

Spinoza's theophany: the expression of God's nature by particular things

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Spinoza's Theophany: The Expression of God's Nature by Particular Things

0. Abstract

What does Spinoza mean when he claims, as he does several times in the *Ethics*, that particular things are *expressions* of God's nature or attributes? This article interprets these claims as a version of what is called *theophany* in the Neoplatonist tradition. Theophany is the process by which particular things come to exist as determinate manifestations of a divine nature that is in itself not determinate. Spinoza's understanding of theophany diverges significantly from that of the Neoplatonist John Scottus Eriugena, largely because he understands the non-determinateness of the divine nature in a very different way. His view is more similar, I argue, to what is presented in the work of Ibn 'Arabī, under the name "*tajallī*".

Key Words: Spinoza, Eriugena, Ibn 'Arabī, expression, modes, divine nature, indeterminacy, superdeterminacy, theophany, *tajallī*

1. Introduction

Spinoza repeatedly states in his *Ethics* that all particular things – ordinary objects in the world – are modes of God, which *express* his nature or attributes “in a certain and determinate way”.

For example (my underlining):

Particular things are nothing other than affections or modes of God's attributes, by which the attributes of God are expressed [*exprimuntur*] in a certain and determinate way (E, 1p25c).

By body I understand a mode, which expresses God's essence, insofar as it is considered as an extended thing, in a certain and determinate way (2d1).

Singular thoughts – this and that thought – are modes that express God's nature in a certain and determinate way (2p1d).

the essence of a human being [...] is an affection, or mode, which expresses God's nature in a certain and determinate way (2p10c).

For singular things are modes, by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by 1p25c), that is (by 1p34), things by which God's power, by which God is and acts, is expressed in a certain and determinate way (3p6d).

Scholars have grappled with this notion of *expression* – a concept for which Spinoza provides no definition. Some have linked it with Neoplatonic ideas. For example, Gilles Deleuze observes that Spinoza's theory of expression was “developed, in the Renaissance as in the Middle Ages, by authors steeped in Neoplatonism”.¹ In this article, I compare Spinoza's theory of the expression of God's nature by his “certain and determinate” modes with the theophanic theory of John Scottus Eriugena (c.800–c.877) and then of Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240). My purpose is not mere comparison, however. Rather, through the comparison, I hope to explain the place and purpose of this theory of divine expression in Spinoza's system.

My conclusion will be that Spinoza's theory of divine expression can be seen as a *theophanic* theory (or “a theophany” in short), by which I mean a characterisation of particular things as determinate manifestations of the divine nature – *theophanies*, as the term is used by Eriugena. Spinoza's theophany differs from that of Eriugena in important ways, however. These differences derive from the unique way in which Spinoza understands the unlimitedness of God's nature. For Eriugena (as for other Neoplatonists), the unlimitedness of the divine nature makes it *indeterminate*, whereas for Spinoza, divine unlimitedness entails what I call *superdeterminacy*. I end by noting that a closer precursor to Spinoza's theory of divine expression can be found in the theophany, or *tajallī*, of the Islamic mystic, Ibn 'Arabī.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 19.

2. Expression and Eriugena's Theophany

Deleuze is not the only scholar to find Neoplatonic resonances in Spinoza's notion of expression. Martin Lin, for instance, connects Spinoza's concept of expression with the Neoplatonic idea of emanative causation:

According to the Neoplatonists, efficient causality occurs through a process that they called "emanation" in which the effect receives its qualities or properties from its cause [...] I propose that this conception of efficient causality stands behind Spinoza's conception of expression.²

There is more possible Neoplatonic background to the conception than this. Examining contemporary uses of the term *express* [*exprimere*] in Spinoza's context, Antonio Salgado Borge points out that: "one of the principal senses of this term is 'to manifest'".³ He notes that Zachary Gartenberg and Deleuze both make the same observation.⁴ So does Lin, I add.⁵ We might, then, connect Spinoza's concept of expression with another Neoplatonic idea: the *theophanic* conception, according to which ordinary things manifest God's otherwise incomprehensible nature. In John Scottus Eriugena, for instance, we find this:

the Divine Nature [...] creates itself, that is, allows itself to appear in its theophanies, willing to emerge from the most hidden recesses of its nature in which it is unknown even to itself, that is, it knows itself in nothing because it is infinite and supernatural and superessential and beyond everything that can and cannot be understood; but, descending into the principles of things and, as it were, creating itself, it begins to know itself in something.⁶

The apparently pantheistic language here is striking. In creating things, God not only manifests himself, he creates himself. Things as God's "theophanies" both manifest him and *are* him, in

² Martin Lin, "Spinoza's Metaphysics of Desire," *Archiv Für Geschichte Der Philosophie* 86, no. 1 (2004): 31–32.

³ Antonio Salgado Borge, "Spinozistic Expression as Signification," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2022): 34.

⁴ Zachary Micah Gartenberg, "Spinozistic Expression," *Philosopher's Imprint* 17, no. 9 (June 16, 2017): 2n.2; Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 15.

⁵ Lin, "Spinoza's Metaphysics of Desire," 29.

⁶ John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon: Division of Nature*, trans. I. P. Sheldon-Williams and John O'Meara (Montreal: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987), 689B, 317–18.

some sense. As their creator, God can also be said to *emanate* his theophanies, which is the Neoplatonic form of efficient causation, as Lin proposes. Between God and his theophanies, then, there stands a relation of (i) *identity* (of some sort), (ii) *manifestation*, and (iii) *efficient causation*. Do all these relations play a role in the concept of expression?

