



# Spinoza's Concept of God: Modern Interpretations

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**Abstract.** Spinoza devoted his philosophical system to clarifying the teachings of God. Spinoza is one of the most interested philosophers in the history of philosophy throughout the centuries. It is worth noting the study of the views of the German philosophers of the Enlightenment in the teachings of Spinoza: Goethe, Schelling, Fischer, Shevchenko, and Feuerbach. It is clear that one of the important issues in the history of philosophy that deserves mention in Spinoza is the doctrine of God, one of the most important and profound aspects of Spinoza's teachings. Spinoza developed other doctrines such as monism, materialism, free will, nature, and essence. Spinoza's teachings on God have theoretical, ideological, and methodological significance. Spinoza's interpretation of the concept of God is key to understanding his philosophy, is the primary, central category of the thinker's philosophy and is one of the most controversial concepts among Spinozists, also because it is associated with religious meanings. Spinoza's intellectual study includes the substance relating to the concept of God, in defining what Spinoza focuses on absolute eternity and infinity. Substance, consisting of an infinite number of attributes, each expressing an eternal and infinite essence, and the key to Spinoza's essence, as we shall see, is unity, that is, the unity of being between God and Nature. In the attached text, we will find that God is the doctrine of substance, nature and religious sense. Russian philosophy goes back in many ways to the traditions of German philosophy: Materialism to Feuerbach and Marxism to Hegel, Kant and Schelling, and we will see the philosophers' critique of materialism.

**Keywords:** God · Nature · Materialism · Idealism · Essence · Enlightenment · Monism · Free will

## 1 Introduction

Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza (1634–1677) was one of the most interesting philosophers in the history of philosophy, and he has also been called the reformer of new philosophy. One of the most important indicators of the depth and vitality of Spinoza's philosophical teachings is his influence on thinkers of subsequent generations and even more so for

centuries. Spinoza devoted his whole life to the development of his doctrine, and it is not surprising that there is still great interest in his philosophy today.

Spinoza's teachings occupy an important place in world philosophy. Interest in it is periodically increasing. Answers to newly emerging questions are sought in him. In the three and a half centuries since his life, approaches and evaluations of his philosophy have changed, methods of scholarly research have changed, new centers of study of Spinozism have emerged, debates about the essence of Spinoza's philosophy and the correct interpretation of it have been held, but this teaching has remained an important subject of historical and philosophical study. One of the most important aspects of this philosophy is Spinoza's concept of God, which has a great theoretical-methodological and worldview significance. Many researchers in general consider exactly the concept of God as the central, initial category of the thinker's philosophy, although it is one of the most debatable among Spinoza's researchers.

The aim of this article is a comprehensive study of the problem of God in Spinoza's philosophy. The problem of God in Spinoza has initially attracted the attention of researchers. There are a significant number of studies devoted to this problem, it is considered in different aspects and contexts. Spinoza's contemporaries collected his legacy and studied his biography, and in his teachings they saw mainly a development of Descartes' ideas and a form of atheism - a denial of religion, belief in miracles, the free will of the individual and, therefore, the possibility of salvation. Therefore, this article will present the main points of his thought concerning the concepts of god and substance, and will examine the peculiarities of Spinoza's pantheism.

## **2 The Views of German Philosophers on the Philosophy of the Enlightenment in the Teachings of Spinoza**

The study of Spinoza is connected with the thinkers of the German Enlightenment (above all M. Mendelssohn and G.E. Lessing), the "storm and stress" period (J.W. Goethe) and German Romanticism, who not only appreciated the theological character of the thinker's teaching, but also saw in his references to God "the intoxication of God", a form of religious philosophy, a rational expression of the religious spirit. [1] But some contemporary scholars of Spinozism of the period, believe that the Enlightenment: "...emerges in the context of the Jewish struggle for emancipation in a culture dominated by Christianity." [2]. The debates "on Spinozism" of the 1980s sowed the seeds of some future concepts of Spinoza scholars, for example, F. H. Jacobi's critique of transcendental idealism as an "inverted Spinozism" anticipated the critique of Hegel's interpretation of Spinoza two centuries later.

