

# ON BAYLE'S INTERPRETATION OF SPINOZA'S SUBSTANCE AND MODE

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## INTRODUCTION

There are two aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics that one must bear in mind when reading his philosophy. First, Spinoza understood that metaphysics is the study of the nature of reality, of the nature of Being; and as such, Spinoza was concerned with questions such as: How do things exist? What exists? and Why do they exist? The other aspect is that Spinoza belonged to the philosophical tradition that understood that philosophy had to be systematic. That is, out of one single and simple principle one must be able to deduce a whole philosophical system (and Hegel is probably the last philosopher in this philosophical tradition). For Spinoza the concept of substance is such a principle, and as such, he defended the idea of a monistic metaphysical system, i.e. substance is the simple principle out of which the whole of Reality is to be deduced. That is to say that he strongly maintained throughout his writings that i. one, and only one substance exists, ii. that God or Nature is a substance, and iii. that all that exists is a modification of the substance. There is, however, much debate among commentators regarding the meaning of the concepts of substance and mode, and of the inter-relation between these terms. In this paper I wish to assess the very first published interpretation of Spinoza's thought, namely, that of Pierre Bayle in his *Dictionnaire Critique et Historique* where he portrays Spinoza as a Cartesian.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation was very

influential from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the *Dictionnaire* was translated into various European languages and became standard reading in most European Universities. As such, it could be said that Bayle is largely responsible for much of the misunderstanding that surrounded Spinoza's philosophy in that age. The connection between the reception and the eventual fate of philosophical system is not always appreciated but it is no unimportant element for as Schröder (1996:157) writes: *the understanding and the reception of a philosopher's work depends to no little extent on the way in which earlier interpreters and especially his disciples represented it - that is to say, the Dutch Spinozists of the late 17th and early 18th century - influenced the fortune of their Master's philosophy abroad.* Most modern commentators would not subscribe to Bayle's interpretation as it has been discredited due to its clear misinterpretation of some of Spinoza's views. In fact, it has been noted recently that Spinoza himself would reject his own views would then incur the implications inferred by Bayle in the *Dictionnaire* (cf. Curley 1969:13; Nadler 2008:56).

**(CONTINUATION OF NOTE 1)** name had been banned under the Anti-Socinian Act of 1653, which was the foundation for all intellectual censorship in the Dutch Republic. One such documented case is: Adriaan Koerbagh, a medical doctor and jurist, who wrote two books on the education of the Dutch people; he was arrested and questioned by the police on the 20<sup>th</sup> July 1668 and confirmed that his books concealed Spinozist ideas (cf. Siebrand 1988:13). Socinianism (from the Latin *socius* – 'companion') held the views that i. Christ was human and not divine, ii. that human beings possess free will and thus it preached against the Lutheran idea of predestination, iii. argued in favour of pacifism and against all wars, iv. argued for the separation of church and state, and v. argued in favour of reason over dogma. Thus, it is easy to see why Spinoza's *Tractatus*, and the *Ethics*, were banned under the Anti-Socinian Act, since Spinoza held at least i., iv., and v.

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<sup>1</sup> Bayle's is the very first interpretation of Spinoza's thought to name Spinoza explicitly. Earlier commentaries did not mention the name of Spinoza or explicitly allude to his thought for Spinoza's works and **(TO BE CONTINUED)**

There is, however, a temptation to read Spinoza as a Cartesian because he makes use of much Cartesian terminology, such as substance and mode. Such a reading would be partially accurate because Spinoza is the most prominent philosopher that appeared just after Descartes, and as such he was influenced by and commented on Cartesian philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Spinoza use of terminology, such as substance and mode is directly related to this. However, and this is the crucial point here, Spinoza changed the meaning of, as well as changing the inter-relation between, those terms – for he further developed those Cartesian and Scholastic concepts as I shall demonstrate later in this paper. This point is vital to demonstrate that Bayle misinterpreted Spinoza's doctrine of substance and mode and that his reading must be rejected as a proper interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy.

#### CARTESIAN AND SCHOLASTIC PHILOSOPHY: TWO POINTS

Before assessing Bayle's interpretation of Spinoza's concepts of substance and mode, I wish to make two points regarding Cartesian and Scholastic philosophy, since Bayle reads Spinoza as falling under this tradition. The first point concerns the Cartesian and Scholastics' understanding of Metaphysics. Cartesians and Scholastics held the view that there is the supernatural realm, which God inhabits, and the natural realm, where God's created extended and mental substances exist. Thus, for Cartesians and Scholastics, Metaphysics is both concerned with the natural realm through a study of the nature of our reality and with the supernatural realm through the study of the nature of God, souls and immortality. This is in direct contrast with Spinoza's views. In Spinoza's metaphysical system one finds only the natural realm. Spinoza's system does not provide for a supernatural system. Certainly, there is talk of God. But one must remember that Spinoza's God

is a naturalised entity. Spinoza's God is Nature, the whole of Nature (i.e. nature as the essence of everything that exists – *natura naturans*, and nature as a physical self-contained system – *natura naturata*; cf. E I p29).<sup>3</sup> It is therefore generally agreed that Spinoza defended a pantheistic view of the world (cf. Hampshire 1953:36; Priest 1991:160), and thus the absence of a supernatural realm. For Spinoza all that exists is this divinised realm inhabited by us.