Lin identifies (iii) with expression. But the linguistic connotations of “*exprimere*” suggest (ii) as well: particular things can be said to manifest God’s nature in the way that effects generally signify their causes – as smoke signifies fire or a flush signifies pregnancy (to use Roger Bacon’s favoured examples).⁷ What about (i)? To propose that divine expression involves identity is less bizarre than it might at first appear, if we bear in mind that in Spinoza’s era the notion of *representation* was often treated this way: representations were often regarded as being in some sense identical with what they represent.⁸ The idea of an identity between God and particular things is also suggested in Spinoza’s statements to the effect that each of God’s modes *is* God, *quatenus* some qualification.⁹ For example, Spinoza suggests that when some human mind has an idea it follows that *God* “*quatenus* he is explained by the human mind, that is, *quatenus* he constitutes the essence of the human mind” has that idea (E 2p11c). Douglas argues that expressions of the form “God *quatenus*...” in Spinoza function as distinct logical subjects from “God”.¹⁰ Lin argues, furthermore, that the objects denoted by those expressions are distinct from the one denoted by “God”, although he regards them as strange,

⁷ K.M. Fredborg, Lauge Nielson, and Jan Pinborg, “An Unedited Part of Roger Bacon’s ‘Opus Maius’: ‘De Signis,’” *Traditio* 34 (1978): 75–136; Roger Bacon, *On Signs*, trans. Thomas Maloney (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2013). On the idea of expression as signification in Spinoza, see Salgado Borge, “Expression as Signification.”

⁸ See, for instance: Karolina Hübner, “Representation and Mind-Body Identity in Spinoza’s Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 60, no. 1 (2022): 51–54.

⁹ On the meaning of the mysterious “*quatenus*” see: Mogens Laerke, “‘Deus quatenus’... Sur l’emploi des particules réduplicatives dans l’Éthique,” in *Lectures Contemporaines de Spinoza*, ed. M. Delbraccio, P.-F. Moreau, and C. Cohen Boulakia (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 2012); Alexander Douglas, “Quatenus and Spinoza’s Monism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 56, no. 2 (April 2018): 261–80; Martin Lin, *Being and Reason: An Essay on Spinoza’s Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), ch.5; Alexander Douglas, “Quatenus,” in *Spinoza Cambridge Lexicon*, ed. Karolina Hübner and Justin Steinberg (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁰ Douglas, “Quatenus and Spinoza’s Monism.”

“non-basic” objects that ontologically depend on God in an intimate way.¹¹ Nevertheless, the language that identifies ordinary modes, such as the human mind, with “God *quatenus...*” evokes some sort of identity, no less than Eriugena’s mysterious pronouncement that in creating things the Divine Nature *creates itself*.

These three relations are intimately connected in the concept of expression, which is thus a single relation with three different aspects rather than a mere bundle of three relations. An expressed object efficiently causes its expressions, and *insofar as* it causes them it manifests them, as effects often signify their causes, and *insofar as* it manifests them it is in some sense identical with them, as a representation is in some sense identical with its object on the theory referenced above.

Some historians deny that Eriugena goes as far as *identifying* God (or the divine nature) with his theophanies, since this would make him a pantheist¹² of sorts:

Eriugena [sic.] has been accused of being a pantheist because of his daring statements identifying God with the being of creatures. For example, he calls God “the being of all things”. But in fact he does not identify God with his creatures [...]. He raises God so far above beings that no confusion between them is possible.¹³

In the passage quoted above, we see Eriugena stating that the divine nature “is infinite and supernatural and superessential and beyond everything that can and cannot be understood”.

The divine nature is beyond *all* beings, both comprehensible and incomprehensible. It cannot

¹¹ Lin, *Being and Reason*, ch.5.

¹² In this article I don’t discuss the distinction sometimes made between pantheism and panentheism. It might be more appropriate to refer to the described here as panentheism. Whatever sense of identity is bound up in the notion of expression would seem to be asymmetric: things, as theophanies, express God, but God is not said to express things. Such asymmetry is the distinguishing feature of panentheism as opposed to pantheism, according to Melamed: Yitzhak Melamed, “Cohen, Spinoza, and the Nature of Pantheism,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 2018, 171–80; Yitzhak Melamed, “A Concise Grammar of Pantheism” (unpublished), accessed November 25, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/36909644/A_Concise_Grammar_of_Pantheism.

¹³ Armand Maurer, *Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Etienne Gilson (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982), 70.

then be identified with any being.¹⁴ Likewise, Natalia Strok notes that while there are passages in Eriugena's *Periphyseon* that lend themselves to a pantheistic reading:

there are fragments in *Periphyseon* that go in opposition and distinguish God from His creation because, although the essence of everything is in Him, divinity still remains in an unreachable and transcendent level, beyond everything, and is nothing of the creation order.¹⁵

Whether or not Eriugena should be seen as a pantheist, the contrast with Spinoza on this point is striking. Spinoza is very clear in ascribing both being and comprehensibility to God. It is part of the very definition of God that he is in himself and is conceived through himself (E 1def6). Moreover, Spinoza credits the human mind with an adequate idea of God's essence (E 2p47), meaning that God is certainly not beyond knowledge. The reasons allegedly prohibiting Eriugena from being a pantheist are not present for Spinoza. Perhaps, however, these differences show that it is misguided to draw too close a parallel between the theophanic relation between God and his creatures in Eriugena and the expressive relation between God and his modes in Spinoza.

