Latent Platonism in Descartes & Spinoza

Who, for Descartes and Spinoza, was ‘Plato’?
- Plato of Plato’s (large or small) corpus (perhaps as a reconciliation of Heraclitus & Parmenides)
- Plato-Aristotle as a grand hybrid
- Plato-Plotinus
- Plato-Augustine

The Reality of Universals

Plato: Mind-independent truths are the ultimate objects of knowledge
- *Phaedo, Republic, Parmenides, Timaeus, Sophist* (but cp. *Philebus*)

Descartes: Universals are constructs of a mind struggling to make sense of its experience
- “The mind … looks around in all direction on order to extend its knowledge further… First of all, it finds within itself ideas of many things… Next, it finds certain common notions … as long as it attends to them, it is completely convinced of their truth. For example, the mind has within itself ideas of numbers and shapes, and …” (Principles I. 13; see also I.49)
- [Genus, species, differentia, property, accident] … arise solely from the fact that we make use of one and the same idea for thinking of all individual items which resemble each other: we apply one and the same term… (Principles I. 59, which applies this analysis to triangles)

Spinoza: Universals, the means by which we arrive at general truths, are not truth-conducive
- “I shall briefly add something about the causes from which the terms called *Transcendental* have had their origin—I mean terms like Being, Thing, and Something. These terms arise from the fact that the human body, being limited, is capable of forming distinctly only a certain number of images at the same time ... These notions they call *Universal*, like Man, Horse, Dog, and the like, have arises from similar causes, namely, because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human body that they surpass the power of imagining ... Hence it is not surprising that so many controversies have arisen among the philosophers, who have wished to explain natural things by mere images of things.” (1p40s1)

Paradigmatic Essences

Plato: Forms are standards or paradigms against which their instances are measured
- *Phaedo, Republic*

Descartes: The natures of triangles or of God contain perfectly properties ascribed to existent triangles or God
- “[T]here is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle ... This is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle, for example that its three angles equal two right angles...” (Fifth Meditation)
- “Necessary existence is contained in the concept of God. Therefore it may be truly affirmed of God that necessary existence belongs to him, or that he exists.” (Second Replies)

Spinoza: Common notions are perfect statements of universal properties
- “What is common to all things and is equally in the part and in the whole, does not constitute the essence of any singular thing.” (2p37) “Those things which are common to
all, and which are equally in the par and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately.” (2p38)

Causal Essences
Plato: Forms are the true (or ultimate) causes of the behavior of particulars
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   Phaedo, Republic, Parmenides

Descartes: Does God cause events directly, or through infinite and eternal essences?
   •  “[I] shall set out two or three of the principal rules according to which it must be thought that God causes the nature of this new world to operate.” (The World, ch. 7)

Spinoza: Eternal essences (participate in the) cause (of) instances of them
   •  “From this it follows that so long as singular things do not exist, except insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes, their objective being, or ideas, do not exist except insofar as God’s infinite idea exists. And when singular things are said to exist, not only insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes, but insofar also as they are said to have duration, their ideas also involve (etiam involvent) the existence through which they are said to have duration.” (2p8c)
   •  “I say that we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, that is (be 3def1), when something in us outside us follows from our nature which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone.” (3def2)
   •  “All modes by which a body is affected by another body follow both from the nature of the body affected and at the same time from the nature of the affecting body, so that one and the same body may be moved differently according to differences in the nature of the bodies moving it…” (2p13addax1”)

How Many Eternal Truths are there?
Plato: There are eternal truths for every general term, or perhaps only a select logical few
   •  Eternal Truths comprise moral concepts (Socratic dialogues), basic sensory experience (Phaedo & Republic), general truths (Republic, Parmenides), or a more limited set (Sophist)

Descartes: There are true and immutable natures for (at least) mathematical truths and God
   •  “When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by e or dependent on my mind ...” (Fifth Meditation)

Spinoza: There is an eternal truth for every distinct way any attribute can be expressed
   •  “All the things which follow from the absolute nature of any of God’s attributes have always had to exist and be infinite, or are, through the same attribute, eternal and infinite.” (1p21) “Whatever follows from some attribute of God insofar as it is modified by a modification which, through the same attribute, exists necessarily and if infinite, must also exist necessarily and be infinite.” (1p22) “Every mode which exists necessarily and is infinite has necessarily had to follow either from the absolute nature of some attribute of God, or from some attribute, modified by a modification which exists necessarily and is infinite.” (1p23)
   •  “Whatever we conceive to be in God’s power necessarily exists.” (1p36)

Is God’s Essence the Cause of God’s Existence?
Plato: Does Plato anywhere explicitly discuss the origin of the forms or demiurge?
   •  Republic, Timaeus
Descartes:
- “Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear and distinct than is the case than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature ... When I concentrate more carefully, it is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separates from the essence of a triangle...” (Fifth Meditation; see also Principles I.15)

