Self-Determination as a First Principle

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Self-determination has a long and venerable history as mark of first principles. Aristotle's first principle is thought thinking itself, Spinoza's is a God that is the cause of itself, and Hegel's is the Absolute that, after unfolding itself to generate the world returns to itself. Similarly, Descartes's "I think therefore I am" is a reflexive act of thought and, therefore, an indubitable principle. The mode of self-determination in these examples is different in important ways, some of which will emerge later. However, these principles are sufficiently alike that we can talk about them collectively and self-determined first principles. It is easy to see why they are attractive as first principles: they terminate causal sequences. What is the cause of some thing? If we answer by identifying some other thing, we face the question, what is the cause of it? And if we can answer that question, we face the question of the cause of that cause, and so forth. Regress looms. The usual assumption is that an infinity of causes cannot be traversed. So if something needs to happen before we get to some particular event, and something before that, and so forth infinitely, the particular event could never occur. Self-Determination stops the regress because, it is assumed, a self-determined principle needs no further cause. As Spinoza perspicuously puts it: God is cause of Himself. To say that a first principle is self-determined is not, of course, to say that everything comes from it in a single causal sequence, nor that all comes to be at once. The self-determined cause acts continuously, generating any number of cause sequences. Moreover, it is as much the source of time as of everything else.

There is another equally venerable tradition that accounts for first causes by their unity. Plotinus and other Neoplatonists most famously posit the one as the highest principle. They thought they were following Plato, and there is some reason to think they were right. Kant is another philosopher whose first principle is one; he calls it the transcendental unity of apperception and takes to be the act that makes all experience possible. As such, it itself is beyond any possible experience, as is Plotinus's one, despite his famous descriptions of ascending to it. Kierkegaard's God is also beyond reason and intelligibility. The

motivation for making one the first principle is the assumption that one must always be prior to any plurality. There cannot be two unless there would be a one. Likewise, something that is truly one must terminate a sequence of causes because what is one cannot be caused by anything else. Anything that were, per impossible, caused to be one, would be one in respect of its cause, but not one otherwise. But, to the extent that this thing is one and not one, it is a plurality. Indeed, insofar as it can be considered in multiple ways, it would be a plurality. Hence, anything that is truly one is cannot have a cause. It must itself be a first cause.

There is an ancient dispute between the proponents of these first principles. On one hand, if the principle is self-determined, then it is a plurality: there is the aspect of the thing that is determined, and the aspect that does the determining—a determiner and a determined. To be sure, the same thing plays roles, but if this thing is to have both functions it must have multiple dimensions and, thereby be some sort of plurality. Insofar as a self-determined principle is a plurality, there must be unity that is prior to it. On the other hand, if the first principle is indeed strictly one, then how does it act as the principle? How can many come to be from one? The very character that allows the one to be itself uncaused would seem likewise to prevent it from being the cause of something else.

This dispute between the one and the self-determination as first principles recurs throughout the history of philosophy in various guises, as the particular principles have varied. It is important to appreciate how subtle the difference is between both sides. What makes the self-determined thing a candidate for a first principle is precisely the *unity* that it acquires from its self-relation. That is to say, the proponents of self-relation acknowledge that being one is essential to being a first principle. Their issue whether the principle is one because it is some entity, some nature, that is self-related, as they hold, or firstly one, as their opponents hold. Again, the reason for thinking the first principle is self-determined is that, in that way, it would be one, and it is assumed that any first principle must be one. But if the principle is one by being self-determined, it is not strictly one and, therefore, not properly a first principle.

One way that we might, perhaps, escape this conclusion is to suppose that the self-determined principle is not intrinsically self-determined, but only so by virtue of our thought. Thus, for Spinoza to say that God is the cause of himself is not to speak literally of God bringing himself into being—which would

be impossible, of course—or causing himself in any other literal way. It is a, rather, a kind of metaphor to acknowledge that when we think of God, we contemplate an object that is entirely self-contained, and requires nothing else for its existence. Nothing else could cause God. If everything needs a cause, then he must cause himself.

There is something to this reasoning, but we can also see that Spinoza does take the self-determination of the God in the most literal way. He famously distinguishes *natura naturans* from *natura naturata*. That is, he distinguishes the actively causal aspect of God (or nature) from the passive dimension in which nature is acted upon. The meaning is, indeed, quite literal: when, as we might say, one body acts upon another, the entirely of nature at one time is acting upon itself to produce, as it were, a new configuration of itself. God or nature is one in the sense that it is whole. Not only are there the active and passive dimensions of this whole, but there is also the possibility of an individual's coming to be active—to the extent possible—by grasping an adequate idea, an idea that is, by itself, the entire cause of another idea. In sum, the unity that allows Spinoza's God to be the first principle is wholeness, and it is repeated, surprisingly, in causally distinct wholes—each an adequate idea—within this whole. The criterion for the first principle, that is, unity, is separate from the thing that is supposed to meet it. God is one because self-related, but that means God is only whole, not strictly one. What of the one that serves as the criterion here, the unity that God only partially meets?