3. Divine Indeterminacy in Spinoza and Eriugena

One point, however, should give us pause before moving entirely away from this parallel. The reason Eriugena regards God as beyond being and knowledge seems to concern the *indeterminacy* of the divine nature. Concerning the unknowability of God (even to God himself), the *Periphyseon* asks:

How, therefore, can the divine nature understand of itself what it is, seeing that it is nothing (*nihil*)? For it surpasses everything that is, since it is not even being but all being derives from it, and by virtue of its excellence it is supereminent over every essence and every substance. [...] So God does not know of Himself what He is because He is not a "what" (*quid*), being in everything incomprehensible both to Himself and to every intellect. [...] He

¹⁴ See Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 523D, 123.

¹⁵ Natalia Strok, "Eriugena's Pantheism: Brucker, Tennemann and Rixner's Reading of *Periphyseon*," *Archiv Für Begriffsgeschichte* 57 (2015): 114.

does not recognize himself as being something. Therefore He does not know that He is a “what”, because He recognizes that He is none at all of the things which are known in something, and about which it can be said or understood what they are.¹⁶

As Donald Duclow explains:

Created being is essentially finite and hence can be defined according to the limits within which it is confined. The uncreated, however, pervades and transcends all created being in virtue of Transcending all finitude, the divine nature cannot be understood in its precision – that is, in its infinity – within the confines of finite being.¹⁷

The gist of the idea here seems to be that an infinite divine nature must be entirely indeterminate, since any determination would involve limitation and finitude. The infinite divine nature is therefore beyond knowledge, and even beyond *being* – the idea of something that *is* without being anything in particular is difficult to find sensible. This brings us back to the parallel with Spinoza, since he too seems to identify infinity with a lack of determinacy.

Before examining the relevant texts in Spinoza, it’s worth pointing out an awkwardness in Eriugena’s theophany.¹⁸ On one hand, Eriugena regards the divine nature as absolutely indeterminate and therefore beyond being and knowledge. On the other hand, as we saw in a quotation above, he views creatures as the divine nature’s instruments of self-knowledge: “descending into the principles of things and, as it were, creating itself, it begins to know itself in something”. The divine nature can know itself in creatures since it is in some sense identical with those creatures. But in what sense? The anti-pantheistic passages in the *Periphyseon* are those that distinguish God from creatures on account of God’s transcendence of being. Yet how can Eriugena on one hand reason that in knowing the creatures God knows himself, while

¹⁶ Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 589B-C, 143-45.

¹⁷ Donald Duclow, “Divine Nothingness and Self-Creation in John Scotus Eriugena,” *The Journal of Religion* 57, no. 2 (1977): 112.

¹⁸ Henceforward I will use the term “theophany” to refer to any theory explaining particular things as manifestations or theophanies of the divine nature. Context will, I hope, make clear whether “theophany” is being used as a name for this sort of theory or to refer to a specific manifestation of the divine nature.

on the other hand refusing to conclude that if God transcends being and knowledge then the creatures do also, or, contrariwise, that if the creatures do not transcend being and knowledge then God also does not? All seem to follow equally well from the identity between God and creatures. When it comes to that identity, Eriugena appears to want to have his cake and eat it too. No wonder deciding whether or not he is a pantheist has proven so difficult for scholars.

Turning to Spinoza, we find several passages in which he associates determinacy with finitude, implying that God, being infinite, must lack determinacy. In a letter to Jarig Jelles, Spinoza begins by discussing shape and ends by saying something about determination in general:

shape applies only to finite and determinate bodies. For whoever says that he conceives a shape indicates by this only that he conceives some determinate thing and the way it is determinate. This determination therefore does not pertain to the thing per its being. Rather, it is its non-being. For shape is nothing other than a determination, and determination is negation. It cannot, as they say, be anything but a negation (Ep.50, G3.240).

This suggests that for something to exist in any determinate way, it must be negated – that is, it must be finite and limited. Yet at the start of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines God as absolutely infinite and goes on to explain that if something is absolutely infinite then “whatever expresses essence and *involves no negation* pertains to its essence” (E 1d6expl; my italics). As Harold Joachim puts it: “God is conceived by [Spinoza] as absolutely positive because absolutely real: as excluding all negation from his being”.¹⁹ This and the fact that determination is negation suggest strongly, though they do not quite entail, that an absolutely infinite being must lack determination. While some readers have resisted this conclusion,²⁰ Yitzhak Melamed points to

¹⁹ Harold H. Joachim, *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza: Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 104.

²⁰ Lewis Robinson, *Kommentar zu Spinozas Ethik* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1928); Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Robert Stern, “‘Determination Is Negation’: The Adventures of a Doctrine from Spinoza to Hegel to the British Idealists,” *Hegel Bulletin* 37, no. 1 (May 2016): 29–52.

further textual evidence.²¹ For instance, Spinoza writes (in Latin): “*determinatum nihil positivi; sed tantum privationem existentiae ejusdem naturae, quae determinata concipitur, denotat*”, which Melamed translates as: “‘determinate’ denotes nothing positive, but only the privation of existence of that same nature which is conceived as determinate”.²² Moreover, Spinoza claims in the *Ethics* that “being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature” (E 1p8s1). Here it is finitude rather than determinacy that is identified with negation. But since this is contrasted with “absolute affirmation”, we could read the passage as another reference to the principle that determination is negation. And in another letter we find Spinoza stating: “the nature of God does not consist in one kind of being, but rather in Being, which is absolutely indeterminate” (Ep.36, G4.185). The final word here is “*indeterminatum*” in the Latin version of the letter and “*oneindig*” in the Dutch version (most likely a translation). Edwin Curley translates it as “unlimited”, which matches the Dutch version better.²³ As we shall see, there is a good reason for this – the idea of an *indeterminate* God would be problematic for Spinoza in several ways. But Melamed is right that the balance of textual evidence does seem to imply that God’s infinity entails a lack of determinacy, for Spinoza no less than for Eriugena. This raises two questions.

