

Spinoza's argument for substance monism

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Resumo: Investigo, neste artigo, os fundamentos do argumento maduro spinozista do monismo substancial. O argumento é sucintamente afirmado na *Ética*, Parte I, proposição 14. Ele faz apelo a duas premissas explícitas: (1) a de que deve haver uma substância com todos os atributos; (2) a de que as substâncias não podem compartilhar seus atributos. Em conjunto com uma terceira premissa implícita, a de que uma substância não pode não ter qualquer atributo, Spinoza infere que não pode haver mais que uma substância. Começo a investigação com a análise da primeira premissa, que é fornecida sob a forma de quatro provas da existência de Deus na *Ética*, Parte I, proposição 11. Demonstro, a partir dela, que Spinoza adota uma abordagem progressiva, em que a quarta prova da existência de Deus é mais exitosa e persuasiva que a terceira; esta, por sua vez, mais exitosa que a segunda etc. Também esmiúço, aqui, conceitos centrais do pensamento de Spinoza, incluindo os conceitos de razão (*ratio*) e poder (*potesta* ou *potentia*). Analiso, em seguida, a segunda premissa do argumento spinozista do monismo substancial, conforme estabelecido na *Ética*, Parte I, proposição 4, em conjunto com *Ética*, Parte I, proposição 5. Aceito e respondo a objeção atribuída a Leibniz de que uma substância *p* pode ter os atributos *x* e *y* e uma substância *q* pode ter os atributos *y* e *z*, e, portanto, que substâncias podem compartilhar alguns atributos embora permaneçam distintas. Ao longo deste estudo, minha atenção se volta para os procedimentos argumentativos adotados por Spinoza. Isso resulta num fechamento, numa leitura internalista do texto, segundo a qual Spinoza abraça efetivamente o monismo substancial. Na conclusão deste estudo, registro a originalidade do argumento de Spinoza em relação às teorias da substância do século XVII.

Palavras-chave: Spinoza; Monismo Substancial; Provas da Existência de Deus; Individuação.

Abstract: In this paper, I inspect the grounds for the mature Spinozist argument for substance monism. The argument is succinctly stated at *Ethics* Part 1, Proposition 14. The argument appeals to two explicit premises: (1) that there must be a substance with all attributes; (2) that substances cannot share their attributes. In conjunction with a third implicit premise, that a substance cannot *not* have any attribute whatsoever, Spinoza infers that there can be no more than one substance. I begin the inspection with the analysis of the first premise, which is provided in the form of the four proofs of God's existence in *Ethics* Part 1, Proposition 11. While demonstrating how Spinoza adopts a progressive approach, where the fourth proof of God's existence is more successful and persuasive than the third, which is more successful than the second, *etc.*, I also unpack concepts central to Spinoza's thinking here, including the concepts of reason (*ratio*) and power (*potesta* or *potentia*). I then analyze the second premise of the Spinozist argument for substance monism, as established by *Ethics* Part 1, Proposition 4 in conjunction with *Ethics* Part 1, Proposition 5. I take up and respond to the objection attributed to Leibniz that a substance *p* can have the attributes *x* and *y* and a substance *q* can have the attributes *y* and *z*, and thus that substances can share some attributes while remaining distinct. Throughout the study, my attention is focused on the argumentative procedures Spinoza adopts. This yields a close,

internalist reading of the text where Spinoza effectively embraces substance monism. In conclusion to this study, I underscore to the originality of Spinoza's argument for seventeenth century theories of substance.

Keywords: Spinoza; substance monism; proofs of God's existence; individuation.

Part 1: Outlining the Argument for Substance Monism

Speaking from a broad historical perspective, the kind of substance pluralism found in early Aristotle and among several of his Medieval descendants does not come down to Spinoza in great shape. It is fair to say, in fact, that Spinoza confronts a generally contested and fragmented terrain of philosophical debate and discussion: the notion of substance, the belief that a plurality of substances populates the world and this fact can *meaningfully* explain natural phenomena was challenged by the nascent demands of mechanistic thinking.¹ Take but one canonical example. In what sense are extended substances truly substances for Descartes if extended substances are created continually by God? What is more, what *explanatory force* can they play as substances, if they are shorn of power or force and serve as mere placeholders for an intellectually perceived geometry?² Yet substance monism is a radical theoretical alternative — and Spinoza embraces the risks clear-sightedly. He is unquestionably aware of the alternatives to this view, and he is also aware that it would have likely had implausible-looking consequences

¹ As has been abundantly documented by Robert Pasnau in *Metaphysical Themes: 1274-1671* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For reactions to Descartes specifically, see more recently Tad M. Schmaltz, *The Metaphysics of the Material World: Suárez, Descartes, Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

² On this specific point, see Daniel Garber, *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). The Cartesian theory of substance is a complex subject. One would do well to return to the central texts, such as Descartes *Principles of Philosophy*, I.51, where tensions in the bona fide substantiality of created substance are especially salient. There, we see Descartes carefully hedging his definition of substance as that which enjoys genuine independent existence by appealing to the notion of God's "concurrence." Descartes' understanding of concurrence is indebted to Scholastic discussions (Burgersdijk makes a similar point in *Institutionum*, Book II, Ch. 1, §4). Created substances thereby remain substances, even if they are only substances in a relatively weak sense insofar as their *subsistence* requires God's concurrence. At the heart of the Cartesian definition of substance in the *Principles* is the belief that "not depending on another being" is essential to the nature of substance. Beings qualify as substances, understood as capable of subsisting, if and only if they are not caused by another. But created substances causally depend on other created substances and on God. Descartes wants that we grant his middle-of-the-road appeal to concurrentism, and that we accept that even though created substances are indeed caused by another, they are not caused by another in such a way that the fact they are substances is called into question. Even with this restriction in mind, created substances can satisfy the criteria of substance Descartes gave in his Geometrical Exposition in response to Mersenne, namely *substanding* [Geometrical Exp., Def. V / AT VII 161 / CSM II 114], as created substance can be logically held to be a subject in which properties reside, even if its persistence or existence requires God's concurrence. On the other hand, if we deny Descartes this middle-of-the-road appeal to concurrentism, and hold that being a substance requires absolute independence, then we are on the way to embracing Spinoza's substance monism. The fact that Descartes opened the door to Spinoza was widely appreciated by Spinoza's immediate successors.

both for leading figures in the historic, linguistic, and philosophical tradition within which Spinoza worked as well as for so-called common-sense.

