult since it is so seldom discovered; for if salvation lay ready to hand and could be discovered without great labour, how could it be possible that it should be neglected almost by everyone? But all noble things are as difficult as they are rare (V s42).

⁶⁸ Nadler, “Spinoza and Philo”, p.235.

⁶⁹ Nadler, “Spinoza and Philo”, p.236.

⁷⁰ Nadler, “Spinoza and Philo”, p.235.

⁷¹ Nadler, “Spinoza and Philo” p.245.

But is human cognitive rationality, which I perceive that Nadler seems to be so optimistic about, really the noble rarity that Spinoza speaks of? Nadler's definition of a rationalist is

someone who denies that revelation or any divine inspiration or aid is required for religious knowledge [...] and while the rationalist may hold that knowledge of God is essential for human happiness, he believes that the human being is; through reason itself, naturally endowed cognitively with all that he needs to acquire that knowledge.⁷²

According to Nadler rationalism is thus the view that human reason can, through its own device of cognition, achieve knowledge of God. There are a few words here that I find create our contradictory understanding of what it entails to achieve knowledge of God. Nadler says that a rationalist denies *divine* inspiration for *religious* knowledge. And yes, Spinoza's philosophy does not relate to the Divine but it does not seek religious knowledge either. He is not a monotheist but a monist. But, that does not mean that *inspiration* needs to be thrown out with the bath water, for cannot inspiration be found in relation to things which are not necessarily Divine or religious? Is it not the inspiration of wonder itself that is what motivates the desire to know? Nadler goes on to say that a rationalist *believes* that the human being is *cognitively* endowed to acquire knowledge. I do not perceive Spinoza as someone satisfied with any knowledge based on belief. I conceive of Spinoza's rational philosophy pertaining to the notion of the constant inspiration provided from his Principle of Sufficient Reason as its credentials. It has already been stated that according to Spinoza everything can be explained, by all, to some degree. It is thus not the content but the degree that differs and the difference is not for the purpose of qualification of value but rather for the establishment of the degree of existence. In other words, the credentials for what can be qualified as knowledge refer to how adequate or inadequate the ideas are. Yet again the question I find we are wrestling with is; does Spinoza want to know or does he want to understand? I perceive that he wants to understand through the useful explanations provided by both the imaginative first level of knowledge and the cognitive second level of knowledge. But I do not conceive that he stops at that level of knowing. For Spinoza, to KNOW God one needs to use the awareness provided by the intuitive third level of knowledge because this is the kind of knowing that provides JOY.

The difference between the frame of mysticism that Nadler speaks of and the frame of mysticism that I am referring to is the fact that Spinoza does not fill the 'gaps' of the unknown with rationality about another world, but instead uses rationality to explain the yet

⁷² Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p.236.

not understood and thereby 'unknown' of this world. The more the not yet completely known is explained the more it exists and the inadequate ideas become an adequate part of our world. In other words, Spinoza's rationality does not have the luxury of staying aloof and out of this world, but rather becomes part of our lives. It is thus not a *unio mystica* experience with a transcendental mystical Being for the purpose of receiving proof of that Being, as in the traditional definition of mysticism, but a union of understandings of an immanent mysterious being that provides a knowing of what it is to be alive.

Nadler clearly states that "there is nothing mystical in Spinoza's conception of knowledge for which we naturally strive or of the means through which we can attain it".⁷³ As already stated I agree with Nadler's conclusion because I too do not see Spinoza as a mystic of his time, but I do not want to conclude there. To me it seems like we stagnate at the cognitive intellect of the second kind of knowledge and avoid looking at what the third kind of knowledge of intuition entails. We have already established that there is nothing supernatural in Spinoza's philosophy. My question is then, as a monist, where does the inspiration, that I suggest motivates the desire to know come from? If we look at the word it can be understood as *in spirit* but if there is no spirit to be in or no spirit in you then what is it that drives us to want to know God? Nadler writes:

Most remarkably, because Spinoza thought that the adequate knowledge of any object, and of Nature as a whole, involves a thorough knowledge of God and how things relate to God and its attributes he also had no scruples about claiming that we can, at least in principle, know God.⁷⁴

Spinoza states in *Ethics* V p25 that the greatest striving of the mind, and its greatest virtue, is understanding things by the third kind of knowledge, intuition. Nadler continues to state that the third kind of knowledge is accompanied by the greatest satisfaction of the mind that there can be, namely joy.⁷⁵ But even though Nadler refers to the third kind of knowledge, which is intuition, it seems as if he is thinking of cognitive knowledge, which is the second kind of knowledge, because Nadler writes: "whatever causes joy in us is the object of our love. The project that Spinoza prescribes for human beings, at least as the key to achieving an ideal and lasting happiness, is clearly a strictly rational and intellectual one. There is no mysticism here".⁷⁶

⁷³ Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p.242.

⁷⁴ Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p.246.

⁷⁵ Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p.247.

⁷⁶ Nadler, "Spinoza and Philo", p. 247.

