
**FEOFAN PROKOPOVICH AND
BENEDICT DE SPINOZA
THOUGHTS ABOUT GOD AND THE ESSENCE OF
NATURE**

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Abstract

The 18th century was marked by extremely dynamic changes and reformatting of the European intellectual space, namely by the foundation of new educational institutions representing different denominations, which was reflected in the works of Russian and Western European thinkers. This article aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the philosophical content of the thoughts about God and the essence of Nature expressed by Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza. It is shown that the relationship between the philosophical beliefs of Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza represents a cross-section of the European philosophical landscape of the time when the commonality of initial premises did not at all guarantee similar conclusions; on the contrary, it created favourable conditions for a diversity of philosophical ideas. The conclusion drawn in this article suggests that the views on the essence of Nature and existence of God expressed by Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza if not do not fully coincide, then at least can be considered not contradictory. Besides, the criticism of Spinoza's views in Feofan's works can be fully explained by the religious mind-set that largely influenced Feofan's worldview as opposed to Spinoza.

Keywords: differentiation, nature, fundamental, principles, world

1. Introduction

The evolvement and development of philosophical views shared by Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza took place in the period of active introduction of a new thinking paradigm, which organically combined modern and scholastic approaches to philosophizing.

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In the works by Feofan Prokopovich, one can find characteristic features of many philosophical movements and schools of thought [1]. However, none of them is final or reflects the full diversity of ideas he was interested in. As it has been noted by researchers [2, 3], the period when Feofan Prokopovich lived and worked can be characterized as the period of formation of the vibrant and up-to-date process of philosophizing, when true knowledge acquires the same value as any practical skills, i.e. people start valuing knowledge when they benefit from it. Consequently, the process of acquiring knowledge in a new format drew the attention of multiple thinkers and intellectuals. This fact can be considered to be one of the reasons for such great attention to cognitive issues from European thinkers of the 18th century [4-6]. At the same time, the topic of true knowledge is vividly actualized in the works by Feofan Prokopovich, suggesting that it might be reasonable to trace his direct contacts with European philosophers since in his writings Feofan turns to the topics that were actively explored by Western European thinkers [7].

Modern historical-philosophical research [5, 8] allows us to make various assumptions as to ideological intersections and creative parallels. However, the approach that seems the most reasonable is to identify the ideological connection that has clear coordinates. In this case, it is a direct reference to Benedict de Spinoza in 'Reasoning about godlessness' by Feofan Prokopovich [9].

Judging by the time when Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza lived and worked, it can be argued that these thinkers belong to the same philosophical epoch; hence, it can be assumed that their writings contained similar motives, which could be reflected in their theoretical works [9-11]. Taking into account the diversity of spheres of scientific and philosophical interests of each of them, it seems reasonable to try and find out whether these two outstanding but extremely controversial intellectuals of their time had anything in common. These and similar questions served as motivation for the identification of common and distinguishing aspects in the views of these philosophers, as well as for the examination of their main ideological contradictions.

It should be noted that such comparative research has already been carried out over the history of Philosophy, which is proved by the works of V. Nichik, who focused on research into the writings of Feofan Prokopovich [12]. Interestingly, the research by V. Nichik contains a comparison between the views of the two thinkers and substantiation of the common features of their theories: "...Prokopovich comes quite close to understanding God as nature expressed by Bruno and Spinoza" [12, p. 23], while in the writings by Feofan Prokopovich one can find what may, at first sight, seem straightforward and categorical criticism of Spinoza's views. This fact was bound to raise a logical question about Feofan's attitude to Benedict de Spinoza's philosophical views.

Since the creative heritage of each of these philosophers is extremely voluminous, which makes a systemic comparison of ideas significantly more difficult, we believe that it is reasonable to restrict the research to such milestone works as 'Natural philosophy' [10] and 'Reasoning about godlessness' [9] by

Feofan Prokopovich and 'Short treatise on God, man and his well-being' [11] and 'The ethics' [11] by Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza.