Several prominent interpretations are already on hand for making sense of Spinoza's argument for substance monism and the arguments for the existence of God.³ Some of these interpretations will be called on in what follows, though I have attempted to the best of my ability to bracket the secondary literature and "return to the text itself" for the purposes of this close reading and reconstruction.

Now, my reader may balk at the fact that I further bracket several key philosophical or historical issues here. For example, I will not dwell on whether the term "substance monism" is an appropriate term, considering the fact that "monism" implies "oneness," or number, and considering Spinoza's (wavering) depreciation of measure and number as capable of yielding a rational understanding of *Natura naturans*.⁴ I will not, moreover, discuss closely related and important issues in Spinoza's mereology and connected issues in metaphysical priority.⁵ Nor will I be interested here in saying what I think the divine substance "really" is for Spinoza, correctly construed, though I will hint at least one possible answer. I am simply interested in discussing the elemental parts of Spinoza's view, the inner constitution, as it were, of his deep metaphysical commitment to substantial oneness.

³ In the English-language literature, see esp. Don Garrett, "Spinoza's "Ontological" Argument" [1979], reprinted in Don Garrett, *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Martin Lin, "Spinoza's Arguments for the Existence of God", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75:2 (2007): 269-297; and Mogens Lærke, "Spinoza's Cosmological Argument in the *Ethics*", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 49:4 (2011): 439-462. In the French-language literature, see esp. Alexandre Matheron, "Physique et ontologie chez Spinoza l'énigmatique réponse à Tschirnhaus" [1991], in Alexandre Matheron, *Etudes sur Spinoza et la philosophie à l'âge classique* (Lyon: ENS Lyon, 2011) and Jean-Luc Marion, "Spinoza ou l'unification des preuves de l'existence de Dieu", in Jean-Luc Marion, *Questions cartésiennes III: Descartes sous le masque du cartésianisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2021). I independently reach a similar conclusion as Matheron in maintaining that Spinoza's ontological proofs are progressively compelling. Matheron considers that they "gagnent en pureté intuitive" (583) and succeed one another "comme en une sorte de parcours initiatique," (583) yielding a more precise ontology of power.

⁴ This issue is prominently treated in Gueroult, *Spinoza 1*, Appendix 9 on the Letter on Infinity, 500-529. On the issue of the "numerical" nature of infinite, see Ramond's nuanced discussion in Charles Ramond, *Qualité et quantité*, ch. 2. Returning to the issue of how "far-reaching Spinoza's depreciation of number is," (245) Lærke argues in Mogens Lærke "Spinoza's Monism? What Monism?", in *Spinoza on Monism*, ed. Goff, that Spinoza does not, nor can he claim that there is "one substance," but he does not for his part correct how "divine unity" should be understood for Spinoza (246). Della Rocca, in Michael Della Rocca, "The Elusiveness of the One and the Many in Spinoza: Substance, Attribute, and Mode", in *Spinoza in Twenty-First-Century American and French Philosophy*, ed. Stetter and Ramond, goes further still, arguing (67-71) that "divine unity" (or God's being "one and the same") can be understood as an improper *and* a proper designation, since, on the one hand, there are none of the same nature or essence as God, but on the other hand, the thinking substance and the extended substance both exist and are not of the same nature or essence.

⁵ See Ghislain Guigon in "Spinoza on Composition and Priority", in *Spinoza on Monism*, ed. Goff.

On occasion, I will bring Spinoza's argument into discussion with the context of its elaboration. I will draw attention to how Spinoza unreservedly embraces the tradition's view on substance as enjoying existence by its own right, and how Spinoza thinks the only substance in this sense is God, since all other substances are created by God, as noted above. Naturally other features of Spinoza's substance monism also tie into contextually or historically sensitive issues. As noted, however, I strive to bracket these issues and focus on the text itself.

The aims of such a study are, one might think, clarificatory. What passes in textbook surveys as Spinoza's doctrine of substance monism is in fact an extremely intricate package of arguments and claims. Only by carefully attending to the way that Spinoza ties these together to form a general philosophical view do we appreciate the richness and nuance of Spinoza's philosophy. What is true here, it can be said, is true of the remainder of Spinoza's doctrine as well. This paper I voluntarily qualify as an exercise in philosophical analysis or dissection.

To begin, let us grant that *the* master statement of substance monism in Spinoza is put forth at 1p14:

Except God, no substance can be or be conceived. [1p14]

The demonstration reads:

Since God is an absolutely infinite being, of whom no attribute which expresses an essence of substance can be denied (by 1d6), and he necessarily exists (by 1p11), if there were any substance except God, it would have to be explained through some attribute of God, and so two substances of the same attribute would exist, which (by 1p5) is absurd. And so except God, no substance can be or, consequently, be conceived. For if it could be conceived, it would have to be conceived as existing. But this (by the first part of this demonstration) is absurd. Therefore, except for God no substance can be or be conceived, *Q.E.D.*" [1p14d]

This demonstration calls on two propositions and one definition. One of the propositions is demonstrated by means of Spinoza's ontological arguments for the existence of God [1p11], the other, more peculiar still, consists in the claim that no two substances can share any attribute or "affection" [1p5]. The definition of God states that God an absolutely infinite entity of which any attribute is an essential feature expressing its eternal essence [1d6]. For the purposes of elucidating substance monism, we must grant that Spinoza's definition of God is relevant to theology properly understood, whether we doubt that such a "God" is, as Leibniz famously

remarked, anything more than a mere “Metaphysical something” [A VI, iii, 474f]. A more serious concern that I shall soon take up is whether Spinoza’s definition of God does not form a patently invalid premise in the proof of the existence of God. I will argue that it does not, provided it is construed as a real definition offering a true description of a thing.

