

Handout 9: Spinoza's Proof of Substance Monism

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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In this handout we'll look at a fairly simple interpretation of Spinoza's argument for substance monism. Once Spinoza establishes steps (1) and (2), the rest of the proof pretty much follows from them, together with his definition of God as "a thing that is absolutely infinite, i.e. a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, each of which expresses an eternal and infinite essence" (1d6).¹ Step (5) states Spinoza's substance monism:

- (1) No two substances can share an attribute.
- (2) It is in the nature of substance to exist.
- ∴(3) God exists (from 2 and the definition of God).
- ∴(4) No other substance than God exists (from 1, 3, and the definition of God).
- ∴(5) Everything that exists is either God or a mode of God (from 3, 4, and the definition of mode).

In the rest of this handout we'll consider each step in turn.

I NO SHARING OF ATTRIBUTES

Step (1) comes at 1p5:

In Nature there cannot be two or more substances having the same nature or attribute.

Spinoza's argument for 1p5 rests upon the definition of substance (1d3), the definition of attribute (1d4), the definition of mode (1d5), 1p1, and 1p4. We have already discussed the definitions, so we'll focus here on 1p1 and 1p4.

1p1 follows from the definitions of substance and mode, and says that substance is "prior to" its states, or modes. But what does it mean to say that something is "prior to" something else?

¹Throughout, I'll refer to passages from the *Ethics* using a standard nomenclature: "BookTypeNumberSubtype"; e.g., "1p5c" = Book 1, proposition 5, corollary; "1ax4" = Book 1, axiom 4; "2d3" = Book 2, definition 3.

First, it means that the existence of a mode depends upon the existence of the substance of which it's an affection, and not vice versa. We'll call this the *metaphysical* priority of substance over mode. Second, and more importantly for our purposes, substances have a *conceptual* priority over modes. We conceive of a substance's modes (at least in part) by conceiving of the substance itself, but we do not conceive of the substance itself by conceiving of its modes. So a substance is conceived "through itself" i.e., through its attribute.

ip4 says that if two things are distinct, then they either differ in their attributes or their modes. This is a version of Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles:

PRINCIPLE OF THE IDENTITY OF INDISCERNIBLES (PII)

If $A \neq B$, then A has (or lacks) some attribute or mode that B does not have (or does not lack).

PII is motivated by the PSR. For suppose that $A \neq B$. By the PSR, there is some explanation for this fact. But how can we explain this fact except in terms of some difference in their essence or nature (i.e., their attribute), or else in terms of some difference in their modes? If A and B do not differ in an attribute or mode, then their difference cannot be explained. And the PSR rules out such brute distinctness.

Now on to the proof of ip5. Suppose that A and B are distinct substances, but they don't differ in their attributes. By ip4, then, they must differ in their modes. Spinoza claims that if this were the only difference between A and B, they could not be conceived as distinct from each other. Why not? Well, to conceive of the distinctness of A and B through their modes alone, we would have to conceive of A through its modes alone, and B through its modes alone. But as ip1 tells us, we cannot conceive of a substance through its modes alone. So we can't conceive of the distinctness of A and B through their modes alone. But if we can't conceive of A and B as distinct through their modes or attributes, then their distinctness can't be conceived—and this would violate the PSR. So unless two substances differ in their attributes, their distinctness can't be conceived, and hence they cannot be distinct. Hence, no two substances can share their attributes.

Leibniz objected to this argument. Let's grant that two substances cannot share *all* of their attributes. But suppose that A has attributes X and Y, while B has attributes Y and Z. Then, it seems, we could conceive of A and B as distinct, even though they share an attribute (namely, Y). This is an excellent objection. Could Spinoza respond to it?

Perhaps. Let's suppose A has attributes X and Y and B has attributes Y and Z. Could we conceive of A as *a particular substance with attribute Y*? I think the answer is "no"; having attribute Y does not distinguish A from B, and hence conceiving A as a particular substance with attribute Y does not suffice for us to conceive of A rather than B. But given Spinoza's definition of 'attribute', if Y is an attribute one *can* conceive of A as a particular substance with attribute Y: an attribute is what enables us to conceive of a substance. So Spinoza might be able to respond to Leibniz's objection.

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT FOR IP5

If A and B are distinct, they are distinct either in their attributes or their modes (ip4). Thus if A and B are distinct but share their attributes, they must have different modes. If A and B can be conceived as distinct through their modes, A and B can be conceived through their modes. But a substance cannot be conceived through its

modes (1p1). So if A and B are distinct but share their attributes, they cannot be conceived of as distinct. Thus their distinctness cannot be conceived, but by the PSR it must be conceivable. So if A and B are distinct they must differ in their attributes. Hence no two substances can share an attribute (1p5).

