

TWO PROBLEMS WITH SPINOZA'S ARGUMENT FOR SUBSTANCE MONISM

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In Part I of the *ETHICS*, Spinoza presents his central metaphysical thesis that there is only one substance in the universe.¹ This substance is identified with God, or Nature, and is thought of as numerically one, infinite and necessarily existing. The argument for this conclusion is presented in propositions 1 to 14 that are each purported to be inferred from some combination of previous propositions, the definitions and the axioms. The conclusion of the argument is stated in IP14, "There can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God." IP5, "In the universe there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute", is crucial for the argument, as most commentators would agree²; this is because in order to prove that there is only one substance in the universe, Spinoza needs to rule out that there are two or more substances. The existence of two or more substances requires there being a way to distinguish them. There are then three possible scenarios, namely, either (a) two (or more) substances sharing every attribute, (b) two (or more) substances not sharing any attribute, and (c) two (or more) substances sharing some but not all attributes. Jonathan Bennett argues that, essentially, the argument for substance monism, the thesis that there is only one infinite and necessarily existing substance in the universe, rest on two premises.³ These are (1) "There must be a substance with every possible attribute", and (2) "There cannot be two substances with an attribute in common", from which the conclusion "There cannot be more than one substance" follows.⁴ I adopt Bennett's structure because in this essay I would like to argue that: (I) the demonstration of IP5 does not fully rule out scenarios (a) and (c) to the conclusion (2), and (II) although (1) rules out (b) (because there being a substance that has

all the possible attributes would make it impossible for a substance sharing no attribute with it to exist), Spinoza does not provide an independent argument to rule out (b) to the conclusion (1).

I will therefore attempt a reconstruction of the steps leading to the conclusion in IP14 focussing especially on IP5d in order to establish whether IP5d suffices to rule out (a) and (c) and whether (1) is justified. If I succeed it would seem unjustified for Spinoza to conclude that there cannot be more than one substance from the premises available.

In order to claim that there is only one substance, Spinoza needs to rule out that two or more substances exist. He starts by giving some definitions of substance, attribute and mode. His understanding of substance, "that which is in itself and is conceived through itself" (ID3) is closely related to his understanding of attribute, "that which the intellect perceives of substances as constituting its essence" (ID4), that it is possible to read some sort of identification between substances and attributes. In Bennett's view, Spinoza does not make a difference of content between substances and attributes, but only a difference of logical form, that is, in the way we use the concepts so that we can think of substance as *what has an attribute*, and of attribute as *what is had by a substance*.⁵ The attribute is, by being the essence of the substance, what Bennett calls "basic way of being".⁶ Nadler says, "[a]n attribute is the most general and underlying nature of a thing".⁷ This would mean that we conceive of a substance *as* being in a certain way; we could not conceive of the substance without conceiving what the substance *is*; though substance and attribute remain conceptually different. Modes on the other hand are defined as the "affections of a substance, that is, that which is in something else and is conceived through something else" (ID5). Modes

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¹ Spinoza (1677/2006).

² See for example, Bennett (1984), Curley (1988), Nadler (2006).

³ Bennett (1984), 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Bennett (1984), 63.

⁶ Bennett (1984), 61.

⁷ Nadler (2006), 56.

or affections are thus non-basic, particular and determinate ways of being which a substance can assume. Nadler explains, “the modes of a thing are concrete manifestations of the attribute or nature constituting the thing” and consequently they cannot be conceived without also conceiving the attribute of which they are a mode.⁸ An attribute determines the *kind* of modes by which it can be manifested, but does not determine that it will be manifested in some specific mode, for example, the attribute of extension in a substance does not determine what size, shape or colour that substance is going to have, though it does determine that whatever modes it has will be of the sort by which ‘extension’ is manifested.

After the definitions are presented the next step in the argument is to address the scenarios in which there are two or more substances. In IP4 Spinoza lays out a requirement for there being two or more distinct things in the universe, that is, that there be a way of differentiating them. He explains that there being nothing external to the intellect than substances/attributes and their affections, the only possible way of distinguishing two or more substances is either by a difference in their attributes or by a difference in their affections (IP4). Spinoza then proceeds to claim in IP5 that “In the universe there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute.” (IP5) Assuming this conclusion is correct would rule out (a) and possibly (c), though he does not explicitly mention the later possibility; I will discuss this argument in more depth later in the essay. From here Spinoza moves on to claim that a substance cannot be caused by another substance (IP6), because causation between substances would need them to have something in common (IP3). Therefore by IP2, understood as something like ‘unless two substance share attributes they have nothing in common’, and by IP5, it follows that substances cannot have anything in common, from which IP6 in turn follows.