First, we can ask how Spinoza could in this case regard God as existing in himself and being conceived through himself. Spinoza rules out Eriugena’s scheme (problematic though it is), in which the indeterminate nature only exists and is conceived through the determinate things it causes. But then, if God lacks determinacy, Spinoza must explain how something can

²¹ Yitzhak Melamed, “‘Omnis Determinatio Est Negatio’ – Determination, Negation and Self-Negation in Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel,” in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, ed. Eckart Forster and Yitzhak Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²² Melamed, 185.

²³ Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. Edwin Curley, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 29–30.

be or be conceived through itself without being anything determinate. This leads to problems we will examine.

Second, we can ask why the nature of Spinoza's God gives rise to determinate things at all. In the theophanic tradition, God creates creatures in order to serve as vehicles of his self-comprehension. Discussing the Neoplatonic theory of emanation, Harry Wolfson writes: "The theory of emanation maintains that the entire universe with all its manifold finite beings is the unfolding of the infinite divine nature, the product of its thinking."²⁴ We have seen a specific version of this in Eriugena: having no determinate being of his own, and wanting to know himself, God must create himself as determinate things and know himself through them. This explanation isn't available to Spinoza, who holds that God is conceived through himself, not through determinate things. Moreover, one standard Neoplatonic explanation of the emanation of creatures from the divine nature appeals to *volition*: God freely wills to engage in his cognitive activity. Eriugena states, as we saw, that the divine nature is "willing to emerge from the most hidden recesses of its nature in which it is unknown even to itself", while Wolfson reports that in Neoplatonism generally "the emanative cause of the universe does not act by necessity but by volition".²⁵ Spinoza, however, believes that the very idea of divine volition is inconsistent with divine perfection (O4.154; G3.80). In the Appendix to Part 1 of the *Ethics* he writes: "God is and acts only from the necessity of his nature" and: "all things have been predetermined by God, not, certainly, from the liberty of his volition or absolute good pleasure, but from the absolute nature of God or infinite power" (O4.150; G3.77). But why should determinate beings follow *necessarily* from the nature of an indeterminate being? These beings aren't necessary for God's self-knowledge, since he is conceived through himself, and anyway why should it be necessary for God to know himself?

²⁴ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 1.88.

²⁵ Wolfson, 1.89.

On the first question, Spinoza could simply insist that something can exist and be conceived without being determinate. He would, however, find a strong philosophical tradition against him. Elizabeth Anscombe traces to Aristotle the idea that a thing must be conceived under some determinate description to be conceived at all.²⁶ If I ask whether a given thing exists, the answer depends on how the thing is determined. For example: the sapling has ceased to exist, replaced by the mature tree, but the living organism remains. If I ask whether *it* still exists and hope for an answer, I must specify whether I mean by “it” a sapling or a living organism. This, for Anscombe, shows that existence can’t be detached from determination: *whether* a thing is depends on *what* it is.²⁷ To speak of an indeterminate object, Anscombe argues elsewhere (though still discussing Aristotle), “suggests a phantasmic notion of the individual as a ‘bare particular’ with no properties, because it supposes a continued identity independent of what is true of the object”.²⁸

The same line of thinking is found in Spinoza’s contemporary, Johannes Clauberg.²⁹ In his logic textbook, which Spinoza owned,³⁰ Clauberg proposes that the essence or nature of a thing is that “by which the thing both is and is-what-it-is: thus humanity is the essence of a

²⁶ Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1973), “Aristotle.” Similar arguments are made in: Peter Thomas Geach, “Form and Existence,” in *God and the Soul* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 1969), 42–64; Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 50ff.; Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 42ff.; Anthony Kenny, “Quidditas and Anitas after Frege,” *Giornale Di Metafisica* 38, no. 1 (2016): 109–18. Criticisms of these authors’ readings of Aquinas can be found in: Stephen Theron, “Esse,” *The New Scholasticism* 53, no. 2 (May 1, 1979): 206–20; Giovanni Ventimiglia, “Is the Thomistic Doctrine of God as ‘Ipsum Esse Subsistens’ Consistent?,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 4 (December 13, 2018): 161–91.

²⁷ Anscombe and Geach, *Three Philosophers*, 8.

²⁸ Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe and Stephan Körner, “Symposium: Substance,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 38 (1964): 70.

²⁹ Theo Verbeek, ed., *Johannes Clauberg (1622–1665): And Cartesian Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century*, International Archives of the History of Ideas – Archives Internationales d’histoire Des Idées (Dordrecht: Springer, 1999); Massimiliano Savini, *Johannes Clauberg, Methodus cartesiana et ontologie* (Paris: Vrin, 2011); Alexander Douglas, *Spinoza and Dutch Cartesianism: Philosophy and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Tad M. Schmaltz, “Spinoza and Descartes,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 64–83.