The choice of works is not accidental and corresponds with the aim of the article to analyse the thinkers' philosophical thoughts about God and the essence of Nature. Each of the chosen works addresses the philosophers' views on God and nature - the issues that define the understanding of the unique character of their standpoints - and provides insight into controversial aspects that resulted in the philosophers' criticism of one another.

2. Feofan Prokopovich as a religious and political figure, philosopher and educator

Feofan (Theophan) (born Eleazar) Prokopovich (1678-1736) was born into the family of a Kiev burgher. Orphaned at the age of seven, he was brought up by his maternal uncle, professor of the Kiev-Mogila Academy (KMA), Theophan Prokopovich, whose name he inherited. After receiving his primary education at the Kiev-Bratsk Monastery, in 1687-1696, he studied at the KMA. Without completing the full course, he went abroad. Subsequently, he studied at several universities in Europe, the longest of all (three years) - at the Collegium Graecum - the Collegium of Saint Athanasius in Rome. Upon his return in 1705-1716, he taught Poetics, Rhetoric, History, Natural philosophy (Physics and Astronomy), Philosophy, Logic, Theology and Mathematics at the KMA. In 1711, became the rector of the academy. His alphabet book was used not only for children in the Russian Empire, but also for Georgians, Serbs, Greeks and Bulgarians. In Serbia, this work went through seven editions and was popular even in the 19th century. The thinker wrote numerous poems in Latin, Polish, and Russian, among them - 'Ad Pontificum' (against Pope Urban VIII, in defence of Galileo Galilei).

Prokopovich was a prominent representative of the academic scholars of the modern era. In his lectures, he was the first to introduce students to the teachings of R. Descartes, J. Locke and F. Bacon. He gave explanations of Nicolaus Copernicus's system and Galileo Galilei's teachings. Repeatedly, like Giordano Bruno, he expressed the idea of the plurality worlds. The philosopher strove to give a scientific explanation to natural phenomena and free philosophy and sciences from theological coloration as much as possible. Prokopovich was the first to develop the methodology of writing and teaching History, which he outlined in the Rhetoric course for the 1706/07 academic years 'De method scribendi historiae...' ('On the methods of writing history...'). He wrote the historical works 'Collection from chroniclers of brief information on the authorities of the great Russian monarchs...' and 'Register of Russian sovereigns from Rurik himself...'. The description of the philosophical courses in Rhetoric, Logic, Physics and other disciplines taught by the professor is thorough. The educator's books were translated into German, French, English and Swedish.

Prokopovich's state activity was extremely intense. In 1716, Peter I took him to St. Petersburg, where the latter first became Bishop of Pskov, Narva and Izborsk (April 7, 1718) and on July 10, 1725, Archbishop of Novgorod and

Velikiye Luki. Since 1721, the thinker, vice-president of the Synod, actually headed the Russian Orthodox Church.

Prokopovich kept in touch with famous European scientists and educators, opened schools, and invited foreign scientists. His school on the Karpovka River was the best in Russia. The philosopher initiated the abolition of the patriarchate in Russia and supported the state reforms of Peter I. The thinker was Peter's main assistant in spiritual affairs. The authorship of the 'Spiritual Regulations' (1721) belongs to him. He became the most prominent representative of the doctrine of enlightened absolutism in Russia.

Supporters of social transformations and scientists rallied around Prokopovich. He called his circle the 'Academic Druzhina', which included the most educated people of that time - V. Tatishchev, A. Kantemir and others. The main goal of the 'Academic Druzhina' was the dissemination of educational ideas and scientific knowledge. The Russian Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Arts were created with the participation of the 'Academic Druzhina'.

Prokopovich's scientific and philosophical works, socio-political views, and pedagogical and state activities testify that he was an outstanding figure in the early Enlightenment. The thinker's views on man, state, Church, morality and art were directly related to his social activities and aimed to substantiate Peter's reforms. Y.F. Samarin notes that Peter I "found in Feofan a person close to him in character and thoughts, a person who could understand him and serve him not as a compulsory tool, but as his free associate, filled with a common conviction" [2, p. 84].

