

## IBN ARABI AND SPINOZA ON THE NATURE OF GOD

Both Spinoza and Ibn Arabi are generally regarded as pantheists. But, as Spinoza is considered by some an atheist and by others a materialist or a God-intoxicated man, so Ibn Arabi's doctrine of God is also a matter of controversy. Although Spinoza's metaphysical monism appears to be radically different from Ibn Arabi's conception of ultimate reality, yet in the light of some interpretations, certain affinities could be traced in the systems of these two thinkers from the West. I propose to discuss, in the first place, Ibn Arabi's doctrine of God, then, Spinoza's system and finally, I shall compare the both.

The ultimate Reality, according to Ibn Arabi, is one. All things are its manifestations, God or the Real (*Haqq*) or the phenomena (*Khalq*) are merely two names of the same reality. When God regards himself through Himself, He is one. And the moment He is regarded through one of His forms, the unity splits up into multiplicity. This unity may be likened to Plotinus' Primal One. But it is different from that in so far as Ibn Arabi's God is one as the essence of the many, whereas in Plotinus, the One is arrived at by way of reducing multiplicity to one ultimate causal factor. As the essence of everything, Ibn Arabi's God is above all spatio-temporal relations.

In "Fusus'l Hikam", Ibn Arabi explains this doctrine :

"Unity has no meaning than two (or more) things being actually identical but conceptually distinguishable one from the other. So, in one sense, the one is the "other", in another, it is not not."

Again :

"Multiplicity is due to different points of view, not to an actual division in the One Essence (ayan)."

God, as essential unity is known only through intuition. On the other hand, this essential unity is divided into fragments by the act of perception.

Ibn Arabi's God is both immanent and transcendent. Anthropomorphic verses of the Quran have been interpreted by him in terms of God's being immanent. He "hears" or "sees", in so far as He is in all that "hears" or "sees".

Again, His essence is not confined to one being or a group of beings that hear or see but is manifested in all such beings and in all beings whatever. In this sense, God is above all limitation and individualization. As a universal substance, He is the essence of all that is. Thus Ibn Arabi reduces "tanzih" and "tashbih" (transcendence and immanence) to "absoluteness" (*itlaq*) and limitedness (*taqayid*) and uses the terms in more or less materialistic sense but in a sense fundamentally different from that of theologians.

God is immanent regarded as the essential unity of all that exists. He is transcendent regarded as being in Himself, i.e., above all limitation. Transcendence and immanence are inseparably correlated aspects of God.

Ibn Arabi's God is not the creator of the universe in the sense of being distinct and separate from it. The universe has not been brought into existence *ex nihilo*. Creation of finite things is merely the manifestation of Divine substance. When a thing is annihilated, it goes back to the Universal Substance. Ibn Arabi denies that God is the cause of the universe, because the notion of cause implies temporal priority and difference between cause-factors and effect-factors. For him, cause and effect belong to the same continuum, the Divine Substance, although we attribute the cause to one aspect of this continuum (the divine aspect—the Lāhūt) and the effect to the other aspect of the same continuum (the manifested aspect—the Nāsūt). It is always the divine that controls and has effect on the phenomenal. But what are the divine and the phenomenal except the One Reality? All that Ibn Arabi is to do is not to admit the reality of particular causes in the phenomenal world for such admission would amount to polytheism. According to Ibn Arabi, the effect is determined by the cause, not produced by it. God, in this particular sense, may be regarded as the cause of the universe. Again, God cannot be regarded as the condition (Shart) of the universe. The condition, unlike cause, does not include the element of

necessity. The cause necessarily entails the effect while the condition does not necessarily entail the existence of the thing conditioned. God, in this restricted sense, may be taken as the cause of the universe, because it is His necessary manifestation. Cause and effect or God and the universe are two aspects of one and the same reality.

The creation of the universe is not an event in time. We cannot say that the universe was not and then (*thumma*) it was. "Then" has a reference to the logical priority of the cause to its effect. The universe, like anything else in it, is an eternal existence in its *thūbūt* (state of latency) and a temporal in its *Zābūr* (appearance in external world). He goes on to say that in saying that an object is created or caused to exist, we mean no more than what mean when we say that "a man has appeared in our house today, which does not imply that he had no previous existence before coming to our house." (Fus. PP. 421-22) Ibn Arabi boldly holds that God does not create or cause anything. Creation (*takwin*)—which according to him means the coming into concrete manifestation of an already existing substance—belongs to the thing itself. "It comes into being" means that it manifests itself on its own account. The only thing that God does in the matter is to will and think it to be (concretely manifested), and God wills nothing and commands nothing the existence of which is not made necessary by the very nature and laws of things themselves. God according to him is another name for such laws.