Another duality has emerged. It will not do for the thing that is the first principle to differ from the character that makes it so. The first principle needs to be so in respect of itself. Indeed, the reason for the first principle to be self-determined is that, it seemed, only as such could it be one. But for the self-determined principle to be one in this way is for it *not* to be strictly one. It differs from the character that makes it a principle. Again, it is the self-contained character of a self-determined principle that allows it to terminate a causal sequence, but if its unity depends on something else, it is not self-contained.

At first glance, this objection seems misdirected: the self-determined principle is one; it is one by virtue of its being self-determined. The point is that its unity is subordinate to the character the principle has, but attained by the character in respect of its self-determination.

This response only raises a different, albeit similar, difficulty. The principle that is one in respect of its self-determined nature is not only a plurality in respect of its nature (because it is self-determined), but also a plurality insofar as that nature is *also* one. This is the plurality that something has in virtue of possessing an attribute: the thing is distinct from its attribute, even if the attribute always belongs to the thing. It is not objection against plurality to insist that the attribute that the nature has is unity. It is the intrinsic difference between the thing and its attribute that makes it a plurality. Moreover, even if we separate the thing from the attribute, at least in thought, there is within it another sort of plurality: the thing has some character, but it is also capable of further determination through an attribute. So, besides the nature, there is a capacity for determination. And if we identify that nature with the capacity, as for example, to be an animal is to have a capacity for perception, we discover that the nature itself is still a plurality because the capacity for perception is defined through perception, but also fails to be a determinate perception. It is perception and something else and, thus, a plurality. Indeed, plurality emerges when we try to consider the nature of something along. The thing is some character—be it perfection, rationality, or anything else—but it is also a thing or nature or self-subsistent or ultimate principle. Indeed, whatever we say of it, there is the nature and the thing's being what that nature makes it—self-subsistence make something a substance. We can see that any attempt to account for the unity of a thing by invoking features of its nature, whatever that nature is and whatever those features are, will fail.

One philosopher who faces the difficulty of accounting for the unity of the first principle head on is Maimonides. He argues that God, that is, the first principle must be one. Hence, any way in which He is conceived to be a plurality is incorrect. On this basis Maimonides rejects God's having attributes or a definition or any other character. God is strictly one, but we cannot say that without making God many because speech always involves the attribution of something to something else. It is, thus, impossible to ascribe any character to God or even to speak about Him. The solution is a version of negative theology: the more of what we can show God not to be, the closer we can come to grasping God, though we can never come to an adequate grasp. Maimonides' first principle is so strictly one that nothing at all could be said or known about it. He is, though, enough of an Aristotelian to say that the first principle knows himself, and he adds that not only are knower and knower the same, but they are also identical with the act of knowing

(*Guide of the Perplexed*, book 1, ch. 68). This self-relation is somehow a consequence of God's unity, but importantly, he cannot connect God's unity with His self-knowledge. Obviously, the latter cannot be an attribute without making God many. A God whose unity is so strict that his nature is beyond our comprehension cannot be known to be self-determined. Maimonides hedges by insisting that God's knowledge can be nothing like our knowledge because God can know, with a single act of knowing, all the particulars, even though these particulars are not necessary consequences of some law or principle (*Guide* 3 ch. 20, p. 482, Pines trans.). Reading Maimonides charitably, we can say that his claim that God knows himself is a way of talking about God's *action* rather than God's *nature* in something of the way he proposes that we can speak of the motions of the cosmos without knowing the natures of their creator. Studying an action is a way for us to grasp what we can of a cause through its remote effect. The point is that God's self-determination needs to be understood as a consequence of his unity or, more generally, that self-determination is an effect of the first principle, even though we cannot understand how there could be a causal link—indeed, *because* we cannot understand how there can be a causal link.