Attending to 1p14, we see that the argument for substance monism is rather easy to reconstruct in its valid logical form, since it involves but two explicit premises and one implicit premise:

- (1) There must be some substance with infinite or all attributes.
- (2) There cannot be two substances that share some attribute in common.

From these premises, put forth at 1p14, and granting the further implicit premise that there cannot be a substance without any attribute, Spinoza can infer the validity of substance monism:

- (3) There cannot be more than one substance.

Let us now begin by examining (1), put forth at 1p11, according to which:

God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists. [1p11]

Spinoza adduces three demonstrations and a further scholium to prove that God necessarily exists, which suggests outright the significance he attached to it. This should come as no surprise, for God’s necessary existence secures the bedrock of Spinoza’s philosophical system in the *Ethics*. I will begin therefore by interrogating the four proofs and inspecting their logical and philosophical characteristics.

Part 2: Spinoza’s First Proof of God’s Existence

Spinoza’s first proof is the most succinct:

If you deny this, conceive, if you can, that God does not exist. Therefore (by 1a7) his essence does not involve existence. But this (by 1p7) is absurd. Therefore, God necessarily exists, *Q.E.D.* [1p11d1]

There are various ways this argument can be interpreted. On one reading, at least, it is invalid.

Take the following line of interpretation. Spinoza understands “essence involving existence” and “necessary existence” as equipollent. Hence, Spinoza's claim that it is absurd to assert that God does not exist, following the fact that God's essence involves existence. What grounds does he give us for granting this? Spinoza's appeal to 1p7 suggests that we must grant this: *any* substance's essence involves existence, which in turn allegedly follows from the fact that, since one substance cannot be produced by another substance (1p6), a substance cannot be produced by anything at all (1p6c).

Already, Spinoza's argument is quite strained. That a substance cannot be produced by anything at all does not entail that it must be produced, *pace* Spinoza at 1p7d. For example, since no substance can be produced, perhaps there is no substance at all.

Now, Spinoza's appeal to 1d1, the definition of self-causation, in 1p7d is intended to motivate the claim that if substance is not produced by anything, it must be self-produced, or “it pertains to its essence to exist” (1p7).

One might similarly suppose that Spinoza's discussion involves an implicit appeal to a second definition, the definition of God as a “a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes” (1d6).

In both cases, if we construe these definitions as merely nominal, or stipulative, Spinoza's reasoning is invalid. In the case of the definition of God, it is incorrect to argue that insofar as God is *conceived* as substance it follows that he is such a thing. Rather, we need the definition to state a fact about God: God is substance. Notably, this feature of the definition of God, it's being *real*, not *nominal*, leaves open the question as to where we receive this immediate knowledge of God's nature *qua* substance, the consequences of which (read: God's necessary existence, its unicity, its simplicity, *etc.*) later demonstrations make explicit.

Looking to the definition of self-causation, if we take the definition as stipulative, we will only have a mechanism for understanding the nature of the existence of certain entities. But Spinoza's use of the definition additionally requires that the mechanism pertains to entities that exist.

Moreover, even if we succeed in salvaging it from being patently invalid by insisting on the definition of God as real, the demonstration would still, it appears, remain question-begging. The argument draws on the premise that God is a substance to demonstrate that God exists. But the consequence is contained in the premise, because substances must exist. Thus, Spinoza

relies on the conclusion of his argument in the premises of his argument. Upon inspection, therefore, the argument appears simply to be that there is a self-causing entity which exists, and that this “explains” why God exists. This is question-begging.

Spinoza has several tools at his disposal for responding to the question-begging objection to substance monism, as we shall see with the follow-up ontological arguments.

A further objection to this demonstration concerns the fact that the premises involved in 1p11d1 apply to any substance whatsoever and not only God or the substance with infinite or all attributes. As we saw, the argument for 1p11d1 involves appeals to 1a7 and 1p7. The latter, in turn, follows from 1d1 and 1p6c. Not one of these premises is restricted in its application. On the contrary, they apply without restriction to any substance whatsoever. Hence, 1p11d1 would seem to demonstrate the necessary existence of any substance. This objection, the non-divine substance objection, suggests outright that 1p11d1 will not stand on its own.

Part 3: Spinoza’s Second Proof of God’s Existence

The second proof is not only more intricate and involved, but also it makes a much stronger case for God’s necessary existence:

For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence. For example, if a triangle exists, there must be a reason or cause why it exists; but if it does not exist, there must also be a reason or cause which prevents it from existing, or which takes its existence away.

But this reason, or cause, must either be contained in the nature of the thing, or be outside it. *E.g.*, the very nature of a square circle indicates the reason why it does not exist, *viz.* because it involves a contradiction. On the other hand, the reason why a substance exists also follows from its nature alone, because it involves existence (see 1p7). But the reason why a circle or triangle exists, or why it does not exist, does not follow from the nature of these things, but from the order of the whole of corporeal Nature. For from this [order] it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now or that it is impossible for it to exist now. These things are evident through themselves, but from them it follows that a thing necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents it from existing. Therefore, if there is no reason or cause which prevents God from existing, or which takes his existence away, it must certainly be inferred that he necessarily exists.