2 EXISTENCE IS IN THE NATURE OF SUBSTANCE

Step (2) comes at 1p7:

It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist.

The proof of 1p7 relies on 1d1 and 1p6c. According to 1p6c,

A substance can't be produced by anything else.

Thus, if substances exist, they must be “self-caused”, which Spinoza has defined as meaning “its essence involves existence, i.e. that its nature can't be conceived except as existing.” (1d1). If something is self-caused, then it cannot be conceived of as not existing; i.e., it's inconceivable that it should not exist. If it's inconceivable for X not to exist, then by the PSR it must exist.

But why should we believe 1p6c? Suppose that a substance could be produced by something else. Then, Spinoza says, “If a substance could be produced by something else, the knowledge of it would have to depend on the knowledge of its cause (by 1ax4). And so (by D3) it wouldn't be a substance.” If substance A were produced by B, then A would be conceived through B. This would be contrary to the definition of substance; if A really is a substance, it must be conceived through itself. But why does Spinoza think that if B causes A, that A must be conceived through B? The axiom he cites in support of this claim is 1ax4, and it plays a very important role in books I and II of the *Ethics*:

Knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, knowledge of its cause.

We can treat ‘knowledge’ as roughly synonymous with ‘understanding’ for Spinoza. So 1ax4 could just as well be put by saying that understanding an effect depends upon and involves understanding its cause. But why should we think this? The answer is that Spinoza thinks that for B to cause A is, at least in part, for A to be explained in terms of B. And for A to be explained in terms of B is, at least in part, for A to be understood through B. Thus, if B causes A, understanding A involves and depends upon understanding B, which is just what 1ax4 says.

So if something other than substance A caused A to exist, A would be explained by, and hence conceived and understood through, something other than A. But this is contrary to the nature of substance: substance is conceived through itself. Hence nothing other than a substance can cause that substance to exist. This is why if we conceive of a substance as existing and hence as having a cause (and given the PSR, anything that exists must have a cause), we must conceive of it as being its own cause. And this is why existence belongs to the nature of substance.

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT FOR IP7

For A to cause B requires that A explain B, and for A to explain B requires that B be conceived through A; thus, for A to cause B requires that B be conceived through A.

Thus, if a substance is caused by something else, it is conceived through something else. But substance is conceived through itself, not something else (1d3). So substance is not caused by something else (1p6c). Substance, then, is self-caused, which means (1d1) that it is part of the nature of substance to exist (1p7).

3 GOD EXISTS

Step (3) comes in 1p11:

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

Spinoza gives two proofs for 1p11. The first is a version of the Ontological Argument for the existence of God, which was first given by Saint Anselm of Canterbury in the twelfth century.² The proof is simple: if God does not exist, then God's essence does not involve existence (1ax7). But God is a substance (1d6), and given 1p7, the essence of a substance does involve existence. So God exists.

The second proof is more original. Suppose that God doesn't exist. Given Spinoza's strong version of the PSR, there would be some "reason or cause which prevents God from existing or which annuls his existence" (AW 148a). Let A be the reason. A must be of the same nature as God, since things of distinct natures have nothing in common (1p2), and if something had nothing in common with God it "could neither give existence to God nor take it away." But if A is of the same nature as God and prevents God from existing, then there is some aspect of God's nature that prevents God from existing—after all, God and A have the *same* nature. Thus, Spinoza thinks, God's nature would involve a contradiction, and "it is absurd to affirm this of a thing that is absolutely infinite and supremely perfect." So nothing with the same nature as God can prevent God from existing, which means that nothing can prevent God from existing. Hence if God does not exist, there is no reason or cause for his non-existence. Thus God exists.

The argument has a weak spot (as does the first proof of 1p11). Suppose that we have specified the nature of a substance in a way that involves a contradiction. Then even if 1p7 is correct and it's in the nature of a substance to exist, *that* substance doesn't exist. If the (supposed) nature of a substance is contradictory, we have a perfectly good explanation for why that substance doesn't exist! So if Spinoza's definition of God involves a contradiction, then we have a good explanation for why God, as defined by Spinoza, doesn't exist. And while Spinoza says that it's "absurd" to suppose that God's nature as he has defined it might involve some contradiction, he hasn't given us an argument for this claim. So: does God's nature defined by Spinoza involve a contradiction?

Recall Spinoza's definition of God in 1d6:

By 'God' I understand: a thing that is absolutely infinite, i.e. a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, each of which expresses an eternal and infinite essence.