This eternal and universal Substance or Being, i.e. God manifests Himself in the external world in one or the other of His forms or attributes which are Divine Names. Ibn Arabi believes that although the divine Essence is above all differentiation and distinction, yet it has certain modalities on the plane of its first determination. In His state of absolute unity, God is above all qualities and so this plane is called that of indivisible and unconditional unity (*ahadiyab*). But on the plane of unicity or "one-ness" (*wahadiyab*), there are principal modalities, or qualities from which all qualities of knowledge and being derive. God is thus above all qualities and yet is not devoid of them as is implied in the famous sufi adage that the divine qualities

“are neither He nor other than He.” Attributes, in so far as they are the Names of Godhead, necessitate their logical correlates—“The Knower,” for instance, “the known” and “The Creator”, “the thing created.”

Now, I turn to Spinoza. Spinoza had three categories for the explanation of reality. Every thing that exists must fall under one or the other of these three categories viz., Substance, Attributes and Modes. As a rationalist, he accepts the traditional definition of substance because it occurs to his mind as the most distinct and clearest idea. He adds a new statement to it and then sets out to establish the world of finite and contingent things as following from the first principle with absolute logical necessity.

For the scholastics (and for Ibn Arabi too), all being was divided into that which dwells within a dwelling and that which does not dwell within a dwelling. To understand this, take the instance of white paper. Whiteness dwells in the paper whereas the paper does not dwell in whiteness. Whiteness, hence, is an attribute predicated of the paper. On this analogy, one can form the conception of a Being which is in itself, not in something other than and external to itself. This Being was given the name of substance. The contingent and finite beings were given the name of accidents because they were not in themselves, but in substance.

Spinoza readily accepts this definition of substance that “it is in itself” and adds to it the statement “and it is also conceived through itself”. Now, the conception of a thing cannot be formed unless its causes are known. “The knowledge of effect depends upon the knowledge of cause and involves the same.” Substance, therefore, cannot be explained by reference to an external cause. It is the cause of itself. This fact makes it infinite. Its infinity entails its self-dependence and self-dependence its uniqueness. According to Spinoza, it is involved in the nature of substance thus defined that it must exist. Spinoza uses the words God, Substance and Nature as signifying the same reality.

Substance or God possesses an infinity of attributes. An attribute is that which “our intellect perceives to be constituting the essence of a thing.”

Again we are told, "the more attributes a thing has, the more reality will it have." (ibid. def : 3) God differentiates Himself in infinite attributes and infinite and finite modes. Of these infinite attributes, we are acquainted with only two—mind and body. Mind and body, or more technically, thought and extension are two fundamentally different but inseparably correlated aspects of God. This infinity of attributes does not damage His unity, but, on the contrary, makes Him the most real. God remains the same, now comprehended under the attribute Extension and now under the attribute of Thought. Man, for example, manifested in two fundamentally different forms, i.e., mind and body, remains the same man. To the question why man could know only two attributes of God, Spinoza answers that since man is composed of body and mind, he cannot go beyond them.

Each attribute is infinite after its kind, but not "absolutely infinite" like God. Thus mind and body are infinite but are limited only by each other. This psycho-physical parallelism runs through all Nature, but at the bottom, all distinction and multiplicity shade off into essential unity. God in Himself has no attributes. Attributes are nothing but our own ways of understanding God. Human understanding perceives *as though attributes constituted* the essence of God.

This interpretation of Spinoza stands in conflict with the statement "the more reality or being a thing has, the more attributes will it have." Had Spinoza taken attributes in subjectivistic sense, he would not have said that we can have adequate knowledge of God. Alfred Weber in his "History of Philosophy" writes :

"The celebrated *determinatio negatio est* does not signify 'determination is negation,' but limitation is negation. By calling God absolutely undetermined being, Spinoza does not mean to say that God is absolutely indeterminate being or non-being, but on the contrary, He has absolutely unlimited attributes or absolutely infinite perfections—that He is positive, concrete, most real being, the being who unites in Himself all possible attributes and possesses them without limitation."

Things proceed from the nature of God neither by creation nor by emanation, but by logical necessity. As it follows from the nature of triangle that the sum of its interior angles is equal to two right angles, so all finite and contingent things flow from God. In his logical process of deriving the finite and the determinate from the infinite and the indeterminate, Spinoza introduces the doctrine of infinite and eternal modes which are logically prior to them i.e., modes are posterior to attributes. The logically prior state of God under the attribute of extension is motion-and-rest. Motion-and-rest is the primary characteristic of the extended Nature and the total amount of motion-and-rest remains constant, though the proportions in the case of individual bodies are continually changing. This total amount of motion-and-rest is what Spinoza calls "the eternal infinite and immediate mode" of God under the attribute of Extension.