In the German idealism of Schelling and Hegel the interpretation of Spinoza outlined by the Enlighteners and Romanticists becomes complete. They justified the idealistic and rationalistic character of Spinoza's doctrine, saw in Spinoza's doctrine a pantheism of sorts, and defended him against accusations of atheism. According to Schelling, Spinoza's pantheism did not mean that he denied a personal God. Hegel held that "Spinoza's system is absolute pantheism and monotheism raised to thought. [3] But not atheism. He saw the reason for Spinoza's accusation of atheism in his denial of the individual, finite being of the individual and the abstract notions of freedom associated

with it that were familiar to the Christian. In Spinoza he saw not a philosopher of nature, but an “ecosmist,” concentrating chiefly on the problems of ethics and philosophy of the spirit, to which he at once passes from God, from metaphysics.

The traditions of classical philosophy were continued in subsequent works of German researchers of Spinoza's philosophy: W. Windelband, K. Fischer, J. Erdmann, and others who viewed Spinoza's teachings through the prism of Kantian theory of knowledge and Hegelian speculative philosophy. B. He saw in Spinoza a religious-mystical thinker who tried to unite mysticism and rationalism, and in doing so fell into an “insoluble contradiction”: Spinoza's system “makes rationalism serve mysticism...”. [4] The contradictory nature of Spinoza's system was also stressed by CK. Fisher. From his point of view, the contradictions “derive from the nature and character of the system - from this conflation of rationalism... With naturalism...” [5].

For K. Fischer, Spinoza's philosophy is both “absolute pantheism” and “absolute rationalism” and “naturalism,” since the substance is not only God but also nature. At the same time, he is one of the first to draw attention to the activity of God, the “producing nature. Spinoza establishes “equality between nature and God.” [6] In this assessment of Spinoza's philosophy, one can perhaps trace the influence of L. Feuerbach, also belonging to the German school of Spinozism.

In his study of Spinoza, L. Feuerbach was one of the first to offer a naturalistic and even materialistic interpretation of it. He praised the anti-religious, anti-theological character of Spinoza's philosophy, which “represents precisely a purification or liberation from all theology and theological metaphysics; it is a pure, absolutely independent philosophy.” [7]. The distinction of matter and Spinoza's is arbitrary, incomprehensible, borrowed as being present from Descartes' philosophy, “not developed from substance itself or shown to be necessary in and out of it. On the contrary, there is no principle of this distinction in substance.” [8].

Its chief flaw L. Feuerbach saw in the confusion of god and nature. In this confusion is the origin of Spinoza's atheism, which manifests itself in the elimination of the “humanity” of God, i.e. his personal character, as well as the thinker's inconsistency: he transformed the essence of nature into the essence of God. L. Feuerbach sought to derive from Spinoza's teachings the rationale for materialism - the notion of matter as an infinite substance, the cause of itself - and placed emphasis on this. He noted: that “thinking expresses something real and therefore relates to God, is self-evident,” but that also that “extension or matter is an attribute of God was not so obvious and direct. [9] For this he proves that it has inherent definitions of infinity, unity, and indivisibility. Matter, as an attribute of extension, is not reducible to a divisible body, thought of as a substance, not as separate bodies. Corporeal substance expresses pure, unbounded reality. L. Feuerbach's materialism is connected in part with the birth of a new period of evolution of research on Spinoza's philosophical doctrine.

### 3 God (Substance) and Monism in the Teaching of Spinoza

In recent years a number of works on the interpretation of the concept of God have appeared in foreign and Russian philosophy, which raises the need to consider some such contemporary interpretations. One of the main questions arising from some of the

contemporary works is: how does Spinoza's philosophical concept of "God" relate to the religious meanings associated with this concept?

Spinoza's interpretation of God is the key to understanding his philosophy, and the overall characterization of his teaching depends on it. To understand Spinoza's conception of God, it should first be noted that Spinoza views "God" as something analogous to the philosophical category of "substance. If the equating of God with Nature, the naturalistic interpretation of God noticeable in Feuerbach, C. Fischer and others, had rather a worldview significance, the consideration of him as "substance" is perhaps more important for understanding the internal logic of Spinoza's metaphysics, who is seen as "the chief metaphysician of the modern period." [10].