The second point concerns the Cartesian and Scholastic understanding of the concepts of substance and mode (and modes are sometimes called accidents). Cartesians and Scholastics held the view that God created two kinds of substances, the mental substance and the extended substance, i.e. God wills the existence of these two substances and therefore these substances depend on God for their existence.

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<sup>3</sup> E I p29 note says: : ...I would wish to remind you...what we must understand by active and passive nature (*natura naturans* and *natura naturata*)...by *natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself ... but by *natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature, or from any of God's attributes, i.e. all the modes of God's attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God).

Chau (1999:56-57) makes an interesting point regarding the role of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* within Spinoza's system by drawing an analogy. She links Spinoza's views to the scientific revolution in optics at the time. Chau argues that in Latin there is a difference between *lux*, i.e. the source of light, and *lumen*, i.e. light which illuminates the objects around the source of light. This difference has been forgotten by modern languages, however, it is certain that Spinoza was familiar with both terms as he was fluent in Latin. Chau's point is that just as in optics there is a difference between the source of light (*lux*) and light itself (*lumen*), there is also a difference between God as creator, i.e. active and immanent and the essence to all things – *natura naturans*, and God as creation, i.e. passive and conceived forming a self-contained system – *natura naturata*. This is possibly one of Spinoza's greatest insights for if reality is conceived simply as product (*natura naturata*), then reality would be at rest, there would be no changes in reality. The idea of changes in reality requires an active and productive element, that which Spinoza calls *natura naturans*. This is to say that the very fact that reality is so dynamic requires the substance, God or nature, to be seen as both product (*natura naturata*) and as producer (*natura naturans*).

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<sup>2</sup> Spinoza only published two books during his life time, namely the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) and *The Principles of Descartes's Philosophy* (1663). The former was initially written for a young man of whom Spinoza was tutor, the latter was published anonymously at Amsterdam. The *Ethics*, which is considered his major work, was only published posthumously in 1677.

They were also pluralists about these two created substances as they maintained that there is a plurality of these two kinds of substance. There are a number of mental substances insofar as there is a plurality of soul like entities and (tokens) of thoughts and also a plurality of extended substances insofar as there is a plurality of different extended bodies in the world. These modifications of the mental and extended substances, that is, soul like entities and bodies are the modes of the substance. The relation between the substance and its modes, for the Cartesian and Scholastic, is a relation analogous to the grammatical relation of subject and predicate. The substance is where the properties inhere. For them, one cannot see the substance one can only see the properties that inhere in it. The Cartesian and Scholastic hold that if God had not created the mental and extended substance the properties would have no subject in which to inhere. Let us look at an example. Let us suppose that I am holding a piece of the extended substance in my hand. The properties inhering in this substance are: it is reddish on the outside, it is whitish inside, it is tasty, it is roughly round. What is this? This is an apple. The properties inhering in a token of the (mental or extended) substance modify this substance, and thus the origin of the term mode or accident. I will come back to this point later in this paper when I will discuss Spinoza's understanding of the concept of substance.

#### **BAYLE'S INTERPRETATION**

Bayle's interpretation understands that Spinoza used terms such as 'substance' and 'modes' in much the same way as Descartes and other seventeenth century philosophers and the Scholastics did. And because Bayle understands Spinoza to be a Cartesian, he is very critical of Spinoza because he (Bayle) understood that Spinoza's monism, his doctrine that only one substance exists, incurred a number of absurdities, which undermined Spinoza's whole philosophical system.

Bayle (1997:221) understood that "*Spinoza taught, 1. that there is but one only substance in the Universe, 2. that this substance is God, 3. that*