The self-determination of God is mirrored in the self-determinations of other forms. Here, Maimonides claims that our knowledge of a substance resembles God's knowledge of himself: just as he is identical with what he knows, when we apprehend a substance, our act of knowing is identical with the object known (bk. 1, ch. 68). Of course, he is drawing on Aristotle's *De Anima* here (book 3, chs 4-8). A substance is self-subsistent, and it can, therefore, be grasped by itself in a single act of knowing. In contrast, when we try to grasp an attribute like two footed, the act of thought is not identical with the object because the object, two-footed, does not have independent existence. So when we think about two-footed, we need to add in the substance or, at least, some substance in which it inheres (see *Met*. Z.4). Indeed, being able to think something by itself is one of Aristotle's criteria for substance—which is surprising because he also thinks that substances rely on first principles to sustain them and, therefore, cannot be thought independently. Something could be said in Aristotle's defense here, but my concern for the moment is not the substance's relation to a first cause but its relation to its own attributes. The act of thinking the substantial form and the form that is thought are one; this counts as a self-determination. However, the forms of sub-lunar entities do not exist merely in thought; they exist in matter. Now, matter

here is not the inert stuff of modern philosophers; instead, it is defined as a capacity, namely, a capable of receiving the form. That is, matter is those structured things that are capable of functioning together. This functioning together makes them one thing, but it also inevitably wears down the material. Hence, all substances, at least, all sub-lunar substances must be involved in processes that sustain themselves by taking in new matter and fashioning it so as to be able to replace the deteriorating parts. Most commonly this process is eating, digestion, and cell division. There is, then, first, the form that Aristotle identifies as an actuality, a function whose activity is its own end, which is to say, whose activity is a self-determination. Second, there is the concrete physical functioning of the composite substance, the beating of the heart, the flow of blood through the body, etc. This physical functioning is a self-relation because it is an activity that is done to sustain the body. It is made possible by a third sort of self-relation, the taking in of other things and their transformation into bodily parts of the plant or animal. The point is that, especially in this last case, on which the other two depend, self-determination is a concrete physical function in which a substance sustains itself by taking what is not itself and making it into itself.

Something of the same process of self-determination occurs in a state and in those acts that individuals choose to live their lives. The political functions of the state define it, and they and the more concrete functions through which the state protects, nurtures, cares for its citizens, and molds its physical environment all serve to sustain the state. Likewise, the activities an individual chooses to realize his abilities (be they politics, philosophy, or something else) serve not only to express his nature but also to sustain that nature in its capacity to continue to perform such acts.

These modes of self-determination are a rich source for understanding individual substances of the sort we ordinarily encounter. However, when we try to project this sort of self-relation onto immaterial substances, we are quickly stymied. It is hard to imagine something without matter as having a function. It is like imagining flute playing without the flute or acts of moral virtue without having a body. Likewise, when try to think of a first cause along these lines, we hit upon the idea of a function that is its own end, but does not change or, really, do anything else. This first cause would seem to have no efficacy. Indeed, it could not change anything else because other substances are themselves self-determined in parallel ways. So, the idea of a first cause seems impossible—except, perhaps, as a kind of ultimately self-determined

entity, a self-related entity that does not have to go outside itself and bring other things into itself, nor to move its own internal organs. This first cause is the form that is simply *act*, the activity without the matter. Aristotle calls it thought thinking itself (*Met.* Λ.9), but this may well be a metaphor; thought is the one function that is able to determine itself without anything additional. If thought is not one, it is, at least, not made many by something outside itself.

This last observation prompts a transition in the discussion. Until this point, I have been focusing on how things or substances could be first principles. They need some sort of unity to be first principle, but the self-determination that makes them one also renders them pluralities. This does not pose a problem for concrete sensible entities—indeed, it provides a rich field for analysis, as I have said. But it does pose a problem when we try to project this kind of self-determination onto first principles. One possible solution takes its start from the notion that thought is capable of thinking itself even while remaining what it is. Thought would seem capable of avoid the duality that is intrinsic to another sort of function's self-determination.

The philosopher who explores thought's self-determinations most thoroughly is Hegel. I've written that all of his philosophy details the variety of possible modes or self-relation. What Hegel realizes that self-determination is often a self-transformation. In his logic of Being, for example, the categories of thought are simple, and their mode of self-determination is self-predication. Thus Being is a being; Determinate Being is a determinate being (*Dasein ist daseinendes*), etc. However, such determinations add thought content to the categories. Being is no longer entirely simple if it is an instance of itself, even if its content is empty; nor is a Determinate Being a mere unity of affirmation and negation if it itself has these characters but, rather, a unity of affirmation and negation that itself affirms its own character and negates others and, thus, Something. It follows that self-determination is also a mode of self-negation and a transition to a new, richer thought category. In this way, self-determination is an motor that propels thought. We have here not a backwards sequence to a first cause, but a forward sequence of unfolding categories. We risk a infinite sequence of increasing richness. What allow the sequence to terminate is the insight that it belongs to thoughts to relate themselves to themselves. Thus, identity is a self-relation, but one that occurs by distinguishing itself from difference, the latter defined similarly. There are, further,