The basic category of Spinoza's philosophy is "substance," which is essentially identified with the concept of "God." Spinoza himself defines God as follows: "By God I mean a being absolutely infinite (*ens absolute infinitum*), that is, a substance consisting of infinitely many attributes, of which each expresses an eternal and infinite essence." [11] In defining substance, Spinoza emphasizes its independence: "By substance I mean that which exists in itself and presents itself through itself, i.e., that representation of which does not need the representation of another thing from which it would have to be formed." [12].

"Substance" is the cause of itself. Viewing God as substance allowed Spinoza to abstract away from religious questions and explore the relationship between an absolute, independent beginning and finite things, to form the notion of a philosophical "God." Although Spinoza uses the terms "substance" and "God" to refer to the same denotation, they still seem to differ somewhat in meaning. Spinoza's definition of God emphasizes its absoluteness, eternity and infinity: "By God I mean a being absolutely infinite (*ens absolute infinitum*), that is, a substance consisting of infinitely many attributes, of which each expresses an eternal and infinite essence. [11] "Substance" is a philosophical category, a means of constructing and analyzing his philosophy. "God," on the other hand, carries some additional semantic content, including religious content.

In Spinoza, God is essentially dissolved in substance, subordinated to the logic of the development of this category. But the religious "trace" in the form of the concept "God" noticeably enriched its content in the philosopher's teaching and strengthened its methodological significance. Firstly, it is with Spinoza's God that researchers associate the justification of certainty in the objectivity of cognition, the connection of the philosophical category of substance with reality. Secondly, God allows us to identify important features of the understanding of substance: activity, activity, ordering, rational logic, the architectonics of self-organization, the possible ideality of this rational order. Third, it is to a certain concept of God that the concept of free will, which is largely related to the Christian religious tradition and its secularization, is correlated. In contrast to the infinity of God and his attributes, in defining substance, Spinoza emphasizes its independence: By substance I mean that which exists in itself and presents itself through itself, that is, that representation of which does not need the representation of another thing from which it would have to be formed. It is substance that is the cause of itself, as Spinoza did not need to emphasize the independence of God. By emphasizing the category of substance, researchers partly divert themselves from religious questions

and analyze the relation of the universal, absolute and infinite beginning to finite things, which is essential for understanding the world in which man manifests his free will.

A considerable number of works, from Hegel and Feuerbach to contemporary scholars, including A. D. Maidansky, R. Woolhouse, M. Geroux, A. Donavan, M. Lin, I. Melamed, M. Rocca and others, are devoted to the category of "substance" and its related categories in Spinoza's philosophy. Noting the complexity of Spinoza's conception of substance, researchers usually focus their attention on the relation of related philosophical categories: substance, attribute, *modus* and others, studying the opposition of categories of the one and the many, the finite and the infinite, essence and existence, considered in various aspects. Without considering within the framework of this work the whole range of questions arising in connection with the study of "substance" in Spinoza, we will note those which, in our opinion, are of theoretical and methodological importance for this study.

The most important key to understanding substance in Spinoza, as well as in his entire philosophy, is monism. This monism follows from the entire prehistory of his philosophy. On the one hand, his conception of God-substance is heir to the medieval tradition of religious monotheism; on the other, it overcomes Descartes' dualism of substances. Spinoza's original conception of substance synthesized these approaches: Spinoza asserts the principle of substance monism. But researchers keep finding weaknesses in this doctrine. German philosophers saw the transition from Descartes to Spinoza as a dialectical removal of the abstract opposites of thinking and being, but they regarded substance as a simple beginning, not logically deployed; "Spinoza's substance was not yet defined by him as within itself concrete." [13]. T. Sedichenko views God as substance, emphasizing the impersonality of God, identifying him with Nature, and his thinking with objective processes, while taking into account the distinction between nature generating and nature generated. At the same time, she criticizes the understanding of God as a thinking subject and giving him personal characteristics - reason and will: "God or substance cannot be said to think anything by nature, like man." [14]. A. D. Maidansky sees Spinoza's God as "the reflexive definition of the intellect", as a certain objectification of Spinoza's logic, his method: "Wherever anything is said about God, Nature, substance or the most perfect Being, the real subject of Spinoza is the intellect. [15] God is thus understood as a kind of order and order acting, causing and generating.