Nature is a big vast individual who contains in him various complex bodies of different orders. As complex individuals gain or lose particulars, they may be said to be changing, but so long as the same proportion of motion and rest is preserved, they are said to retain their identity. Now, we can perceive increasing complex bodies, "and if we thus proceed still further to infinity, we can easily conceive that Nature is one individual as a whole" (Ethics Prop. 13) This "individual as a whole" considered as a spatial system or a system of bodies, is the mediate infinite and eternal mode of God under the attribute of Extension. It is also called "the face of the universe." Immediate infinite and eternal mode of God or Nature under the attribute of Thought is 'absolutely infinite intellect.'

Now we are in a position to compare both thinkers' systems and trace certain affinities. In the first place, I would like to invite the reader's attention to one consideration. I hold that mystical feelings are the psychological sources of all pantheism. We have seen above how Spinoza's substance can be interpreted in different ways. The paradoxical interpretations that his substance is an unqualified and at the same time an infinitely qualified being are due to the paradoxical feelings which are peculiar to mysticism. W.T. Stace, in this connection, writes, in "Mysticism and Philosophy" :

“I am of the opinion that paradoxicality is one of the universal characteristics of all mysticism. This basic paradoxicality will, of course, be reflected in all philosophies, so to speak, high-level interpretations of mysticism. And pantheism, however much it may wear the garb of out-ward logic and rationalism, as in Spinoza, has always its roots in mysticism, we shall expect it to be paradoxical. Only those critics who are deceived by Spinoza’s superficial geometrical method and are unable to penetrate below the surface to the subterranean springs of Spinoza’s thought, will believe otherwise.”

Both Ibn Arabi and Spinoza are mystics, though Spinoza was not prepared to be regarded as a mystic because he belonged to the age of reason. On the other hand, Ibn Arabi belonged to an age much less sophisticated than that of Spinoza. So far as the vision is concerned, Spinoza is as mystical as Ibn Arabi is. But so far as the exposition is concerned, Spinoza has tried to become more logical. Ibn Arabi’s language is highly paradoxical and ambiguous. This is for two reasons. Firstly, mystical feelings, when conveyed, appear to be paradoxical. Secondly, Ibn Arabi has tried to reconcile his monism with the orthodox doctrine of Allah of Islam who, beyond doubt, is personal. This attempt has led him to use paradoxical language.

If we take into consideration the unfavourable circumstances that forced Spinoza to seek a principle which might save him from utter frustration, we can rightly hold that the psychological sources of Spinoza are mystical feelings. He was expelled from the synagogue, an attempt was made to assassinate him and despite being fairly above the level of ordinary men, he had to grind optical lenses to earn a modest livelihood. Homeless and friendless Spinoza would have become a neurotic, had he not identified himself with the One, the Infinite and the Eternal. This identification is the central core of all mysticism and source of ultimate satisfaction. Spinoza, however, was not prepared to leave the hand of logic and reason. Hence mystical feelings, coupled with all the rigour of logic, formed the basis of his system and are, I think, ultimately responsible for contradictory interpretations.

Harold Hoffding writes in his *History of Modern Philosophy*. (pp.294-295).

“For Spinoza the clear understanding of our passions, raises us above them and unites with all the rest of our knowledge,” and he adds that “this understanding of our passions helps to make possible ‘the mystical union with God.’ . . . . . This oriental and mystical tendency forms the basis of all his thought.”

On the other hand, Mr. Stuart Hampshire in his book *Spinoza in the Penguin Series* (pp. 42-43) writes :

“Critics of Spinoza have misunderstood what he meant by God as immanent cause ; if isolated from its context within his philosophy, in fact, the implication is precisely the reverse. . . . . The doctrine appears mystical or unscientific in its tendency only if one forgets that in Spinoza the use of the word “God” is interchangeable with the word, “Nature”. To say that God is the immanent cause of all things is another way of saying that every thing must be explained as belonging to the single and all inclusive system which is nature, and no cause (even a first cause) can be conceived as somehow out-side or independent of the order of Nature.”

Again the outward logic of Spinozistic system begins to appear to be shallow when one tries to form the conception of God or ultimate reality. Spinoza, like Ibn Arabi and other scholastics, has drawn a distinction between the two aspects of reality, i.e., *Natura Naturans* and *Natura Naturata*, i.e. God as in Himself or God as manifested. If we take his doctrine of attributes as merely our own ways of understanding God, it must be admitted that God, in His bare abstraction, is unknowable. This state of absolute abstraction, which is above all differentiation, is exactly the same as the state of unicity (*ahadiya*) of Ibn Arabi’s God. On the other hand, if we take God as consisting of infinite attributes, then we are led to the concept of God who is both an absolutely unqualified being (because He is not personal and determinate) and an infinitely qualified being (because all perfection and reality belong to Him alone.)