³⁰ Jacob Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza’s in Quellenschriften* (Leipzig: Verlag von Veit, 1899), 160–64.

human being and divinity is the essence of God". Elsewhere Clauberg states that a thing's essence answers the question "what is it?", which is *prior* to the question of its existence – the question "is it?".³¹ We might suppose that Spinoza doesn't agree with this priority, if we read into the fact that in his *Short Treatise* the chapter called "That God Is" (ST 1.1) precedes the chapter called "What God Is" (ST 1.2). But we need not read so much into the order of the chapters; the order of demonstration might not follow the order of discovery. In any case, Spinoza does seek to answer the question of what God is, suggesting that God is at least to some degree determinate. He states that "attributes must be ascribed to a being that has an essence" (ST 1.2, O1.206). Eriugena doesn't deny that we must be able to say *what* something is in order to say *that* it is; he simply resists saying even *that* God is.³² But Spinoza wants to say both that and what God is. It is hard, then, to see how he could consistently avoid regarding God as determinate.

4. God as Superdeterminate Rather Than Indeterminate

What, then, are we to make of Spinoza's claims that God is unlimited and free of all negation, while determination is negation? Together these do seem to imply that God is indeterminate, despite the difficulties I have raised. The resolution to this interpretative puzzle lies, I believe, in a very important observation made by Melamed. There are, Melamed notes, at least two ways to avoid being limited by determination.³³ One is to be indeterminate: to fail to exist in any determinate way. But there is another way, which is *to exist in every determinate form*. This is how Melamed explains Spinoza's idea of God: God escapes limitation not by failing to be determined, but by being *maximally determined*. He writes: "the infinite is here conceived as

³¹ Johann Clauberg, *Opera Omnia Philosophica* (Amsterdam: Olms, 1968), 2.790. Jean-Paul Sartre famously reverse this, asserting incoherently the priority of existence over essence, but this was perhaps more for effect than illumination: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 22.

³² Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 589B, 195.

³³ Melamed, "Omnis Determinatio."

maximally determined (as opposed to the absolute indeterminacy of the infinite [...]).³⁴ This is suggested in the *Ethics*: “being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of *any nature* [*alicujus naturae*]” (E 1p8s1, my emphasis). It is also suggested in the *Short Treatise*, in the continuation of a passage already quoted:

attributes must be ascribed to a being that has an essence, and the more essence one ascribes to it, the more attributes one must ascribe to it. Consequently, if the essence is unlimited [*onendelyk*] then so must its attributes be unlimited, and just that is what we call a perfect being (ST 1.2, O1.206).

Also similar is *Ethics* 1p9: “the more reality or being a thing has, the more attributes belong to it”. This bears out Melamed’s proposal that, paradoxically, Spinoza’s God avoids being limited by determination by being subject to *all* determinations.

Rather than being *indeterminate*, let us say that such a being is *superdeterminate*. A superdeterminate being avoids being limited by determination, because a determination is only a limitation insofar as it prevents a thing from existing in other determinate ways, inconsistent with the first. Being triangular, for instance, is a limitation insofar as it prevents the triangular thing from being square, or circular, or some other shape. But since God exists in *every* determinate way, his determinations do not limit him. God, in his absolute superdeterminacy, can be triangular *and* square *and* circular, and so on. I will return to the apparent contradictions involved in this.

Superdeterminacy must be sharply distinguished from what Leibniz calls the *hypercategorematic infinite*, which Maria Rosa Antognazza describes as pertaining to “a being *beyond all determinations* but *eminently embracing all determinations*”.³⁵ Leibniz argues that Spinoza’s idea of God’s infinity – an infinity that is subject to all determinations, rather than “eminently embracing” them – is incoherent. It implies a contradiction, he argues, namely that

³⁴ Melamed, 182.

³⁵ Maria Rosa Antognazza, “The Hypercategorematic Infinite,” *The Leibniz Review* 25 (July 1, 2015): 20.

an *unlimited* being is *limited* in every possible way.³⁶ But we have already seen how Spinoza could reply: a superdeterminate being is not limited by its determinations, since its being in any one determination doesn't prevent it from being in any others. He could also add that the notion of Leibniz's hypercategorical being is problematic – we have already given reasons to suspect the coherence of the idea of a being *beyond* all determinations. Leibniz's hypercategorical infinite does, however, seem in line with a more traditional picture of God as an unlimited being; it matches the being- and knowledge-transcendent image of the divine nature in Eriugena.

We now have an answer to the second question above. Why, in Spinoza's system, should God's unlimited nature give rise to a plurality of determinate modes? Understanding God's unlimitedness as *superdeterminacy* explains this. For God to be unlimited, he must be maximally determined. In the first place, as we see in the passage from the *Short Treatise* quoted above, this means that unlimited attributes must be ascribed to God. But in the *Ethics* Spinoza states that *each* attribute expresses an eternal and infinite essence, presumably God's (E 1def6). If God's nature is superdeterminate – subject to unlimited determinations – then in order to express that nature each attribute must itself be subject to unlimited determinations: the modes. This, I believe, makes sense of *Ethics* 1p16 and its demonstration:

Proposition 16: *From the necessity of the divine nature, an infinity [of things] in infinite modes (that is, everything that can fall under an infinite intellect) must follow.*

Demonstration: This proposition should be manifest to everyone, if only they note that from the definition of whatever given thing the intellect infers several properties, which really follow from it (i.e. the very essence of the thing) necessarily, and more of them, the more reality the definition of the thing expresses – that is, the more reality the essence of the defined thing involves. But since the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes (by definition 6), each of which moreover expresses an infinite essence in its own

³⁶ Antognazza, 12-16.

kind, therefore infinitely many [things] in infinite modes (i.e., everything that can fall under an infinite intellect) must necessarily follow from it.