But if there were such a reason, or cause, it would have to be either in God’s very nature or outside it, *i.e.*, in another substance of another

nature. For if it were of the same nature, that very supposition would concede that God exists. But a substance which was of another nature [NS: than the divine] would have nothing in common with God (by 1p2), and therefore could neither give him existence nor take it away. Since, then, there can be, outside the divine nature, no reason, or, cause which takes away the divine existence, the reason will necessarily have to be in his nature itself, if indeed he does not exist. That is, his nature would involve a contradiction [NS: as in our second example]. But it is absurd to affirm this of a being absolutely infinite and supremely perfect. Therefore, there is no cause, or reason, either in God or outside God, which takes his existence away. And therefore, God necessarily exists, *Q.E.D.* [1p11d2]

As per the first sentence of the long demonstration, the key notion doing the real heavy-lifting for Spinoza's argument here is the so-called Principle of Sufficient Reason, or the belief that "for each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence [*cujuscunq̄ue rei assignari debet causa seu ratio tam cur existit quam cur non existit*]" and that "this reason, or cause, must either be contained in the nature of the thing, or be outside it [*hac vero ratio seu causa vel in natura rei contineri debet vel extra ipsam*]." Some remarks about the Principle of Sufficient Reason and its role are in order.

What "things" does Spinoza mean to designate when he writes (§3 of the above demonstration) that "these *things* are evident through themselves?" I believe that what Spinoza means to say is that the *examples* he adduces are evidently true through themselves, and that, in turn, this would tell us something about the Principle of Sufficient Reason's scope and strength. Thus, it would be evident that "the very nature" of a square circle "indicates" why there are no square circles, because any such nature evidently "involves" [*involvit*] (as in "implicates" or "implies") a contradiction. With his choice example, Spinoza likely means something trivial like the categorical statement "there are some square circles" is utter nonsense, because in proffering it we ascribe contradictory predicates to a subject, which only a madman could deny.

Upon closer inspection, Spinoza seems in fact to wish that we concede a further suppressed premise in the second version of the ontological argument for God's necessary existence:

(1p11d2's Suppressed Premise): Essences or natures themselves ground the intelligibility of propositions about essences or natures.

This is to say that Spinoza would have us grant that any essence or nature has some set of specifiable features that can be meaningfully picked out by propositional discourse. From this it follows that there cannot be any such essence or nature as “square circle,” since the essence or nature “square circle” grounds nothing intelligible.

Hence, illustratively, the contradiction is said by Spinoza to be “contained” in the essence or nature, and, furthermore, on Spinoza’s reasoning, the container is prior to that which is contained in it. In other words, the self-evident examples would suggest that Spinoza sees it as self-evident that we should concede that essences or natures: 1. obtain; and 2. yield intelligibility.

This would mean, however, that essences themselves are at the ground-level of Spinoza’s reasoning, and that the Principle of Sufficient Reason is extracted, as it were, from the fact that there are essences, not *vice versa*.

Thus, the nature of the “evidence” illustrates the following suppressed argument about the Principle of Sufficient Reason and is relevant to discussing God’s necessary existence:

(1p11d2’s Suppressed Argument): If there are reasons, this is because there are essences. Essences support some explanations, but not all explanations. There are essences of a certain sort; hence, there are reasons of a certain sort. What there is determines what can be intelligible.

The additional talk of causality given by the Principle of Sufficient Reason’s canonical form complicates this picture. Regardless, with the sub-argument in hand, Spinoza will then further claim that “a thing necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents it from existing.” This is a particularly counter-intuitive claim to make and recalls the oddity of the suggestion at 1p7d that for want of anything that might produce a substance, substance must produce itself. What about the lack of barriers to some thing’s existence suggest that some thing innately possesses the power to exist? Further, how is this claim in fact derivable from what has been seen?

Specifically, Spinoza must mean to suggest that the claim above follows if we additionally grant that either the reason or cause for a thing’s existence or non-existence is “contained” in the nature of the thing or remains “outside” it. From this, it would purportedly follow that if there is no reason “outside” the thing that prevents its existence, then there must be a reason

inside it to prevent it, if it does not exist; hence, conversely, if it exists, that must be because nothing “contained” in it prevents it.

Yet still, the reluctant reader may demur: what about the absence of an innate barrier to existence yields an innate reason or cause, *i.e.*, a real power, grounded in the nature of the thing itself? This difficulty in the argument will only be taken up with the third proof, when Spinoza explicitly treats of how divine power relates to divine unity and divine existence.⁶

In any case, the key take-away from the opening argument and appeal to the Principle of Sufficient Reason consists in the claim that to establish necessary existence we must first establish that which the essence or nature itself grounds, or “contains”. As we continue to follow Spinoza in his second ontological argument, this feature of the argument becomes even more salient. On the one hand, it is because a substance’s nature “contains” everything relevant to its existence that nothing “outside” it can act as a barrier to its existence. The argument relies on a simple affirmation: no two substances can interact, because no two substances have anything in common, since any substance is conceived through itself. Hence, “a substance which was of another nature [...] could neither give him existence nor take it away.”

What of contrary reasons or causes “contained inside” the divine nature? Alas, Spinoza does not have much to say, besides exclaiming that “it is absurd to affirm this [read: that “his nature would involve a contradiction”] of a Being absolutely infinite and supremely perfect.” What about being “absolutely infinite” and “supremely perfect” prohibits having a reason or cause that would itself prohibit existence? The term “supremely” is particularly difficult to grapple with, since it is not clear whether this means having all perfections or merely having only those perfections that can be had in some full-bodied way. Conceivably, two perfections (or, perhaps, realities or qualities) could be contrary, depending on what perfections one admits of God. Traditionally, for instance, omnipotence and divine benevolence appear at odds, whence the problem of divine theodicy.

In short, Spinoza’s suggestion that it is “absurd” that a “being absolutely infinite and supremely perfect” could have a nature that “involves a contradiction” depends for its cogency on a specifically Spinozist understanding of what constitutes a perfection, and it further implies

⁶ Spinoza’s views on “Power” (*potestas*) and how they differ from his views on “power” (*potentia*) are heavily debated in the French and Italian literature, but I do not intend on engaging in that exegesis here, primarily because I do not find the distinction to be essential for understanding Spinoza’s understanding of divine power and how divine power relates to divine unity and existence. For discussion, see Antonio Negri, *L’anomalia selvaggia: Saggio su potere e Potenza in Baruch Spinoza* (Milan: M.B.P, 1982). For criticism, see Charles Ramond, *Le Dictionnaire Spinoza*, entry “Pouvoir/Puissance” (Paris: Ellipses, 2007).

that certain features or perfections traditionally ascribed to the divine entity do not, in fact, pertain to it, such as benevolence, freedom of the will, *etc.* (The fourth and final proof will return to the issue of divine “perfection”.)