Prokopovich was an opponent of the papal doctrine, namely the idea that the Church should rule over the state in which it is located. The philosopher spoke of the tsar as the supreme judge for the Orthodox Church society. The enlightener often drew attention to the fact that a Christian ruler should be a missionary in the state. Thus, the thinker praised Peter I for his activities against the Raskol (schism).

The philosopher believed that a person should be useful to the state. One's main virtue is socially useful activity and honest and conscientious performance of official duties. Thus, personal merit to the state, and not belonging to the old boyar families, makes a person virtuous and worthy of respect. That is a person, according to the thinker's views, which is, first of all, an individuality. All the benefits that one brings to the state depend exclusively on themselves, and their belonging to a certain class does not play any role. These ideas contradicted the criteria for evaluating a person accepted in feudal society that existed at that time. These views of the thinker substantiated a new humanistic view of a person and their place in society, which was openly proclaimed in the official document 'Table of Ranks'.

3. The initial theses for the comparative analysis of the philosophical views on God and nature expressed by Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza

Let us start the analysis with traditional evaluations. N.A. Kutsenko points out that due to the peculiar manner of philosophizing and the inclination to eclectic combinations of absolutely different philosophical elements, Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza were endowed with the cliché “baroque thinkers” [13], denoting their belonging to the Baroque period (17-18th centuries).

Table 1. The main philosophical views expressed by Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza.

| Thesis | Author | |
|---|--|--|
| | Feofan Prokopovich | Benedict de Spinoza |
| About the essence of nature | “...about the very nature, since it is preserved with the help of God, it can be said, that it preserves itself using its own resources. However, it seems that it is beyond its power since preserving one’s essence means continuing the process of creation in a certain way” [10, p. 164]. | “...nature, which does not originate from any sources and about which we know that it exists, has to be a perfect creation whose inherent feature is existence” [11, p. 87]. |
| About the division of nature | “...the efficient cause can be called the fundamental reason, but an external one... But it very well starts [even] when you do not think about the efficient cause” [10, p. 124]. | “...we shall briefly divide the whole of Nature namely, into <i>Natura naturans</i> and <i>Natura naturata</i> ” [11, p. 48]. |
| About the existence of God | “the knowledge of human God is written in human hearts” [10, p. 6]. | “if man has an idea of God, then God must exist formaliter” [11, p. 178]. |
| About the fundamental principles of the world | “...the general substrate, or the first matter created by God at the beginning of the world, can never be born, expand, or diminish, and the amount that was created remains the same up to now and will remain forever” [10, p. 128]. | “...every substance must be infinitely perfect in its kind, that is to say, that in the infinite understanding of God no substance can be more perfect than that which already exists in Nature” [11, p. 82-83]. |

The next coincidence is the period when the above-mentioned works were created. Spinoza wrote ‘Short treatise on God, man and his well-being’ at the very beginning of his philosophical path, and this work contains the initial ideas, based on which the thinker further developed his views. Early writings are of great interest to researchers since they allow them to trace a philosopher’s ideas back to their very beginning. ‘Natural philosophy’ by Feofan Prokopovich in its contemporary form, as a section of an academic edition of the thinker’s philosophical views, also reflects his early ideas. This period in the philosopher’s

life when this work was created can be considered to be the beginning of his philosophical career.

This fact is essential since it allows us to understand the starting points of the philosophical frameworks developed by each of the thinkers and hence shows the specific feature of the environment surrounding them at the beginning of their ideological evolvement. Relying on similar theses, each of the authors provides his arguments and, consequently, substantiates his views.

The two other examined works, 'Reasoning about godlessness' and 'The ethics', were created in later periods of the thinkers' lives and show the evolution of their views. Besides, their content is extremely similar since both works contain several structural elements, such as a description of the ideal situation, to which people should aspire, instructions that should be observed to achieve the desired result, and warnings as to what the consequences of violations of such instructions might be.

'Reasoning about godlessness' by Feofan Prokopovich is a description of the existing variants of atheism as a phenomenon that should be fought, an explanation of the essence of the true faith and its advantages over deceptive atheist views, as well as instructions on how to differentiate between them and stick to the true faith, which infallibly leads to true knowledge.