I read the demonstration as presenting the following picture. God's essence, being infinitely real and thus superdeterminate, requires him to have infinite properties – to be determined by infinite attributes expressing his essence. But each of these attributes, in order to express a superdeterminate essence, must itself be superdeterminate. An infinity of things thus arises as the infinity of ways in which each superdeterminate attribute is determined. As we can see from the quotations with which I opened, such things are also said to express the attributes, as well as God's nature (the latter perhaps transitively).

The structure I have outlined here suggests that a consequence should be that each of the infinity of things expressing each attribute is *also* superdeterminate, itself determined in an infinity of ways, each of which is determined in yet another infinity of ways, iterating to infinity: a sort of fractal of being. I find no explicit statement of this in Spinoza, though perhaps the first step at least is hinted at in the language – “an infinity in infinite modes” *infinita infinitis modis* – of the proposition.

What is established is that the attributes express God's essence, and *because* they express God's essence – an essence whose infinite nature is such as to be determined in an infinity of ways – they are in turn expressed by an infinity of things in infinite ways.

5. Apparent Contradictions

I began by proposing, drawing on Neoplatonic theophany, that there are three relations that could be covered by “expression”: identity, manifestation, and efficient causation. We can see how the second and third of these apply to the expression of God's essence by the attributes and the attributes by an infinity of things. God's essence efficiently cause the attributes, which manifest it, and each attribute efficiently causes an infinity of things in infinite modes, which manifest *it*.

The relation of *identity*, however, leads to potential contradictions. God's unlimited nature entails superdeterminacy rather than indeterminacy: determination in every possible way rather than absence of all determination. Each attribute is determinate in the sense that, as Spinoza writes, "we can deny infinite attributes of it" (E 1def6expl). The attribute of thought, for example, is limited in that we deny of it extension and an infinity of other attributes (unknown to us, but necessarily existing given God's superdeterminate nature). This is what determines the attribute as thought and not extension or anything else. God's superdeterminacy, we have seen, requires *him* to be determined in every possible way – otherwise he would be indeterminate rather than superdeterminate. If the determinateness of the attributes realises this condition, then God's nature must be in some sense identical with the attributes.³⁷ Meanwhile, in addition to all the ways in which the attributes are determinate, there are all the ways in which the things expressing the attributes are determinate. My mind, e.g., is determinate by not being your mind, nor Spinoza's mind, etc. If God is to be *maximally* determined, as superdeterminacy requires, then he must also be determined in all these further ways. Therefore God must also be in some sense identical with the modes. Note that the barrier to pantheism we found in Eriugena – the fact that God transcends all being and determination – is not present in Spinoza if his God should be taken as superdeterminate rather than indeterminate.

Does identifying God with both the attributes and the modes lead to contradiction? We might try to deny the apparent contradiction involved in the case of the attributes. True, the view entails that God is identical with a plurality of diverse attributes. But these are, we might reply, *non opposita sed diversa*.³⁸ There is at least no contradiction involved in being identical

³⁷ There remains the question of whether God is identical with all the attributes together or (violating the transitivity of identity) with each of them singly. A compelling argument for the former reading is given by Salgado Borge, in unpublished work but with hints in Antonio Salgado Borge, "Spinoza on Essence Constitution," *Philosophia*, 2022.

³⁸ See, e.g., Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 60.

with all of them. When it comes to the modes, however, we have things that seem very plainly *opposita*. I love yum cha, but Jones, a philistine, does not. So if God, or the attribute of thought, is in some sense identical to both me and Jones then it *might* follow – depending on how strong the sense of “identical” is here – that God, or the attribute of thought, both does and does not love yum cha.³⁹ If the sense of “identical” is taken to be very strong, then Spinoza’s system seems to succumb to Pierre Bayle’s attack, appearing as “the most monstrous hypothesis imaginable, the most absurd, and the most diametrically opposed to the most evident notions in our mind”.⁴⁰

One of the “evident notions in our mind” this seems to run against is the Indiscernibility of Identicals. This principle (distinguished from its more controversial cousin, the Identity of Indiscernibles) holds that if A and B have distinct properties – e.g. A loves yum cha and B does not – then A and B can’t be identical. Deleuze suggests that Spinoza simply rejects this principle, which Deleuze describes as the principle that “*Real distinction [...] brings with it a division of things*”.⁴¹ To support this as a viable option, I would point out Donald Baxter’s arguments against the universality of the principle. Baxter suggests that in certain cases a thing can qualitatively differ from itself by existing in various *aspects*.⁴² Aspects are qualitatively

³⁹ We can’t easily say that only a *part* of God loves yum cha, and another part does not. For one thing, Spinoza appears to deny that an infinite substance such as God can have any parts (E 1p13s, 1p15s). On this see: Ghislain Guigon, “Spinoza on Composition and Priority,” in *Spinoza on Monism*, ed. Philip Goff (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2011), 183–205; Yitzhak Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 47–48; Alison Peterman, “Spinoza on Extension,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 15, no. 14 (2015).

Salgado Borge proposes that the attributes can be *essential parts* of God – a type of parthood that Spinoza doesn’t rule out. But modes are not essential to God (this at least seems the gist of E 1p1), so Salgado Borge’s strategy can’t be applied to them. Even if it could, for God to have essential parts that were *opposed* and not merely diverse would seem to violate E 3p6. Again, Salgado Borge’s proposal is unpublished work, but hints are found in Salgado Borge, “Spinoza on Essence Constitution.”

⁴⁰ Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire Historique Et Critique* (Amsterdam: Reinier Leers, 1740), 3.259; ‘Spinoza’, remark N.

⁴¹ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, 31, 34.