Part 4: Spinoza’s Third Proof of God’s Existence

The third proof inaugurates a further angle of approach to an underlying issue that remained unanalyzed in the second ontological argument and that will receive abundant treatment in the fourth and final argument. This concerns the innate and indwelling power of the divine entity to exist, and not merely the absence of any innate impediment to divine existence. The third demonstration thus reads:

To be able not to exist is to lack power, and conversely, to be able to exist is to have power (as is known through itself). So, if what now necessarily exists are only finite beings, then finite beings are more powerful than an absolutely infinite Being. But this, as is known through itself, is absurd. So, either nothing exists or an absolutely infinite being also exists. But we exist, either in ourselves, or in something else, which necessarily exists (see 1a1 and 1p7). Therefore an absolutely infinite Being—*i.e.* (by 1d6), God—necessarily exists, *Q.E.D.* [1p11d3]

Spinoza qualifies this discussion of God’s existence in the following scholium as “*a posteriori*” and judges it easier to grasp than the *a priori* counterpart that will receive its treatment in that scholium. The first element in the discussion here is the important view that “to be able not to exist is to lack power” and “to be able to exist is to have power”. Hence, it follows that the entity with necessary existence has the most power. Spinoza is clearly right to maintain that these are logically converse propositions, but it’s not clear why he asserts that it is “known through itself” that this set of converse propositions is valid. It suggests that the underlying suppressed premise is accepted by all, namely:

(1p11d3’s Suppressed Premise): Power is a requisite of actual existence.

Put thusly, the suppressed premise appears trivial. Why note that existence requires the power to exist, since its negation is patently self-contradictory? Stated otherwise: if something does not have *possible* existence — read: if there is no possible world in which the thing exists, and it is metaphysically impossible that it exists — how could it have *actual* existence, granted that *actual* existence is *possible* existence with some additional feature, or that the *actual* world is one *possible*

world? (Even if no other world is in fact possible, as Spinoza would argue, it does not follow that the actual world is not “possible” whatsoever, whatever that would mean, but rather that the actual world is the *only* possible world.)

In papers dating from 1676 and onwards, such as in his *Quod Ens perfectissimum existit*, Leibniz draws attention this suppressed premise in the argument, and rightly so. Leibniz helps us to see the interest of the suppressed premise, for it tacitly further suggests that, on Spinoza's accounts, we have already granted that God has possible existence, or that the divine entity is possible.

Let us leave the Leibnizian point to the side, however, and further analyze the next element in Spinoza's *a posteriori* argument. Spinoza writes that “if what now necessarily exists are only finite beings, then finite beings are more powerful than an absolutely infinite Being.” The wording is off-putting but should not trouble us too much. Spinoza did not intend to maintain that finite beings necessarily exist. Rather, Spinoza wants to compare the power of what can *possibly* exist and cannot *not* exist with the power of finite things which, *actually* existing, must be able to *possibly* exist, but which also *possibly* could not exist. Now, it would be allegedly “known through itself” that the latter cannot be “more powerful” than the former. Therefore, since finite things actually exist (such as human beings), that which is “more powerful” must also exist, namely God.

Part 5: Spinoza's Fourth Proof of God's Existence

It is in the fourth and final demonstration (a scholium, in fact) that the most original and most sophisticated of Spinoza's versions of the proof of God's existence is laid out. As with the previous *a posteriori* argument, here the discussion pivots on the Spinozist notion of power, which imbues it with a certain originality and force:

In this last demonstration I wanted to show God's existence *a posteriori*, so that the demonstration would be perceived more easily—but not because God's existence does not follow *a priori* from the same foundation. For since being able to exist is power, it follows that the more reality belongs to the nature of a thing, the more powers it has, of itself, to exist. Therefore, an absolutely infinite Being, or God, has, of himself, an absolutely infinite power of existing. For that reason, he exists absolutely.

Still, there may be many who will not easily be able to see how evident this demonstration is, because they have been accustomed to contemplate only those things that flow from external causes. And of these, they see that those which quickly come to be, *i.e.*, which easily

exist, also easily perish. And conversely, they judge that those things to which they conceive more things to pertain are more difficult to do, *i.e.*, that they do not exist so easily. But to free them from these prejudices, I have no need to show here in what manner this proposition—what quickly comes to be, quickly perishes—is true, nor whether or not all things are equally easy in respect to the whole of Nature. It is sufficient to note only this, that I am not here speaking of things that come to be from external causes, but only of substances that (by 1p6) can be produced by no external cause.

For things that come to be from external causes—whether they consist of many parts or of few—owe all the perfection or reality they have to the power of the external cause; and therefore their existence arises only from the perfection of their external cause, and not from their own perfection. On the other hand, whatever perfection substance has is not owed to any external cause. So its existence must follow from its nature alone; hence its existence is nothing but its essence.

Perfection, therefore, does not take away the existence of a thing, but on the contrary asserts it. But imperfection takes it away. So there is nothing of whose existence we can be more certain than we are of the existence of an absolutely infinite, or perfect, being—*i.e.*, God. For since his essence excludes all imperfection, and involves absolute perfection, by that very fact it takes away every cause of doubting his existence, and gives the greatest certainty concerning it. I believe this will be clear even to those who are only moderately attentive. [1p11s]

There are three key premises in this *a priori* argument for God's necessary existence:

- (1) “[...] since being able to exist is power, it follows that the more reality belongs to the nature of a thing, the more powers it has, of itself, to exist.”
- (2) “[...] things that come to be from external causes—whether they consist of many parts or of few—owe all the perfection or reality they have to the power of the external cause; and therefore their existence arises only from the perfection of their external cause, and not from their own perfection.”