self-relations that do not distinguish themselves from what is different from them, but include and encompass the difference. Thus, the category universal includes within itself its particular instances, and yet differs from each instance by encompassing all. Likewise, the instances are not different from the universal; they themselves each contain the universal as an internal constituent. There are multiple variations of each of these modes of self-relation. The sequence of self-determinations culminates in a thought category that is itself the unfolding of all thought categories, the Absolute. However, insofar as this too is merely a category of thought, it acquires still another self-determination, one that stand apart from the unfolding that constitutes its nature. Again, there are two modes of self-determination based upon the two that are fundamental for logic. These are the modes of indifferent self-relation, as the Absolute is related to its further determination as a category, and the self-relation that encompasses and other and makes it apart of itself, as the living thing does with its food. These *modes* of self determination define the spheres of Nature and Spirit. Spirit includes nature insofar as it incorporates external nature into a whole. The ultimate idea here is again a thought that thinks itself, but instead of the ultimate logical category, the Absolute, we now have a thought that whose thinking of itself results in the unfolding of nature and spirit before it "returns" to itself. That is to say, there is a self-determination of nature that includes all else within itself, not just all other thoughts—that would be the logical absolute—but all else that is.

Hegel is talking about the self-determination of thought, thought thinking about thinking. His reasoning begins from the famously empty category of Being and proceeds, through self-determination, to the ultimate thought thinking itself, an enfolding that is both stable and all-inclusive. Thus, Hegel achieves at the end of his system the sort of self-sufficient self-determination with which other philosophers begin. Again, this is explicitly a self-determination in thought. We need to understand that thought somehow, by virtue of its indifference to its parts or its encompassing its parts, *is* Nature or Spirit respectively. I pass over the questions of whether this sort of idealism can stand. More interesting for us is that thought is capable of reflecting upon itself: thinking about a thought is more directly and immediately intelligible than a self-determination that consists of things that act upon themselves by interacting with their environment. The immediacy that is possible with thought is important inasmuch as the issue is whether self-relation can

achieve unity. Yet, Hegel makes a point of showing that the seemingly simple unity of a thought thinking itself is not simple at all. Medieval philosophers maintained that when Aristotle's God is thinking about himself, that is, thinking about thinking, he produces all else in the process. Hegel shows, painstakingly, how this could be. In his favor is an extraordinary *comprehensiveness*. What he does not have is *simplicity*.

Is not comprehensiveness a mode of unity? Does comprehensiveness, then, depend logically on simplicity? Is Hegel thereby subject to the initial argument that a plurality requires a unity? A substance and an attribute constitute a plurality even if the attribute must inhere in the substance. A category that unfolds itself and returns to itself is not a plurality in the same way. The stages here are linked together, but it is crucial to Hegel's project that they differ. Part of the idea is that thinking one thing simply becomes thinking another thing. There is a continuity of thought, but also a difference. The movement through the *Logic* and then through the *Realphilosophie* is from separate categories of thought to more unified categories of thought.

The assumption is that the more unified these categories are, the more they unfold from a single category and return to it, the closer they are to a first principle. That is to say, the unity assumption is at work here. While Hegel does achieve an impressive degree of unity, the unity that he strives to attain is not a part of the system. To be sure, one could defend him by saying that it is only the unity of the final category of the system, thought thinking itself, that Hegel really aims to attain. That is, to be sure all he could attain, perhaps all that any system based on self-determination could attain, and perhaps even all there is. But I revert to my original argument: We know that Hegel has attained a principle at the end of his system by virtue of the system's unity; however, this unity is comprehensive rather than simple, but depends upon a simply absolute unity.

How, though, could such a unity serve as the first principle? This question has also been with us from the beginning. We cannot understand unity as an efficient cause that generates other things, though Plotinus famously tried to do so by maintaining that the one thinks itself and in this self-determination becomes many. As intriguing as this account is, it does not explain why the one would think itself, especially if this means making itself into a lower level existence. Once we see that unity is not an efficient

cause, we can easily see how it is a first principle: it is a first principle insofar as anything else must be one to be, just what we have seen all along. This is a principle of intelligibility rather than a principle of unfolding. We might have wished for the latter type of principle, but then again most of the proposed first principles that are self-determined (including Aristotle's) have been of this exemplary type.

To recap the discussion, my contentions here are that the arguments for the subordination of unity to the first principle's essential nature (whatever this nature is) depend on unity's being a consequence of that nature and that the key move in showing that nature is one is to show its self-determination through some mode of self-relation. However, the motivation for showing this self-determination is the assumption that only what is one could be a first principle. The contradiction is clear: In order to show that something is a principle, it is necessary to show it is one, but the process of showing unity is to show self-relation or, equivalently, self-determination and only what is not strictly one can be self-related. To make unity a consequence of self-relation is, thus, to assume tacitly that the candidate someone aims to show to be the first principle lacks the unity she assumes to be requisite for such a principle.