## 4 Materialism and Idealism in the Philosophy of Spinoza

The study of Spinozism in Russian, and later Soviet, philosophy represents a special page in the history of such studies, reflected in a number of contemporary works. [16]. Russian philosophy goes back in many ways to the traditions of German philosophy: materialists to Feuerbach Humanism and Marxism, idealists to Kantianism, Schellingianism, and Hegelianism.

The idealistic interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy was criticized, and his use of the concept of God was defined as forced. The limitations of his materialism were noted: "Spinoza is not a dialectician and does not give us a doctrine of development, but his system, being a system consistently materialistic, contains the necessary prerequisites to build on it a scientific theory of dialectics." [17]. Spinoza's ontology, however, paid

particular attention to the attribute of extension as an attribute of matter, paid less attention to its equality with the attribute “thinking”, and identified the category *substance* with the category *matter*. Some progress with respect to nineteenth-century materialism consisted in the use of the category “matter,” understood as objective reality. But this does not seem to have had any noticeable effect on the understanding of Spinoza.

Soviet researchers in the 1970s studied Spinoza within the Marxist paradigm, when interest in Spinoza grew again, perhaps under the influence of foreign research. Of note were the works of M. S. Belenkij, I. A. Konikov, V. V. Sokolov, and others. At this time a certain departure from the identification of Spinozism and materialism was outlined. I. A. Konikov criticized L. A. Mankovsky’s identification of the attribute of extension with matter as an identification of substance with one of its attributes, and this identification was understood mechanically. He paid attention to the fact that Spinoza does not have complete identification of substance and matter, “Spinoza’s substance is a metaphysically rewired nature, but nevertheless, a real, empirical nature...”. [18] I. A. Konikov notes the metaphysical, mechanistic nature of “Spinoza’s materialistic monism. The denial of motion as an attribute leads Spinoza to recognize thinking as an attribute, and thus to hylozoism. Spinoza’s “hylozoism” is also spoken of even more definitely by V.V. Sokolov. Moreover, for him Spinoza is a pantheist. In his opinion, Spinoza’s philosophy identifies God with substance. In turn, in the immanence of God and nature, in Spinoza’s materialistic pantheism, V. V. Sokolov sees one form of expression of early materialism of the time. Later Soviet studies of Spinoza’s philosophy are more inclined toward a compromise interpretation of Spinoza’s teachings. M. Gerou marked the beginning of a critical overcoming of the legacy of the German, primarily Hegelian, tradition in the study of Spinoza’s philosophy, but remained influenced in some respects by the work of C. Fischer. In Spinoza, Fisher is a pantheist. The critique of the Hegelian approach to Spinoza is a major innovation and hallmark of the French approach: “Instead of Hegel’s transcendental subjectivism, Spinoza offers a kind of immanent objectivism for which there is no negation and no contradiction.” [19]

Another important feature of Spinozism in France is its predominantly secular character, a gravitation toward materialism, toward Marxism. P. Machré believes that Hegel distorted Spinoza in order to squeeze him into his schemes, “because Hegel’s own teleological-subjectivist-idealist assumptions prevented him from seeing the incomplete, anti-subjective materialism of his predecessor.” [19]. For the most part, these interpretations of Spinoza focus on the philosophy of history. Spinoza’s conceptions of materialism in the French interpretation are interesting. In E. Holland, this is a particular materialism: “Spinoza regards thought and matter as absolutely equal.” [19]