From these, Spinoza then further derives the claim that:

- (3) “[...] Perfection, therefore, does not take away the existence of a thing, but on the contrary asserts it. But imperfection takes it away.”

It is due to the equivalence established in premise (2) between “perfection” and “reality” that Spinoza can assert that, in view of premise (1), premise (3) holds. An additional important feature of premise (2) concerns the clarification that if something “comes to be” from an external cause, it owes its “perfection” or “reality” to the “power” of the external cause; hence, its “existence” arises from the “perfection” of the external cause. Here, Spinoza runs together “existence”, “perfection”, “reality”, and “power”.

What then is the precise conceptual content of the notion of power brought to bear on Spinoza's fourth ontological argument? It is difficult to pin down exactly without evoking several other equivalent (and equally elusive) terms like “perfection” or “reality” or “existence.”

I suspect that evincing the underlying and unique causal structure of things might be, for Spinoza, the key motivating issue here.

A theory of substance as causally powerful is nothing new. Created substances play key roles as natural agents of causation and thus as powerful entities in the world of his predecessors, some of whom took it as self-evident that substances must be powerful. Aquinas, for example, maintains without hesitation that:

The powers of the soul are its natural properties. But the subject is the cause of its proper accidents, whence also it is included in the definition of accident. Therefore the powers of the soul proceed from its essence as their cause. [*Sum. Theol.*, Ia, qu. 77, art. 6]

Aquinas continues to note that “all the powers of the soul, flow from the soul, as from their principle” [*Sum. Theol.*, Ia, qu. 77, art. 6, resp.]. Again, he maintains that the “emanation of a substance's proper accidents [*emenatio propriorum accidentium ad subjecto*] does not happen by some transformation, but is a natural result, in the way that one thing naturally results from another, such as color from light” [*Sum. Theol.*, Ia, qu. 77, art. 6, resp.].

Looking ahead in Spinoza's *Ethics*, we find that he puts the view of substance's (causal) power to extensive use. For instance, according to 2p7, we find that this causal structure is one and the same across anything that belongs to substance, like its essential qualities, or attributes. This is called the ‘parallelism’ doctrine. Thus, the fact that God's *power* of acting and *power* of

thinking, for example, are one and the same (2p7c), follows from the fact that there is only one causal structure underlying things. Moreover, Spinoza's discussions of God's *power* to exist in 1p11s show us that Spinoza's fully developed argument for God's necessary existence involves the identification of God's *reality* or *perfection* being unbounded with God's *power* being unbounded.

A second issue also bears underscoring. Spinoza's discussions of the unique substance's "power to exist" recall the view on substance espoused by Descartes in *Principles of Philosophy* I.51. For Descartes, only God is a substance in the sense put forth at Principles I.51, because God is the only substance that exists without the "concurrence" of another substance. Descartes wrote that:

By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God's concurrence. [Principles I.51 / AT VIII A 25 / CSM I 210]

Spinoza's view in 1p11s of God as necessary existent belongs to this tradition of discussions of how if we think of substance as subsisting or existing by its own power, then certainly, God is the only substance, since all other "substances" are causally created by God.

To return to Spinoza's line of argument itself, unlike in the second ontological argument examined above, where Spinoza contented himself with showing that no "cause or reason" can be "contained" within the divine nature that forbids its existence (read: the divine essence cannot be contradictory), here the aim is to show that some cause or reason compels divine existence from within and that this cause or reason pertains to the divine essence. That "cause or reason" is implicated in the Spinozist concept of a thing's indwelling power as requisite for its possible existence. Premise (1) is particularly noteworthy in this regard, since it shows that, for Spinoza, a thing's amount of power equals the thing's amount of reality.

This suggests an embrace of what is sometimes called the Principle of Plenitude. Broadly stated, the view would be that the divine nature "involves" (as in "implicates" or "implies" or "contains") the most amount of reality or perfection, and therefore, that it has the greatest claim on existence or the greatest power to exist vis-à-vis any other contender or possible substance.⁷

⁷ For discussion of the claim that reality, for Spinoza, is quantifiable, see Ramond, *Qualité et quantité*, esp. Ch. 1.

This suggests a *very* odd sounding view, however, as if some essences, or merely possible substances with fewer than infinite attributes, struggled amongst themselves to achieve existence and fell short of winning the right to exist.

Leibniz's commentary on the direct relationship between "quantity of essence" and "possible existence" put forth in his *De Rerum Originatione Radicali* [1697] underscores a similar problematic to the one latent in Spinoza's discussion of God's necessary existence:

First, from the fact that something exists rather than nothing, we must acknowledge that there is a certain urge [*exigentia*] for existence or (so to speak) a straining [*praetensio*] towards existing in possible things or in possibility or essence itself. Put briefly, essence in and of itself [*per se*] strives for existence. Whence it follows in turn that all possibles [*possibilia*] or things expressing essence or possible reality strive for existence with a right [*jure*] proportional to [their] quantity of essence or reality, or to the grade of perfection which they involve; for perfection is nothing but quantity of essence.

Hence, as manifestly as can be, it is understood that, out of the infinite combinations of possibles [*possibilia*] and possible series, that exists through which the greatest quantity of essence or possibility is brought into existence.⁸ [G VIII 302-308]

Though insightful by way of comparison and though useful as a heuristic tool, it is implausible that Spinoza would have shared Leibniz's view and conceived of *possibilia* as waging a total war amongst themselves of winner-takes-all existence, the strongest, the one with the most amount of perfection or reality, being the one that prevails. (Though, to be fair, it is equally implausible that Leibniz genuinely believed that mere *possibilia* do anything at all, strictly speaking.) Yet in a letter sent to Johannes Hudde from Voorburg in June 1666, Spinoza does give some clue as to how the understanding involved in 1p11s of the strivings of hypothetical substances might be understood naturalistically, that is if we construe these strivings in terms of what a given nature "requires":

Since the nature of God does not consist in a definite kind of being, but in a being which is absolutely unlimited [*indeterminatum*], his nature also requires [*exigit*] everything which expresses *being* [*esse*] perfectly, since otherwise his nature would be limited and deficient. [Ep. 36]

⁸ G. W. Leibniz, "On the Ultimate Origin of Things", in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1989), 150 [translation modified].