In propositions 7 to 11, Spinoza develops a version of the ontological argument to prove the existence of a substance that necessarily exists based on the claims that this substance is self-caused (IP7), infinite (IP8), and has infinite attributes (IP9-11) to the conclusion expressed in P14 that “there can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God”. I am not concerned here with assessing the ontological argument, but with examining how (1), that is, “there

must be a substance with every possible attribute”, is obtained. Even if the ontological argument works here it seems clear to me that in that case we will only have a substance that necessarily exists, but we will not have a substance that possesses all the attributes. Spinoza arrives to the latter claim through arguing for the infinitude of the substances. The proof of IP8 claims that a substance could not be finite because to be so, “it would have to be limited by another substance of the same nature” (ID2) and since the existence of another substance of the same nature has been ruled out by IP5 then the substance exists as infinite. Note here that a substance will only be infinite “in its own kind” because, even if substances of other natures, i.e., other attributes exist, they could not be a limit to the former substance. There is no limitation across substances of different attributes. Therefore, establishing that substances are infinite in their own kind, still allows (b), that is, that different substances with different attributes could exist. Nadler agrees that after establishing IP8, “it is still possible that there are a great many substances, each with one attribute, each necessarily existing, each eternal, and each infinite in its own kind.”⁹ Nadler also points out that what Spinoza wants to have is not this ‘relative infinitude’ but ‘absolute infinitude’.¹⁰ The argument continues with a strange claim in IP9 that, “the more reality or being a thing has, the more attributes it has” with no further explanation but a reference to ID4. However, this proposition seems to lead Spinoza to claim in the scholium of IP10 that “in Nature there exist only one substance, *absolutely* infinite (my emphasis). But what ID4 implies is only that if the nature of a substance is such and such then, if it exists, it will have the attributes that would express that essence, that ‘way of being’. Therefore, if it is in the essence of a substance to possess all possible ways of being then, if it exists, that substance will have all possible attributes. But merely this does not demonstrate why, or how, it is that *there is* a substance with such nature as to possess all attributes.

I think it will be trivial to argue at this point that since I can conceive such substance as existing then it exists (by IP7) because in the same way I could have conceived of two substances existing, or a substance not possessing all attributes; insofar as the are possible substances, i.e., not self-contradictory ones,

⁸ Nadler (2006), 58.

⁹ Nadler (2006), 67.

¹⁰ Ibid.

then, by IP7, they will also exist. I think, however, that this is what Spinoza does. It seems to me that the reasoning through which Spinoza arrives to IP11, "God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists", involves arguing at IP10sch that if a absolutely infinite entity exists then, "it must necessarily be defined (ID6) as an entity consisting of infinite attributes". Therefore, since Spinoza will identify the one substance of his argument with God, and the definition was given that God was an absolutely infinite being, then it follow that if God exist, (and the ontological argument has presumably proven that it does) then the God that exists is the God that was defined as an absolutely infinite being, and consequently a being consisting in infinite attributes.

Let me now go back to IP5d and examine its argument. The existence of two or more substances requires there being a way to distinguish them, and at IP4 he establishes the only two ways to distinguish them, namely, by a difference in their attributes, or by a difference in their affections. Regarding the first possibility, Spinoza responds that if two substances are distinguished only by a difference in their attributes then, "it will be granted that there cannot be more than one substance of the same attribute". Thus he rules out scenario (a). Here, however, an objection was raised originally by Leibniz, and restated by Bennett, namely that Spinoza ignores the possibility that substances may share *some* attributes but not others, situation I sketched in scenario (c).¹¹ Regarding the second possibility, Spinoza responds that if two substances are distinguished only by a difference in their affections, since these affections can be disregarded, we will be left with the same attribute or substance, and so they would not really differ or could not be distinguishable from one another. A common reaction to this claim is that it seems arbitrary or unjustified to disregard precisely the features that make for a distinction between substances to then claim that they do not really differ.¹² An objection raised by Bennett (and others) against Spinoza's second answer is that a substance 'truly' has affections; hence conceiving of it 'truly' is to conceive of it *with* its affections.¹³