Descartes would regard this definition as contradictory. That's because Descartes held that a substances have exactly one attribute. The reason (related to his argument for the real distinction between mind and body) is that if A has attribute X and B has attribute Y, then A and B can be

²Descartes also gives a version of the Ontological Argument in the Fifth *Meditation*; we did not discuss it.

clearly and distinctly understood apart from one another. But then since God can make it the case that things are as they are clearly and distinctly understood to be, A and B can exist apart from one another, and hence (by Leibniz's Law) are distinct. So on Descartes's view, if A and B have distinct attributes, A and B are not the same substance.

Spinoza strongly denies this Cartesian claim. First, he claims in *IP10* that

Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself.

Spinoza's argument for *IP10* is somewhat obscure. But that doesn't matter for our purposes, since Descartes would agree with *IP10*: remember, he doesn't think that you can conceive of the attribute of extension through the attribute of thought or vice versa; the attributes must be understood distinctly from one another. But Spinoza goes on to conclude:

From these propositions it is evident that although two attributes can be conceived to be really distinct (each conceived without the aid of the other), we still can't infer from that that they constitute—that is, constitute the natures of, i.e. are possessed by—two different substances.

Above, I gave a condensed version of Descartes's argument from the conceptual distinctness of the attributes to the conclusion that a substance has exactly one attribute. Here Spinoza is denying that this argument is valid. His subsequent explanation of why this "is clear" leaves much to be desired. But the *PSR* will help us to unpack it.

Suppose that one substance has attribute X, and thus (as Descartes would say) it can't have attribute Y. The *PSR* says: there's an explanation for that! So what could the explanation be? It seems that the explanation *must* involve the fact that the substance has attribute X; after all, the Cartesian claim is that it can't have attribute Y *because* it has attribute X. But then something concerning attribute X explains something about attribute Y; namely, why a substance with attribute X lacks attribute Y. Thus attribute Y is conceived in part through attribute X—namely, Y is conceived as something which is incompatible with X—and this violates *IP10*, which Descartes accepts. Since attributes cannot be conceived through other attributes, the presence of one attribute cannot explain the lack of another. Thus the *PSR* will not tolerate the claim that a substance's having one attribute precludes it from having another. So, to posit the existence of a substance with multiple attributes is not contradictory.

This idea plays an important role in Book II of the *Ethics*, so we should give it a name:

CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTNESS OF ATTRIBUTES (CDA)

If A is of attribute X and B is of attribute Y, A cannot be conceived, understood, or known through (and hence cannot be caused by or explained by) B.

Spinoza's adherence to CDA will lead him to deny that there is any interaction between minds and bodies; since minds are characterized by the attribute of thought and bodies by the attribute of extension, the one cannot be conceived through (and hence cannot be causally or explanatorily related to) the other.

Given CDA, there seems to be no good reason to think that a being with multiple attributes is contradictory or impossible. Thus while Spinoza has not given a positive argument that God as he defines him is not contradictory, he has deflected one potential objection to the claim. But I think

CDA can be used to give a positive argument that Spinoza's definition of God *isn't* contradictory, even though Spinoza himself does not do so. Here's how.

Suppose that God as defined by Spinoza is contradictory. Then either (a) one of the attributes of God contains some internal contradiction, or (b) there is some contradiction between one attribute and another. CDA, as we have just seen, rules out (b). Thus if God is impossible, it is because one of the attributes of God contains an internal contradiction. But if some attribute contains an internal contradiction, *no* substance has that attribute, since it would be impossible for any substance to have it. Hence God does not have it. So God has no attribute that contains an internal contradiction. Thus God as Spinoza defines him is not contradictory.

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT FOR IP11

God is a substance with infinite attributes (1d6). Existence is part of the essence of substance (1p7), and so it is part of God's essence to exist. Thus, God exists (1p11).

4 NO OTHER SUBSTANCE THAN GOD EXISTS

Step (4) is given in 1p14:

God is the only substance that can exist or be conceived.

1p14 follows directly from 1p11, 1p5, and 1d6. By the definition of God (1d6), God has infinite attributes. God exists (1p11), and thus there is a substance with infinite attributes. If there were another substance, it would share some attribute with God. But no substances can share an attribute (1p5). Thus, no other substance than God exists.

5 EVERYTHING THAT EXISTS IS EITHER GOD OR A MODE OF GOD

Step (5) comes at 1p15:

Whatever exists is in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God.

1p15 follows from 1p14 together with 1ax1, which states that everything that exists is either in itself (a substance) or in something else (a mode). Since no other substance than God exists, whatever else exists is a mode. Since a mode must exist in a substance (1d5), every mode that exists is a mode of God. Thus, whatever else exists besides God is a mode of God.