We may gather that when Spinoza states that God “requires” or “demands” such-and-such Spinoza means that it is a law of nature that such-and-such follows from God. We also know that what expresses being, for Spinoza, is called an “attribute”. Hence, cashing in the metaphor above, we may paraphrase Spinoza as holding that it is a law of nature that the essence of a substance constituted by any attribute infinite in its kind is also constituted by all other attributes. So, it is a law of nature that the maximally real substance obtains. In other words, the Principle of Plenitude had been only stated figuratively and illustratively. Thus, granted that every substance must have an essence constituted by some attribute, the substance with the maximal number of attributes excludes other substances from existing, since no substances share attributes.

Part 6: Spinoza’s No Shared Attribute Argument

This brings us at last to return to the argument for substance monism stated at 1p14 and Premise (2) in the reconstructed argument for substance monism. Recall that (2) states that there cannot be two substances that share some attribute in common. Spinoza specifically advances this claim at 1p5. Its demonstration appeals to a special case of the so-called Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles. It appears to be put forth at 1p4d as well. Some remarks about these very early propositions, and the great difficulties in understanding Spinoza on this crucial point, are in order.

Let us begin with a general philosophical remark and ponder briefly the plausibility of holding that Spinoza embraces the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles. According to the principle, qualitative identity implies numerical identity. In conjunction with the less controversial Principle of Indiscernibility of Identicals, or the view that numerical identity implies qualitative identity, it is involved in the bi-conditional principle called Leibniz’s Law, according to which numerical identity is co-existence with qualitative identity. The Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles suggests that no two things can have all the exact same properties and that two individual things cannot differ *solo numero*. Likewise, the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles suggests that qualitatively identical things cannot be individuated. This principle readily lends itself to believe in the purely qualitative constitution of things, a belief Robert Adams has baptized the belief in “primitive suchness,” to be contrasted with the belief in “primitive” and “nonqualitative” (along with, presumably, non-descriptive) “thisness” or

haecceitas of things.⁹ Following J. M. E. McTaggart, we may also refer to the same principle as the Dissimilarity of the Diverse, or the fact that if x and y are distinct then there is at least one property that x has and y does not or *vice versa*.¹⁰ Some, such as Michael Della Rocca, have maintained that the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles can be understood as derivable from the Principle of Sufficient Reason.¹¹ On this understanding of the roots of the former principle, it is because no reason or explanation can be given for the non-identity of two things which share all of their properties or features that the former principle holds.

Is it plausible to suggest that Spinoza embraces such a principle, even though he does not state it formally? Perhaps so. If attributes or essential natures, *i.e.* a qualitative constitution, did not exhaust the individuation of substances, then there could indeed be primitive, perhaps conceptually inaccessible substances distinct from that substance which has all attributes. There is some debate now whether Spinoza extends his embrace of the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles across his metaphysics, particularly with regards to his strange view that the mind and the body are one and the same, which on its own suggests that numerically identical things do not need share all their properties. But this does not concern us here. Let us now turn to the propositions in question. According to 1p4:

Two or more distinct things are distinguished from one another, either by a difference in the attributes of the substances or by a difference in their affections. [1p4]

The demonstration reads:

Whatever is, is either in itself or in another (by 1a1), *i.e.* (by 1d3 and 1d5), outside the intellect there is nothing except substances and their affections. Therefore, there is nothing outside the intellect through which a number of things can be distinguished from one another except substances, or [*sive*] what is the same (by 1d4), their attributes, and their affections, *Q.E.D.* [1p4d]

Of special note is the strict identification Spinoza makes in the demonstration of “substances” and “their attributes.” Spinoza will draw dramatic conclusions from this premise in the following proposition. The vagueness of 1p4’s wording can be dissipated if we accept that by “distinct things” Spinoza means to refer to substances themselves.

⁹ Robert Merrihew Adams, “Primitive Thisness and Primitive Identity”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 76:1 (1979): 5-26.

¹⁰ J. M. E. McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, ed. C. D. Broad, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 101.

¹¹ Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza*. London: Routledge, 2008.

The claim here, then, is that two substances can only be distinguished from one another by virtue of some qualitative difference, or difference in properties — a difference in the substances’ attributes, and therefore a difference in the very essence or nature of the substances, or a difference in the substances’ affections.

The demonstration is also interesting in that here we find that Spinoza sees as equivalent the metaphysical view that everything that is must be in itself or in another, and the entities expounded in his ontology, namely substance and mode. Attribute is superfluous in this regard, since it is only that which the intellect picks out as the nature of substance. Likewise, because conception and existence are equipollent in the realm of Spinoza’s ground-level ontology (a substance is “in itself” and “conceived through itself,” whereas a mode is “in another” and “conceive through another”), one can see 1p4d as licensing the view that Spinoza’s embrace of the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles is in some respect motivated by his commitment to the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

1p5 itself is intriguing, but difficult to set straight. 1p5 is the first proposition of the *Ethics* that a genuine Cartesian (or Aristotelian, for that matter) would refuse to countenance. According to 1p5:

In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature
or [*sive*] attribute. [1p5]

The demonstration reads:

If there were two or more distinct substances, they would have to be distinguished from one another either by a difference in their attributes, or by a difference in their affections (by 1p4). If only by a difference in their attributes, then it will be conceded that there is only one of the same attribute. But if by a difference in their affections, then since a substance is prior in nature to its affections (by 1p1), if the affections are put to one side and [the substance] is considered in itself, *i.e.* (by 1d3 and 1a6), considered truly, one cannot be conceived to be distinguished from another, *i.e.* (by 1p4), there cannot be many, but only one [of the same nature or attribute], *Q.E.D.* [1p5d]

The most persistent issue in the literature about the demonstration is understanding why Spinoza thinks he is entitled to take the affections of substance and “put them to one side” in his discussion of what allows for distinct substances to obtain. The feeling is, of course, that Spinoza has merely “put to one side” the very question that needed answering. For if there were two

substances that shared some attribute, but had different affections conceived under that attribute, should we not say these were distinct substances? Let us call this the affections objection.