In the response to the second possibility, Spinoza mentions that the reason why the affections

can be disregarded is that "substance is prior to its affections" (IP1). Bennett can only think in one interpretation for this claim but argues that it results in a fallacy. His interpretation is that it is because of the accidental character of the affections that they can be put aside, "for if [substances] are unlike only in respect to their accidental properties they could become perfectly alike ... and so identical."¹⁴ This is a fallacy because it cannot be inferred from the fact that some properties are accidental, and thus they could have been different, that they could have been possessed by two objects at the same time, since one substance possessing a property may preclude other substances from also possessing it.¹⁵ Garrett attempts to rescue Spinoza's argument by explaining that the relation of "being in and conceived through" between modes and substances requires that the modes be completely conceived through its substance to the extent that "any difference of affections would have to be conceived through a difference of substance."¹⁶ Otherwise, Garrett claims, "there will be something about the affection of x that cannot be completely understood solely through conceiving the nature of substance x, namely, the *reason or cause*... [for x's affections]" Therefore, this would justify disregarding the affections since any difference of them would also be a difference of substance. I reject Garrett's view for the following reason. If what Garrett proposes was right then in the world there would have to be either as many substances as there are affections or only a single affection corresponding to the one substance that has it. But no one would deny that there are many, perhaps even infinite possible affections in the universe, i.e., sizes and shapes are many, particular thoughts, memories, imaginations are many. What is required for the relation of "being in and conceived through" is perhaps that the conception of substance contains or includes a conception of all the modification that substance is capable of.

With respect to the first objection by Leibniz and Bennett, Garrett's way to defend Spinoza is by arguing against the possibility of two substances sharing an attribute, which will in turn preclude the possibility that two substances may share some attributes but not all.¹⁷ I will not examine his argument here, but would

¹⁴ Bennett (1984), 68.

¹⁵ Ibid. Bennett states the modal fallacy thus: (P and possibly Q) à possibly (P and Q).

¹⁶ Garrett (1990), 80.

¹⁷ Garrett (1990), 95.

¹¹ Garrett (1990), 71.

¹² Nadler (2006), 62.

¹³ Garrett (1990), 73.

only state that this argument relies on Garrett's previous point that any difference of affections would have to be conceived through a difference of substance, and to that extent it may fail. It would suffice to my purpose in this essay to suggest that IP5d does not *fully* rule out scenarios (a) and (c) to the conclusion of (2) of the argument presented in the introduction, since the solutions offered by the commentators are not satisfactory, and therefore it is still possible to argue, for example, for the view that two substances sharing an attribute may differ in their affections.

Even if IP5d succeeds, we are still left with the possible scenario (b). It is only when the thesis that there is one substance possessing all attributes is brought up that this possibility vanishes. However this thesis should be the result of having previously ruled out that possibility. In other words, we could ask, why is it impossible for two substances to share an attribute? And then we will answer that, by IP5d, this is because they could not be distinguished from each other; there being a way to distinguish them seems to be a condition for conceiving them as two. But, on the other hand, if we ask, why is it impossible for two substances to exist while having different attributes, what will our answer be? There is no reason, no logical impediment or requisite that makes it impossible that this should be the case, except of course there being a substance that possesses all the attributes. But the order of the reasoning should be that *because* it is impossible for two substances to exist while having different attributes, then, since all the attributes need to be instantiated¹⁸, there must be one substance that instantiate them all. Otherwise, it would seem that Spinoza is arguing for his substance monism simply by defining into existence one substance that has all the attributes and thus precluding all other possibilities. Bennett also points out that "it is *built into* the definition of 'God' that God has every attribute" and objects that likewise one could prove the existence of any other property in a thing.¹⁹

Spinoza presents his argument as if he had an *independent* reason for claiming that there is one substance that possesses all attributes, and I think if he had then he would be entitled to rule out the possibility that two substances exist having different

attributes (b). But I do not think he has. I would suggest that the definition of God as 'absolute infinite being' is a theological import into the concept of the one necessarily existing substance that occurs when Spinoza replaces 'substance' by 'God' in his ontological argument. I do not think that Spinoza can establish the premise (1) of the argument through the reasoning presented in IP7-IP11, and therefore scenario (b) is not ruled out. Furthermore, I do not think IP5d conclusively rules out scenarios (a) and (c) by the interpretations offered, although I have not fully explored other ways in which IP5d could rule out at least one of these scenarios. I conclude that Spinoza's thesis for substance monism is not fully justified.



¹⁸ Bennett explains this premise by saying that every basic way of being must be instantiated in the actual world, for if an attribute was not instantiated there could be no explanation for it. Bennett (1984), 77.

¹⁹ Bennett (1984), 75, my emphasis.

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