⁴² Donald Baxter, “The Discernibility of Identicals,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 24 (1999): 37–55; Donald Baxter, “Self-Differing, Aspects, and Leibniz’s Law,” *Noûs*, 2017, 1–21; Donald Baxter, “Oneness, Aspects, and the Neo-Confucians,” in *The Oneness Hypothesis: Beyond the Boundary of Self*, ed. Philip Ivanhoe et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 90–105.

distinct *as aspects* while remaining numerically identical *as things*. Thus God-*quatenus*-me could love yum cha while God-*quatenus*-Jones does not, while both being identical to God.

However Spinoza understands it, there is clearly a difference between the sense in which God is identical with the things that express him and the sense in which he is identical with his own essence (E 1p20) – clearly, since the first is an asymmetrical one-many relation (the things express God, but God doesn't express the things) while the second is a symmetrical one-one relation (God is God's essence, and God's essence is God). Nevertheless, there must be enough identity between God and the modes to support the consequence that God is superdeterminate: that is, the many determinations of things must be in some sense determinations *of God himself* and not only, for instance, of effects that God causes.

6. Spinoza and Ibn 'Arabī's Theophany (*Tajallī*)

If this is the point at which Spinoza arrives, it might not be without historical precedent. It aligns Spinoza with a different permutation of Neoplatonism, found within the Islamic tradition in the thought of Ibn 'Arabī, at least as understood by Toshihiko Izutsu.⁴³ Izutsu identifies the following idea in Ibn 'Arabī:

The absolute and ultimate ground of Existence is in both Sufism and Taoism the Mystery of Mysteries. The latter is, as Ibn 'Arabī says, the *ankar al-nakirāt* “the most indeterminate of all indeterminates”; that is to say, it is Something that transcends all qualifications and relations that are humanly conceivable.⁴⁴

At times Ibn 'Arabī's Absolute appears to be indeterminate in the manner of Eriugena's divine nature. E.g. it is said to be “unknowable to us because it transcends all qualifications and

⁴³ I'm not the first to propose a parallel between Spinoza's thought and Sufi ideas; see, e.g.: Ezgi Ulusoy Aranyosi, “An Enquiry into Sufi Metaphysics,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 3–22; Muhammad Kamal, “Ibn 'Arabi and Spinoza on God and the World,” *Open Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 4 (September 15, 2017): 409–21.

⁴⁴ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 486.

relations that are humanly conceivable”.⁴⁵ But on the other hand, there is also the Absolute in its states of determination, in which it is identical with each of the things in the world: “in Ibn ‘Arabī’s world-view, the whole world is the locus or theophany or self-manifestation of the Absolute, and [...] consequently, all the things and events of the world are self-determinations of the Absolute”.⁴⁶ Also: “those things that are provisionally considered as independently existent are nothing but many particularized, delimited forms of the Absolute”.⁴⁷

This is Ibn ‘Arabī’s version of theophany; as William Chittick observes:

The term self-disclosure (*tajallī*) – often translated as “theophany” – plays such a central role in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings that, before he was known as the great spokesman for *wahdat al-wujūd*, he had been called one of the Companions of Self-Disclosure (*aṣḥab al-tajallī*).⁴⁸

But Ibn ‘Arabī’s theophany differs from Eriugena’s on the same point we have found in Spinoza: Ibn ‘Arabī understands the Absolute’s unlimitedness in terms of superdeterminacy rather than indeterminacy. In his *Meccan Revelations*, he states that the Absolute “has nondelimited [*muṭlaq*] being, but no delimitation [*taqyīd*] keeps it from delimitation. On the contrary, it has all delimitations, so that it is nondelimited delimitation”.⁴⁹ Similar reasoning appears in his *Ringstones of Wisdom*: “Whosoever is distinguished from a delimited thing is delimited by not being identical with that delimited thing”.⁵⁰ From this he concludes that we must *not* read the passage from the Quran, “*There is naught like unto Him [God]*” (42:11), as implying a distinction between God and things. Rather, likeness between God and things is

⁴⁵ Izutsu, 23.

⁴⁶ Izutsu, 74.

⁴⁷ Izutsu, 201.

⁴⁸ William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 52.

⁴⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Al-Fūṭūḥat al-Makkiyah* (Cairo, 1911), 3.162.23. For further explanation see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, xxii.

⁵⁰ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Ringstones of Wisdom*, trans. Caner Dagli (Chicago: Kazi, 2004), “Ringstone on the Wisdom of Unity in the Word of Hud,” 97.

denied because their relation is much *stronger*; it is identity: “If we take *Naught is there unto His likeness* as the negation of likeness, then we will have realized, through this idea and the authentic sayings, that He is identical with things”.⁵¹ Ibn ‘Arabī concludes that God: “is delimited through the limit of every delimited thing. No thing is limited without this being the limit of the Real”.⁵² He thus appears to embrace the same identity between God and particular things that we found in Spinoza, and to have the same motivation for it: God/*wujūd*/the Absolute, being unlimited and superdeterminate, must be determined in every possible way and must, therefore, be identical with a perfectly diverse variety of determinate things.⁵³

The comparison is further strengthened by the fact that Ibn ‘Arabī is like Spinoza and unlike at least some Judeo-Christian Neoplatonists – those discussed by Wolfson (see above) – in rendering the efficient causation of the world of determinate things a matter of necessity rather than volition. Within the Jewish tradition some Kabbalists might be said to regard emanation as necessary rather than volitional and were in other ways closer to Ibn ‘Arabī’s position.⁵⁴ To compare Spinoza’s thinking with the full range of Kabbalistic thought lies beyond the scope of this article (and its author’s expertise).⁵⁵ It may well be that ideas in line with Ibn ‘Arabī’s position came to Spinoza through Kabbalism. But we should note that Spinoza’s *direct* understanding of Kabbalism is likely to have been heavily influenced by his near-contemporary

⁵¹ al-‘Arabi, 97.