*all particular beings,..., the sun, the moon,...are modifications of God*", and anyone who is acquainted with Spinoza's thought would agree with Bayle here. However, one of the problems with Bayle's interpretation lies in his understanding of the relation between substance and mode within Spinoza's thought. On commenting on the relation between substance and mode Bayle (1997:221) writes: "*It is the general doctrine of Philosophers, that the idea of Being contains two species under it, viz. substance and accident (mode), and that a substance subsists by itself,..., and that an accident subsists in another Being. They add that subsisting by one's self, signifies only not depending upon a subject of inhesion;...As for accidents (modes),..., they essentially depend upon their subject of inhesion...*". Bayle understands that philosophers in general (that is, philosophers of his age) hold that substance is whatever is independent and corresponds to a subject, as opposed to a mode, which is whatever is dependent and corresponds to a predicate. This is a very Cartesian and Scholastic understanding of substance and mode as I argued previously. It follows that Bayle held that Spinoza understood that substance is an independent entity, which served as the subject in which different properties or qualities (i.e. modes or modifications or accidents) inhere; and because substances are supposed to be independent, substances do not inhere in anything, but themselves; modes, on the contrary, are dependent, that is, a mode is supposed to inhere in a substance and it cannot exist without that very substance in which it inheres. The following passage from Bayle (1997:221) corroborates this as he explicitly says that Spinoza is a Cartesian. I quote: "*Descartes, Gassendus, and in general, all those who have forsaken the scholastic philosophy, deny that an accident (mode) can be separated from its subject, so as to subsist after its separation, and they give to all accident (mode) the nature of those that were called modes, and use the terms, mode, modality, or modification, rather than accident. Now since Spinoza was a Cartesian, it is reasonable to think that he put the same sense upon those words as Descartes did*".

The fundamental issue with Bayle's reading is that he holds that the term 'substance' is analogous to the grammatical term 'subject' and

the term 'mode' is analogous to the grammatical term 'predicate', that is, the relation between substance and mode is analogous to the relation between a subject and its predicate. Accordingly, Bayle understands that when Spinoza asserts that there is only one substance, which is God or Nature, and that everything else in the world is a modification of this substance, that Spinoza is asserting that God is the sole subject in which properties or qualities inhere, and that everything in the world is a property or quality of God.

Bayle argues that such a conception of substance is mistaken because it will lead to a number of absurdities. The first absurdity is described by Bayle (1997:211) when he writes: *"But to affirm that men are modifications of the one and the same Being, that consequently God only acts, and that the same individual God being modified into Turks and Hungarians,..., is to advance a thing more monstrous...than all delirious men shut up in mad-houses. Take particular notice that modes do nothing, and that substances only act and suffer...Thus, according to Spinoza's system, whoever says, 'the Germans have killed ten thousand Turks', speaks improperly and falsely, unless he means 'God modified into Germans has killed God modified into ten thousand Turks': and therefore all phrases made use of to express what men do one against another, have no other true sense but this, 'God hates himself', 'he asks favours of himself', and 'he refutes them to himself'..."*. By holding that Spinoza understood that a substance is a subject and a mode is a predicate, Bayle argues that Spinoza's thought is inconsistent because it allows the absurd consequence that God ends up being the sole agent as well as the sole patient in the world. Just for the sake of providing the reader with a further example following Bayle's line of argument, let us hold that there is only one substance, and that this substance is God, and that this substance is something like a subject. Moreover, that you, the reader, and I, are modifications of this unique substance, and thus we are something like qualities because we inhere in this substance. Since we are qualities of a substance we cannot be agents because we are predicates of a subject, and predicates do not act, only subjects do. Thus, if we were in

conversation one could say that sentences such as 'you are listening to me', really mean something like 'you are listening to God', because I am a mode or quality of God and therefore I cannot be an agent or a patient. Only God, as the only substance and subject, can be agent and patient. This can be taken further to something like 'God is listening to God', because you are also a mode or quality of God, and therefore you cannot be an agent or a patient, only God can.

The second absurdity is that by reading Spinoza in this light, Spinoza's substance, God, becomes extremely mutable or changeable. This consequence can only be drawn because Bayle assumes that there is a sort of transitivity between the properties which are possessed by a mode and the properties which are possessed by a substance, i.e. if M is a mode of substance S, then if M changes, it follows that S also changes. Let me demonstrate this with the following example: people die and are born all the time. Thus, it follows that the substance, God, is changing all the time because its modes, its qualities, are changing all the time. This has implications for the generally assumed theological premise that 'God is perfect'. If something is perfect it cannot be changing all the time. It is just perfect, it has achieved a state of perfection. And if it is still changing, then it cannot have achieved that state of perfection. I remind the reader here that this is a direct implication of Bayle's reading Spinoza as a Cartesian about modes and substance, and that it may not arise if a different reading of Spinoza is taken.<sup>4</sup>

The third implication follows directly from the above one. By reading Spinoza's concepts of substance and mode within a Cartesian framework the substance, God, will possess contradictory qualities. This is so because of Bayle's assumption that there is some sort of transitivity between the qualities which are possessed by a mode and the qualities which are

<sup>4</sup> It will suffice to say here that in different readings of Spinoza's substance and mode, such as the one by HA Wolfson, who reads Spinoza as an Aristotelian in his *The Philosophy of Spinoza* and Edwin Curley, who reads Spinoza in the light of modern physics in his *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, that this issue does not arise.