Another persistent issue in the literature concerns the objection, originally made by Leibniz, that even we concede that a substance cannot share all of its attributes with another substance, perhaps two substances can share some attributes in common, but have others they do not share, through which they are distinguished. Read: substance a might have attributes x and y and substance b might have attributes y and z . Hence, there would be in nature two substances of the same attribute (y), though the two substances would also each hold a second attribute not in common (a has x and b has z), thus remaining distinct. Let us call this the second attribute objection.

Let us address these two objections in turn. In fact, resolving the one will immediately allow us to resolve the other, since both objections can be resolved if we understand that, for Spinoza, attribute exhaustively constitutes the nature of substance.

Take the affections objection. The reason Spinoza feels entitled to put the affections “to one side” is that, as he writes, substance is prior in nature to its affections, and whereas the latter are conceived through it, the former is always conceived through itself. Now, the affections themselves are merely expressions of the attributes. This is to say that a distribution of differences in the affections of attributes is reducible to a distribution of differences in the natures of attributes. Implicitly, Spinoza reasons that only distributions of differences among the natures of attributes are meaningful for understanding differences in the natures of substance. The differences in the affections of attributes only cut so deep, and thus, Spinoza can set them to the side without begging the question. Is Spinoza thereby forced to concede that affections are mere accidents, as in they are inessential to understanding the natures of substances? Not necessarily. The affections are not inessential expressions, or accidental, but they are still expressions, and thus we would do well, argues Spinoza, to see of what natures they are expressions.

Turning to the second attribute objection, again Spinoza's argument draws its force from the claim that whether a substance has a myriad of attributes (and an infinite substance will have infinite attributes, claims Spinoza), each of those attributes still exhausts the constitution of its nature. Hence, it is enough for substances to share any attribute for them to share natures. But

this contradicts the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles as set forth in 1p4. Thus, there cannot be substances which share some attribute in common.

We are therefore left with the necessary premise (2) for the reconstruction of the Spinozistic argument for substance monism. Some substance has infinite or all attributes. No substances can share attributes. There is only one substance.

Granted, this only begs a further question. How can some substance (read: God), with an infinity of attributes, still have one and the same essence or nature, such that any one of those attributes is an adequate expression of God's essence or nature, and such that we cannot conceive of another substance that shares any of the same attributes without thereby contradicting the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles?

Once more, the answer might be at hand in Spinoza's conception of power. On Spinoza's account, substance is power, or God's essence is his power (1p34). It is because of the strict identification of power and essence that the number of attributes which constitute the totality of attributes belonging to substance is irrelevant. The lawlike unfolding of substance, its innate power, also called "the order and connection of causes" (2p7) remains identical across attributes. Thus, the fact that attribute "constitutes" [*constituit*] the essence of substance (1d4) should be seen as a technical term, as meaning both "gives content to" and "adequately explains". Substance's power, as cause of itself, to unfold this essence that receives content expression *via* its attributes remains without impingement.

To briefly conclude, I will underscore two broad points that have emerged on my reading of the text. First, it is debatable whether Spinoza's *definition* of substance is original.¹² It seems not. What is more certain however is that Spinoza puts his understanding of substance to use in a novel fashion. I have attended to Spinoza's argument for substance monism, rather than his

¹² Wolfson, for one, does not think that it is. He takes this up in his discussion of the theory of mode, however. Spinoza's understanding of mode "strikes out a new line" *vis-à-vis* Aristotelian accident, "Spinoza's definition of substance contains nothing new"; rather, "he only restricts its application by firmly insisting upon its rigid logical meaning" (*Philosophy of Spinoza*, 66). Note that, for Wolfson, when the Aristotelians say that "a concrete object exists in something else," this may mean either that a body exists in a place or a part exists in a whole (69). For Spinoza, on the other hand, that there is no such thing as a finite substance means that "everything that is in something else in any sense or manner" cannot be a substance (71). Thus, it is merely a rigid application of substance, as being, on Wolfson's view of Spinoza, "only that which is really and absolutely in itself" or "God" (71). Wolfson understands the replacement of "accident" by "mode" to mean something more meaningful, which is that accidents require subjects, but substance is no subject (72); it is a *summum genus*; it is inconceivable and unknowable; it is conceived through itself, which means it is not conceived (76). For a rebuttal of Wolfson's view on substance as *summum genus*, see Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, Ch. 1. Although I agree with Curley's interpretation of this as unacceptable, largely because it turns substance into a universal, *contra* Spinoza, nonetheless, I find congenial Wolfson's view that Spinoza's originality consists in his rigid *application* of the notion of substance, *and not in forging a new concept of substance*.

definition of substance. It is in Spinoza's argument for there being one substance that his originality is salient; and it is in the fact that he takes this argument as essential for his broader moral and political philosophy wherein largely lies the scandal according to his immediate posterity. Admittedly, I do not profess to know how we may accurately characterize this one-of-a-kind divine substance for Spinoza. Certainly, a key element in that characterization, as witness in the demonstration, is *power*. Somewhere down the line, it seems that Spinoza thinks of the one divine substance as one divine power. Divine substance would thus be that one power that produces everything handed over to the senses or the mind. But this only invites further difficulties. If it is a power, how can a power remain the same while expressing itself in multiple ways?

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