Spinoza: Existence pertains to God’s nature
- “It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist: Demonstration: A substance cannot be produced by anything else (by 1p6c); therefore it will be the cause of itself, that is (by 1def1), its essence necessarily involves existence, or it pertains to its nature to exist.” (1p7&dem)
  - “By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.” (1def1)

Two Worlds
Plato: Forms exist by themselves (as unities) and also as instantiated or otherwise exemplified in particulars
- Phaedo, Republic, Parmenides, Sophist (but cp. Philebus)

Descartes: Knowledge pertains to a realm or features outside of our immediate experience
- “I would not be making a correct judgment about the nature of wax unless I believed it capable of being extended in many more different ways than I will ever encompass in my imagination. I must therefore admit that the nature of this piece of each is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone.” (Second Meditation)

Spinoza: There is an ontological separation between God (the attributes that constitute God’s essence) and God’s modes
- “[B]y natura naturans we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence ... But by natura naturata I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, or from any of God’s attributes, that is, all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.” (1p29s)
- We conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, or real, we conceive under a species of eternity, and their ideas involves the eternal and infinite essence of God.” (5p29s)

Gradations of Being
Plato: Particulars are deficient exemplifications of pure, simple, and complete essences
- Phaedo, Republic, Timaeus

Descartes: Being comes in degrees
- “There are various degrees of reality: a substance has more reality than an accident or a mode; an infinite substance has more reality than a finite substance...” (Second Replies)
• “[I]n so far as one idea represents one thing and another represents another, they differ widely; and the greater the amount of objective perfection they contain within themselves, the more perfect their cause must be.” (Principles I. 17)

**Spinoza**: Spinoza’s modes less real than substance, and possibly not real at all?

• “So if we attend to quantity as it is in the imagination, which we do often and more easily, it will be found to be finite, divisible, and composed of parts; but is we attend to it as it is in the intellect, and conceive it insofar as it is a substance, which happens seldom and with great difficulty, then it will be found to be infinite, unique, and indivisible ...” (1p15s2)

• “By reality and perfection I understand the same thing.” (2def6)

• “By existence here I do not understand duration, that is, existence insofar as it is conceived abstractly, and as a certain species of quantity. For I am speaking of the very nature of existence, which is attributes to singular things because infinitely many things follow from the eternal necessity of God’s nature in infinitely many modes...” (2p45s)

**Emanative Causation**

**Plato**: Forms are essences from which properties emanate without any loss of that property on the part of the form

• *Phaedo, Timaeus*

**Descartes**: Thoughts?

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**Spinoza**: God’s causal power flows continuously and infinitely from God’s nature; everything is only an effect of this

• “From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes...” (1p16)

• “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things.” (1p18)

**Turn Away from the World of Particulars and Toward the World of Forms**

**Plato**: Particular instances of moral or ontological truths are not the proper objects of knowledge

• Piety itself (*Euthyphro*), Virtue itself (*Meno*), Justice itself (*Republic*) ...

**Descartes**: Our knowledge of objects is not arrived at by perceiving them

• “I would not be making a correct judgment about the nature of wax unless I believed it capable of being extended in many more different ways than I will ever encompass in my imagination. I must therefore admit that the nature of this piece of each is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone.” (Second Meditation)

**Spinoza**: True knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of God to each of the infinite and eternal ideas that follows from its nature

• “The ideas of the affections of the human body, insofar as they are related only to the human mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused.” (2p28)

• “[I]ntuitive knowledge ... proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things.” (2p40s2)

**Recollection**

**Plato**: Wisdom is achieved by recollecting our innate knowledge of Forms

• *Meno* (where the slave recollects mathematical knowledge) and *Phaedo* (where we can only recognize instances of equality because Equality itself is written into our minds)

**Descartes**: God implants innate ideas within our minds; truth resides there
• “It only remains for me to examine how I received this idea from God. For I did not acquire it from the senses ... And it was not invented by me either ... The only remaining alternative is that it is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me.” (Third Meditation)

Spinoza: Our natures contain within themselves adequate ideas of God and everything that follows from its nature

• “Each idea of each body, or of each singular thing which actually exists, necessarily involves an eternal and infinite essence of God.” (2p45)

• “The essences of singular, changeable things are not to be drawn from their series, or order of existing, since it offers us nothing but extrinsic denominations, relation, or at most, circumstances, all of which are far from the inmost essence of things. That essence is to be sought only from the fixed and eternal things, and at the same time from the laws inscribed in these things, as in their true codes, according to which all singular things come to be, and are ordered.” (TIE 101)