possessed by a substance. This allows for cases such as: M1 and M2 are modes of substance S; and M1 and M2 possess contradictory qualities; and therefore, following Bayle's assumption, S possesses contradictory qualities, which is illogical. For instance: at any given time some people are healthy, other people are sick; health and illness are contradictory qualities. But since people are qualities of God, then it follows that God is healthy and sick at the same time. That is, God possess contradictory qualities, which is a violation of logical laws (something like S is p and  $\neg$ p at time t). It is worth quoting here the following passage of Bayle (1997:209) where he hints at the problems of mutability in the substance: *"And yet it (God) is the most sensible and proper example that there can be given of a mutable Being, and actually liable to all sorts of alterations and internal changes...it follows, that the God of the Spinozists is a Being actually changing, that goes continually through several states internally and really different from another. It is not therefore the most perfect Being, with whom there is no variableness..."*

#### WHY SPINOZA WAS NOT A CARTESIAN ABOUT SUBSTANCE

I argue that Bayle's interpretation is consistent but mistaken. The problem with Bayle's interpretation is that it is based on the assumption that Spinoza is using the concepts of substance and mode in exactly the same way as the Cartesians and Scholastics did. I believe this to be a mistake, and therefore, it does not necessarily follow that Spinoza's system incurs the absurdities inferred by Bayle's interpretation. I shall now attempt to demonstrate that Spinoza did not follow the Cartesian and Scholastic terminology to the letter. Rather, he developed it further. If I am successful in my argumentation then I argue that Bayle's criticism are undermined and that his interpretation must be rejected.

It is my understanding that Bayle fails to acknowledge that Spinoza ascribes an extra element to his concept of substance and this is the second problem with his interpretation. That is, Spinoza asserts that a substance must be self-conceived, i.e. self-caused. Spinoza understands that a substance must not be conceived or caused

by anything else. If something is caused by something else it is not a substance but a mode or modification of the substance, I quote: *"Existence appertains to the nature of substance; Proof: A substance cannot be produced from anything else; it will therefore be its own cause"* (E I p7). This extra element is crucial in placing Spinoza's understanding of substance apart from the Cartesian's understanding of that same term. That is to say, that the Cartesian understands that the two kinds of substance (viz. mental and the extended) are not self-created but created by God, and dependent on God for their existence. In fact, this extra feature that Spinoza's substance possess, namely self-creation, disqualifies, generally speaking, all things that the Cartesian calls as substance. An entity which is not self-created and that depends for its existence on something else, such as the Cartesian mental and extended substances, is not a substance for Spinoza.

For Spinoza the mental and the extended are attributes of the substance. The substance has an infinite number of attributes, of which human beings can only access two, namely the mental and the extended (cf. E I p 11; ). An attribute is a complete and accurate account of the substance (cf. E I p 10; p 11), i.e. they are ways by which Reality can be described, e.g. one can describe Reality by referring solely to concepts – mental attribute of the substance, or one can describe Reality by referring solely to physical things – extended attribute. Human beings can do both of these things, and that is why human beings have access to the mental and extended attributes. It could be said that attributes are disturbances in the substance, they are disturbances of Being. Modes are created through the substance's attributes, and as such, the relation between the substance and its modes is a causal relation, i.e. the substance causes the modes to exist through its attributes (cf. Scruton 1999:12). For instance: the extended attribute is a disturbance in the substance and a body is a modification of that disturbance; or the mental attribute is a disturbance in the substance and a thought is a modification of that disturbance (cf. *The modes of any attribute of God have God for their cause only in so far as he is considered*

through that attribute, and not in so far as he is considered through any other attribute (E II p 7)). Accordingly, Bayle's interpretation faces two fatal mistakes. First, Bayle fails to acknowledge that Spinoza has, in fact, modified the Cartesian and Scholastic terminology, that Spinoza has modified the meaning of the concepts of mode and substance. Second, Bayle understands that within Spinoza's system the relation between substance and mode is a relation akin to a subject-predicate relation, but this is a mistake because for Spinoza modes are not *predicable* of his substance, and that is to say that modes are not qualities of the substance. Rather, for Spinoza, modes *depend on* the substance for their existence because the modes are conceived through the attributes of the substance, and this implies that the relation between the substance and its modes is a causal relation, which is implemented through the attributes of the substance. Therefore, Spinoza would never say that something is *predicable* of the substance, God, as Bayle presupposes; rather, Spinoza would only say that a thing *depends on* the substance, God, for its existence because it is caused by the substance, God, to exist.

I therefore have argued and now conclude that Bayle fails to acknowledge that Spinoza's concept of substance and mode are distinct from the Cartesian and Scholastic understanding of these terms as well as failing to understand that the relation between substance and mode is not akin to the relation between subject and predicate but akin to a causal relation, and as such, Bayle's interpretation must be rejected as it is an inaccurate account of Spinoza's views.



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