Now if Spinoza's claim is that understanding God through the experience of explanation ultimately leads to the joy of an intuitive knowing of God, which is possible without supernatural revelation, and a mystic's claim is to know God through the joy of a supernatural revelation, which is void of an understandable explanation, then the difference between Spinoza and a mystic is the technical way in which joy is experienced and the knowing of God has been reached. That is to say, if we agree that it is the same God they claim to know. The difference is that on the one hand, God is a natural phenomenon and on the other a supernatural phenomenon. Can this really be the same God related to in two different ways or is it two completely different 'things' that just happen to be referred to by the same name, 'God'. Maybe it would have saved Spinoza a whole lot of trouble if he had done as William Wordsworth (1770-1850) who called his "unseen power that was integral to nature and inherent in all forms" as simply 'something'.⁷⁷ But given Spinoza's all-inclusive God maybe, for Spinoza, the term 'everything' would have been more appropriate.

⁷⁷ Armstrong, *A Case for God*, p. 221f.

6. Conclusion

In a sense, I could have focused on the second kind of knowledge, i.e., the cognitive intellect of reason that I perceive as pertaining to scientific knowledge, and given my essay the title “Spinoza-An Empirical Scientist” and also saved myself a whole lot of trouble! But the reason I perceive Spinoza more of an intuitive mystic than a rational scientist is the fact that he is all-inclusive. He claims that there is only One Substance, which is God. As I understand science, its focus is most often on finding the cause as to be able to control the effects. Spinoza, on the other hand, focuses on the affects as to understand the cause. A scientist is a ‘true’ scientist if the true cause proves to be applicable to all as to create the same effect. On the other hand, a mystic is a ‘true’ mystic if the true cause is found to have an infinite variable of affects when applied to all. The scientific knowledge can thus be set, but the mystic knowledge is constantly varying and therefore mysterious. And the phrase “God works in mysterious ways” can, in this framework, no longer explain the unexplainable ‘away’ but rather explains the infinite variety of explanations. Spinoza’s God can thus be known by the effects we perceive and the affects we conceive and not only by the cause we believe.

According to Spinoza there is no transcendent unexplainable unknown that needs to be proved as to gain the credentials of rational criteria for it to be considered known and included into existence. Instead he points out that the unknown is the self-evidently immanent known affects that as of yet have not been adequately explained as to provide an understanding which is qualified enough as to provide a knowing of the essence. The unknown is thus not unknown because it is transcendent and unknowable, but rather the unknown is what is known by and through the self but that which has not been sufficiently explained as of yet. The concept of the unknown can for Spinoza never be claimed to be unknown based on the conclusion that it is unknowable because according to Spinoza’s Principle of Sufficient Reason everything can eventually always be explained. Spinoza is thus not a rationalist or a mystic within the framework of their traditional definitions, because how can you be a rational mystic if the rational part demands proof and the mystic part deals with that which cannot be proven? Yes, it can be argued that Spinoza uses his rationality to prove God’s existence because in *Ethics* I p11 he states that God necessarily exists. The difference, as I see it, is that that existence is not something unknown that we have to relate to as something other, but instead it is something known that we can understand as to be able to relate. In other words, there is no union of two but instead an understanding of the one.

My essay title labels Spinoza as a rational mystic which can be argued to appropriate to the same concept created by the combination of the seemingly contradictory phrase “atheist spirituality”. André Comte-Sponville writes in his book called *Atheist Spirituality* that “being an atheist by no means entails being amnesiac. Humanity is one; both religion and irreligion are part of it; neither are sufficient unto themselves.”⁷⁸ He also makes a statement through the question “atheists have as much spirit as everyone else; why would they be less interested in spiritual life?”⁷⁹ As I understand him he means that an atheist’s worldview is not a pathological disorder. An atheist can have just as much interest in discerning and discovering the essence of life as a religious person. Now if Spinoza’s philosophy can be understood as dealing with the desire to understand God through the subjective affects, and mysticism is understood as the desire to know God through the subjective experience of revelations, then they can both be argued to have the common goal of wanting to understand and know God. Spinoza does this through the experience of natural phenomena, and mysticism does it through the experience of supernatural phenomena. But what if there is nothing supernatural, as the atheist Spinoza claims, what then is a mystical experience all about? As I understand Spinoza he would not accept a religious mystical experience as a miracle of revelation, since a miracle implies that which is beyond explanation. But I instead claim that he could accept a mystical experience as something mysterious because it provides insight of the yet unknown aspects of the known. To be able to speak of mysticism in general, and not through history, religion or tradition, one needs to have a general definition as a framework. I suggest the definition of mysticism as an experience that is mysterious because it is astonishingly transformative in an infinite variety of ways.

I perceive that Spinoza’s book *Ethics* is an example of this mysterious experience of what I have defined as mysticism. It has to do with the desire to know God through an understanding of all that is God. The ‘union’ pertains to the union of all the explanations of the One Substance God or Nature so as to be able to know the One Substance God. This can be argued to be a union with God because of the love of intellectual understanding through the joy of knowing and not a union with God because of the love of the religiously Divine through the grace of revelation. Spinoza can thus not be framed as a mystic of his time in the traditional sense of the meaning of the term mysticism, but I have through this essay created a platform on which I perceive that it is possible to conceive of Spinoza as a Rational Mystic.

⁷⁸ Comte-Sponville, *Atheist Spirituality*, p.x.

⁷⁹ Comte-Sponville, *Atheist Spirituality*, p.xi.

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