Again, if we take God as consisting of infinite attributes, Spinoza comes remarkably closer to Ibn Arabi. We are told God, in order to be absolutely real and perfect, must have an infinity of attributes out of which only two, mind and body, are known to us because we are the embodiment of them. Now, it seems that Spinoza had in mind the idea of God's other aspects, though different from thought and extension, yet as real as they are. If such is the case, it is wrong to hold that God is exhausted by the all known or knowable world. God, then, is not only immanent in all that exists within the realm of thought and extension but also transcends it. No doubt, Spinoza has not asserted divine transcendence explicitly, but his concept of God will only be compatible with his doctrine of attributes if we take God's transcendence into consideration. This interpretation would justify the phrase "God intoxicated man." Otherwise, Spinoza would be an "accursed atheist" and a "materialist", which, I think, is not logical to hold.

Now, one glance on Ibn Arabi. We have already seen that Ibn Arabi's God is both transcendent and immanent. Both Spinoza and Ibn Arabi cannot be regarded as pantheists because pantheism is the doctrine, as Prof. Ibrahim Wolf, in an article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* writes : ".....that God is all and all is God. God is the universe and the universe is God." Although the universe is God, yet we can, by no means, say that God is equal to the totality of universe. Neither Spinoza nor Ibn Arabi, by God, meant a Being that is exhausted by the universe.

Sayyad Husein Nasr in his book "*Three Muslim Sages*" writes about Ibn Arabi :

"The basic doctrine of Sūfism, especially as by Muhayi-al-Din and his school, is that of the transcendent unity of being (*Wahdat al Wajud*) for which he has been accused by many modern scholars of being a pantheist, a panentheist, and an existential monist, and more recently of what is called Natural Mysticism. All of these accusations are false, however, because they mistake the metaphysical doctrine of Ibn Arabi for philosophy and do not take into consideration the fact that the way of gnosis is not separate from grace and sanctity. The pantheistic accusations against the Sūfis are doubly

false, because, first of all, pantheism is a philosophical system, whereas, Muhayi-al-Din and others like him never claimed to create a "system" whatsoever and secondly, pantheism implies a substantial continuity between God and the universe, whereas the Shāikh would be the first to claim God's transcendence over every category ; including that of substance. What is over-looked by the critics who accuse the Sūfis of pantheism is the basic difference between the essential identification of the manifested order with the Ontological Principle and their substantial identity and continuity. The latter concept is metaphysically absurd and contradicts everything that Muhayi al-Din and other Sūfis have said regarding the Divine Essence."

Nasr looks at Ibn Arabi's doctrine from purely mystical point of view and hence thinks that his doctrine cannot be classified under the head of any philosophical system. But I think that, if one wants to consider it philosophically, he can use the term "panentheism" for Ibn Arabi's doctrine of *Wāhat al-Wājūd*.

To quote Nasr again :

"The term panentheism used by Nicholson and several other scholars who only knew too well that pantheism cannot be applied to the Sūfis, appears somewhat less distasteful. It is true that God dwells in things, but the world does not "contain" God, and any term implying such a meaning, is not appropriate as a description of the doctrine of "*wabadat al Wajud*."

In the light of above discussion, I think, both Spinoza and Ibn Arabi should not be regarded as pantheists. They are panentheists.

Spinoza's doctrine of Attributes and Ibn Arabi's doctrine of Divine Names are remarkably similar. For Ibn Arabi, Divine Names, Like Spinoza's infinite attributes, are lines of force and belong to the created world (*Nasut*), or in Spinoza's words *Natura Naturata*. At the bottom—in *Labut* or *Natura Naturans*, they disappear in the absolutely abstract ultimate reality. Nasr explains this doctrine as follows : "The Shahadah (*Lailaha ill-'allah*) implies also the same apparently contradictory relation. On the one hand every quality, every form of "divinity" is negated, so that He is absolutely transcendent, this

being the view of *tanzih*, on the other hand, the same formula implies that there cannot be any quality completely separate from the Divine Quality, so that it must be the reflection of a Divine Reality with which it is compared *tashbih*. Ibn Arabi's view about the relation, between the Qualities and the Divine Essence, lies between *tashbih* and *tanzih*, positing at the same time God's transcendence and His possessing qualities of which all cosmic qualities are reflections and images."