'The ethics' by Spinoza follows a similar model. It contains a set of basic rules showing an ideal model of interaction between man, God and the world; a system of fundamental principles, which should be perceived as necessary and used to provide strict observation of the rules; and a few theorems, each of which explains the main principles of existence of the whole world harmony and the role of each element in it.

Therefore, these later writings are also very illustrative and useful from the perspective of exploration of the main philosophical views expressed by Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza (Table 1).

4. Comparative analysis of the philosophical views on God and nature expressed by Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza

Taking into account the context in which 'Natural philosophy' was created, its purpose, and the student audience it was aimed at, it is hard not to notice how interesting the explanation of the essence of nature used by Feofan Prokopovich is. One can see an internal contradiction in the very thinker's standpoint since 'officially', God is above Nature and represents its Creator, custodian and continuer. However, at the same time, the philosopher assumes that Nature can be called self-sufficient because essentially, it possesses the same qualities as those that characterize God, namely the ability to preserve and prolong its essence. Therefore, talking about the external classification of the philosophical views set forth by Feofan Prokopovich, no signs show that he belonged to any philosophical movements. Nevertheless, analysis of the content of his works allows us to say that his framework contains elements of pantheism. This fact strikingly distinguishes Feofan from the majority of Russian intellectuals of the period,

among which he was ranked many times [14]. However, these views very well match the thinker's education, as well as the prevailing European philosophical moods.

In the course of analysis of 'Short treatise on God, man and his well-being' it should be noted that it is one of the key works among Spinoza's writings as far as the issues of God, Nature, man and his cognitive ability are concerned. It is a crucial point since during the reconstruction of dynamics of development of philosophical views, it is necessary to examine not only the external factors that motivated the thinker but also the works where these views were manifested.

For instance, the analysis of Spinoza's reflections on the attributes of nature shows that they resonate with the above-mentioned arguments provided by Prokopovich. Strange as it may seem, doubts about the attributes of Nature and its generative capacity turn out to be one of the most important and illustrative issues of modern Philosophy. Looking at the majority of works by thinkers of this period, it is easy to find similar or opposite reasoning about the essence, attributes, and abilities possessed by Nature. However, it is important to note the fact that the above-mentioned quotations reflect each other like a mirror.

For Feofan Prokopovich, despite being a member of the clergy and belonging to a religious educational institution, it was essential to raise nature to the level of God, i.e. God's superiority remained undeniable but he positioned nature as close as possible to God in terms of its attributes. Meanwhile, for Spinoza, it was of great importance to try and explain universal and self-sufficient nature through its comparison with God. This situation is understandable because Spinoza was excommunicated from the synagogue and severely criticized by it [15], while Feofan Prokopovich did not only continue his ecclesiastical activities but also worked his way up through the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which, on the other hand, did not prevent him from substantiation of his philosophical views on the issue of division of Nature.

This is extremely important since it plays a significant role in the philosophical frameworks created by the two thinkers. For Spinoza, this division lies in two types of nature, or *Natura*, while Feofan Prokopovich sees such division in causes, which include the generating initial cause and others, generated by it; according to Prokopovich, all other causes are potentially able to generate too.

It may seem that the given quotations (Table 1) dwell upon different philosophical concepts and have nothing in common. However, a thorough examination shows that their semantic charge is very similar. Spinoza writes about the ultimate cause and the unique essence of all things, which is Nature, generating all existing things and Nature of a different order, including all existence, i.e. all generated things. As for Feofan Prokopovich, in his works, he refers to the ultimate cause of all things - the source that generated existence as such - and all other causes, which are potentially able to generate existence, but only reproduce and preserve it. Putting aside the attempts to find a common denominator of the concepts used by the thinkers, it is easy to notice that each of

them tried to answer the same question, ‘What is the cause of all existence and what is the secret of existence?’.

Taking into consideration the above, the fact that Feofan Prokopovich went down in history as a philosopher who criticized Spinoza’s views may seem surprising, but further research allowed us to restore a more realistic picture of philosophical discussions of that period. Let us consider one of the most vivid examples of such false evaluations.