As attributes of the same substance they are identical, while for Hegel the identity of Spirit and matter is reached only at the end of history. Thought for Spinoza is a property of substance, not of the subject. Spinoza’s “materialism” and “atheism” referred to by J. Deleuze are rather “materialism” and “atheism” anthropological and ethical. Deleuze views Spinoza’s philosophy from a moral-practical perspective, thinking that “it is not enough to show how pantheism and atheism combine in... a thesis that denies the existence of a moral, creative and transcendent God. Rather, it is necessary to begin with the practical propositions which make Spinozism the subject of scandal.” [20] Often “materialism” refers to Spinoza’s desire for objective knowledge, for a scientific

explanation of nature, determinism, and a critique of theology. The ability of Spinoza's substance to think, creating an infinite number of modifications - mode, and the grounds for their existence - is its most important characteristic, to which modern researchers pay attention. Substance has "two more properties: it must be modifiable and think". [21] I. Melamed, criticizing the idealism of M. Rocca and the German idealists, focuses on the problem of infinite modes, which he considers essential for understanding some of the most important doctrines of Spinoza's metaphysics, such as the flow of modes from the essence of substance, necessity, the whole-part relation and the nature of infinity.

The identification of the mental, ideal side of substance and the emphasis on the "superiority" of this side over the being of finite *modus operandi* have contributed to the identification by modern scholars of Spinoza's philosophy of the two kinds of existence of things and of Spinoza's two causal series. Modern scholars are moving further and further away from Spinoza's mechanical, physical understanding of causality, and consequently of God-substance as the "prime mover," paying attention to the thought, semantic, conceptual connections and dependencies. All existence must have its cause (according to the principle of sufficient reason), all facts must be conceivable (conceived) or have a reason for their existence in nature. "Our ability to think of a thing depends on our ability to think of its causes" [22], to possess a notion of that cause. M. Rocca is criticized by P. Severak, who defines Spinoza as a materialist, on the basis of applying the same principles to "Thought" as to extension, on the basis of a "physics of thought. There is no entanglement, no "gimmick" of the one and the many, "one of the great ideas of Spinozism is always to think in the unity of identity and difference." [23] Such is the relation of attributes, such is the relation between nature, produced and produced, thought as the identity of the same Nature. P. Severak grounds Spinoza's monism on the unity of thought and body, asserting materialist monism.

Idealism and dualism in Spinoza's understanding of substance are connected with the peculiarities of his conception which are emphasized by modern Western scholars, namely the think ability and cognizability of substance, with the ideal side as its most important characteristic: "For Spinoza the universal think ability (thought-intelligibility) is a fundamental ontological and methodological requirement. As he sees it, there is nothing that cannot be conceived (conceived [concept]). Conversely, the apparent inconceivability of something is sufficient to remove it from the realm of possible existence. [24].

Thus, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The philosophy of Benedict Spinoza, was inherent in monism, which was pantheistic in nature, as the philosopher identified God with nature;
- The study of Spinoza's philosophy passes through several stages: initial, "German", "Russian-Soviet", and modern, revealing its content as a subject of research more and more deeply;
- The theoretical basis of the study is formed by considering Spinoza's metaphysics, its place in his philosophical system and its main categories: God, substance and others. The activity of God-substance, as a source and bearer of power, the activity of producing conceptual and causal order, the peculiarities of this order is emphasized.

## 5 Conclusion

Thus, the main interpretations of Spinoza's substance in modern philosophy allow us to consider it as a complex category. This category reveals a complex structure which forms the unity of the two sides-attributes: thinking and extension in their unity. Very important in Spinoza's writings was the section on substance, to his great credit. Spinoza developed a theory of substance which considered the whole essence of being. Substance is in indissoluble necessary unity with the attributes and modes, and is the basis of the multiplicity of modes, while maintaining its unity.

Although Spinoza's concept of God is predominantly rationalistic, philosophical, identified with substance and nature, and in a number of interpretations it has acquired a materialistic, natural-scientific meaning, it also entails a noticeable trace of religious interpretations which enrich Spinoza's understanding of *cause itself* and are quite popular with modern researchers.

Spinoza wanted to solve this problem on his own; he moved his doctrine of substance as follows. There is no distinction between God, as the supreme substance, and others which he has created; there is room for the existence of only one substance, in which all that exists in the circle is enclosed. It is this substance that encapsulates both nature and God himself. The unity between nature and God, who is beyond nature, God seems to rise above nature, to be within nature; only nature and God, in tandem, have the capacity to create something. Nature and God are the ruling world, which can create the created world, that is, individual things that have the name of modes.

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