⁵² al-‘Arabi, 97.

⁵³ The question of whether Ibn ‘Arabī should be regarded as a pantheist, however, is more complex. Like Eriugena, Ibn ‘Arabī blocks an easy answer to this question by maintaining a distinction between God’s immanent being and his transcendent being: Mohammed Rustom, “Is Ibn Al-‘Arabī’s Ontology Pantheistic?,” *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2006): 53–67.

⁵⁴ This was pointed out to me by an anonymous reviewer.

⁵⁵ Miquel Beltrán, *The Influence of Abraham Cohen de Herrera’s Kabbalah on Spinoza’s Metaphysics* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Johan Aanen, “The Kabbalistic Sources of Spinoza,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (October 28, 2016): 279–99; Yitzhak Melamed, “Spinoza and the Kabbalah: From the Gate of Heaven to the ‘Field of Holy Apples,’” in *Early Modern Philosophy & the Kabbalah*, ed. Cristina Ciucu, forthcoming; Richard Popkin, “Spinoza, ‘Neoplatonic Kabbalist?,’” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, by Lenn Evan Goodman (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 387–4098.

Abraham de Cohen Herrera,⁵⁶ and Herrera’s thinking appears to fit Wolfson’s description of Neoplatonism on the key points at issue. The First Cause, according to Herrera, “does not act by necessity or in accordance with its nature but rather following the counsel of its understanding and the free choice of its own will and consent”.⁵⁷ This is in contrast to Ibn ‘Arabī’s position as described by Izutsu: “Existence, in compliance with its own necessary and natural internal demand, goes on inexhaustibly determining itself into an infinity of concrete things”.⁵⁸ This necessity can be explained, I argued above, by the superdeterminate nature of the divine being, requiring expression in a plurality of determinate things, whereas Herrera views the First Cause as indeterminate rather than superdeterminate: “not contained by any class, restricted by any difference, or bound to any species or limited nature of things or to all of them together”.⁵⁹ Spinoza’s sole explicit reference to the Kabbalah is negative in tone (TTP ch.9, O3.370; G 135-6), but perhaps he was subtly influenced by Kabbalistic ideas distinct from those he explicitly identified with the tradition due to authors such as Herrera. I focus on Ibn ‘Arabī, in any case, as a source who expresses with exceptional clarity the views I am ascribing to Spinoza.

Eriugena, we saw, hesitates before the step into pantheism, perhaps fearing the apparent contradictions involved in identifying God with creatures. Ibn ‘Arabī appears to have no such concern, at least in Izutsu’s exegesis, which states that since each thing and event in the world is a “self-determination” of the Absolute, “the world of Being cannot be grasped in its true form except as a synthesis of contradictions. Only by a simultaneous affirmation of contradictories can we understand the real nature of the world”.⁶⁰ Nor does Ibn ‘Arabī seem

⁵⁶ Beltrán, *The Influence of Abraham Cohen de Herrera’s Kabbalah on Spinoza’s Metaphysics*; Melamed, “Spinoza and the Kabbalah: From the Gate of Heaven to the ‘Field of Holy Apples.’”

⁵⁷ Abraham Cohen de Herrera, *Gate of Heaven*, trans. Kenneth Krabbenhoft (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 4.2, 158.

⁵⁸ Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 489.

⁵⁹ Herrera, *Abraham Cohen de Herrera*, 1p2, 5.

⁶⁰ Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 74.

unduly troubled about the Indiscernibility of Identicals. According to Abdul Haq Ansari, “In the *wujūdī* system [...] the world is not a plurality of beings. There is just One Being there which appears here in this form and there in that form”.⁶¹ Moreover:

it is not the case that a part of the Absolute appears in one being and another part in some other being. Nor is the case that there is more of it in one form and less in another. The Absolute appears in all forms without suffering any division or diminution.⁶²

7. Conclusion

There is much more to be explored in these comparisons. But as far as understanding Spinoza goes, I propose to read his theory of divine expression as a type of theophany – one that, perhaps like Ibn ‘Arabī’s *tajallī*, explains God’s causation of particular, determinate things as a necessary consequence of his superdeterminate nature. This makes it unlike better-known forms of Neoplatonism (at least in the West), which treat God’s creatures as voluntary self-manifestations of his indeterminate nature. Reading Spinoza’s theory of divine expression as a heterodox theophany allows us to understand the concept of expression in terms of the three relations mentioned above. When particular things express the nature or attributes of God, this means, first, that they are *efficiently caused* by God, as a necessary consequence of his superdeterminate nature. It also means that they *manifest* God’s nature, in the sense of signifying it, in the sense noted by Salgado Borge.⁶³ And, finally, it means that they are *identical to* God, in whatever mysterious sense is required to draw the conclusion that, in having “certain and determinate” modes of every variety, *God himself* is determined in every way, as his superdeterminacy demands. However repulsive the conclusions this implies might be to the

⁶¹ Abdul Haq Ansari, “Ibn ‘Arabī: The Doctrine of Waḥdat al-Wujūd,” *Islamic Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 154.

⁶² Ansari, 154.

⁶³ Salgado Borge, “Expression as Signification.”

“evident notions in our mind”, it is an idea that Spinoza isn’t alone in having and might have found in his broad reading of diverse philosophical traditions.

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