The writings by Feofan Prokopovich contain criticism of Spinoza’s views on the essence of God, as well as accusations of atheism. According to Prokopovich, Benedict de Spinoza’s atheism is expressed in his recognition of a single substance, or Creation, or Nature, its different states and modifications, i.e. attributes and deeds [9, p. 7]. Thus, Spinoza is criticized for division between God and nature as a self-constituted creation since, for Feofan, everything except for God has been created by Him and cannot be equated with Him. However, if we compare the evidence for God’s existence used by each of the thinkers, it turns out that they are not only similarly formulated but also extremely similar in their very essence (Table 1).

Taking into account the context in which the arguments were formulated, it is difficult to deny their content similarity since each of them is meant to explain and substantiate the existence of the idea of God. Moreover, it is obvious from the quotations that the issues considered by the philosophers are very alike, and their argumentation is characterized by clarity, consistency, and coherence. Having agreed with this thesis, a researcher finds himself in a difficult situation because the whole previous tradition of commenting and criticism postulated rejection of Spinoza’s interpretation of God by Feofan Prokopovich and considered accusations of atheism brought against Spinoza by Prokopovich to be the latter’s steadfast stance [16].

In our opinion, the main manifestation of Spinoza’s opposition to religion involved his refusal to take the law of God for granted and his attempts to understand what was usually accepted as a given. Spinoza longed for the same thing as Feofan - rational faith and a conscious attitude to the true divine knowledge. At the same time, just like Feofan, Spinoza did not reject the idea of God but suggested his understanding of it, which led to the rejection of his ideas by both the religious Jewish community and circles of intellectuals and philosophers [15]. Like Spinoza, Feofan Prokopovich insisted on approaching God through the cognition of His creation - the world surrounding man and man himself, and he considered the idea of God inherent in man to be the key to such cognition [17].

However, the explanation of the idea of God’s existence is not the only common stand shared by the two philosophers; their interpretation of the ultimate cause of the world is equally important (Table 1). The fact that this issue was of interest to the philosophers is a great illustration of the progress of Philosophy in the modern era since each of the thinkers could give different answers to the same question, or, if the answers were similar, their argumentation could differ significantly.

Having described the similar and different aspects in the development of philosophical views by the two thinkers and identified undeniable commonality of the contexts of their philosophical heritage, let us return to the subject of Feofan's criticism of Spinoza.

Such criticism addressed the hierarchy supported by Spinoza. We have already discussed the opposition of their views on the interdependence between God and Nature. In our opinion, it was this opposition that became the main source of criticism and condemnation that can be found in the work by Feofan Prokopovich. Therefore, Feofan Prokopovich did not view endowing nature or substance with creative power or generating ability as atheism but could not put up with raising Nature above God because he believed that nature acquired the creative potential only by copying God and getting closer to His omnipotence. Meanwhile, for Spinoza, it was essential to raise nature, i.e. substance, and he suggested that it should be called the ultimate cause, the fundamental principle, or God. Thus, for Prokopovich nature is something that at least partially implements God's infinity, while for Spinoza God fragmentarily shows the immensity of nature.

5. Conclusions

Summarizing this research, it should be noted that the criticism of Spinoza's views in Feofan's works can be fully explained by the religious mindset that largely influenced Feofan's worldview as opposed to Spinoza. Along with that, it is important to point out that such criticism was of situational and ideological nature but did not address the philosophical ideas, which is proved by the many ideological similarities in the thinkers' writings. Their views on the essence of Nature and the existence of God if not do not fully coincide, then at least can be considered not contradictory.

The relationship between the philosophical beliefs of Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza represents a cross-section of the European philosophical landscape of the time when the commonality of initial premises did not at all guarantee similar conclusions; on the contrary, it created favourable conditions for a diversity of philosophical ideas. Besides, it was common for many philosophers to have similar views on certain subjects and disagree as to other issues. The philosophical views expressed by Feofan Prokopovich and Benedict de Spinoza can be considered an illustration of this statement.

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