

Spinoza's Modal-Ontological Argument for Monism

One of Spinoza's clearest expressions of his monism is Ethics I P14, and its corollary 1.¹ The proposition reads: "Except God, no substance can be or be conceived", and the corollary claims "that God is unique, that is, (by D6) that in Nature there is only one substance, and that it is absolutely infinite (as we indicated in P10S)".² It is a peculiarity of Spinoza's way that he does not claim his monism – that there is only one substance – directly. Only by identifying substance and God does he establish his monism.

Spinoza's monism consists in combining or interweaving two lines of ideas: The one consists of the idea of substance, which is defined as what exists and is conceived in and through itself (I D3), and which is then claimed to be a *causa sui* (I P6), and to exist necessarily (I P7); the other consists of the idea of God, which is an absolutely infinite being or substance (I D6), and which is then claimed to be unique.³ The problem is to show that God is a substance, or that there is such a substance of absolute infinity (and then to prove that it is unique).

One route to this may seem to be the demonstration to I P11. The proposition says: "God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists". Spinoza's demonstration of this seems rather weak. It relies on I P7 and says in effect that since God is a substance, and any substance exists necessarily (P7), God exists necessarily. But Spinoza seems to assume the difficult part of what needs to be proven – that God is a substance; in other words, he has to show that there is an absolutely infinite substance – a substance which has an infinity of infinite attributes. This is sneaked into the definitions (of substance and God), but ought to be proved or at least shown possible. But Spinoza doesn't show this there (It is perhaps a sign of his dissatisfaction with the demonstration that Spinoza tries two alternative proofs of P11 there). This then does not seem to be a promising way of establishing the monistic thesis of P14.

Spinoza's own demonstration of this central proposition of his metaphysics, I P14, relies on I P5, which says that "In Nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute". This has been often regarded as notoriously puzzling, and has raised harsh criticism.⁴ I am not going to defend P5 or to discuss the criticism here.⁵ I want rather to propose an alternative basis for the crucial P14 and its corollary. The alternative does not follow Spinoza's own demonstration of the proposition, and does not appeal to P5, but rather to the inner "logic" of the preceding propositions and their order. This, I believe, often reveals Spinoza's mind, and the reasons for his propositions, better than their official demonstrations.

It is clear that the idea of God's absolute infinity is central to Spinoza's monism in general and to the basis of I P14 in particular. This notion of absolute infinity, central as it is to Spinoza's system, is introduced in contrast to the restricted notion of infinity-in-a-kind (ID6, exp.), on which Spinoza is very sparse.⁶ Evidently, when Spinoza's system is grasped in its entirety, the notion of absolute infinity is primary, not only in relation to finiteness, but also to what is infinite-in-a-kind. But in building up towards it we may feel bound to proceed the other way. Perhaps, we can approach the general idea in the following way: When we think of something as infinite, we think of it as infinite **in a kind**. It can be infinitely long, or infinitely heavy, or of an infinite duration, or of infinite extension, or knowledge etc. All these are instances of what we might call infinity-in-a-kind.⁷ Spinoza doesn't use the notion so widely; in the few cases in which he uses it he speaks of attributes (sometimes, in the Short Treatise – substances) as infinite in their kind. For reasons to be spelled out later I believe though that the notion of "kind" here is somewhat wider than that of attribute in the strict Spinozistic sense. In particular I shall propose that being, or reality, is in a certain crucial context, a kind. This notion of being infinite-in-a-kind raises many problems, and is far from clear, but central to it seems to be the idea that what is infinite-in-a-kind cannot be restricted by another thing of that kind – it has the measures of this kind to their maximum, or in their fullness. God, in addition, is **absolutely** infinite, which is also infinite across kinds. It does not only have the fullness of each kind, but the fullness or entirety of all kinds - there is no kind or quality you can coherently think of, which he lacks. And each of them he has "infinitely", that is, for each of them he is infinite-in-a-kind. This means that any quality or attribute that **can** be coherently ascribed to God, does in fact belong to him in the fullest possible degree.⁸

Now, one of God's qualities is reality, or being. And a key idea in the argument is that being and reality are graded: one thing (or kind of things) can be more real, or has more being, than another. This idea, strange as it may seem to many of us nowadays, was central to many 17-century metaphysicians and was quite common to many of Spinoza's medieval predecessors. An ancillary idea, repeatedly emphasized by Spinoza, was that the more real something is, the more qualities or attributes it has. It would be a short step from this idea to argue that something which has infinite being or reality must also have infinite attributes: only that which has infinite attributes can be infinitely real, or has infinite being. Thus, Spinoza derives from the idea of a substance its being infinitely real, and from this - that it is absolutely infinite, or God. This, I suggest, was roughly one of the main ideas leading to his monism, and to I P14.

Let us follow the main steps in some more detail. We can begin the route to this in I P7: Substance (by definition) is its own cause, from which Spinoza concludes that it exists necessarily. In I P8 Spinoza says that "Every substance is necessarily infinite". It seems

plausible that by “infinite” he does not mean here “absolutely infinite” but rather “infinite-in-a-kind”, for otherwise, Spinoza would have proven already here all he needs for his monism, and P11, as well as P14 would seem superfluous. The wording of the demonstration of P8 supports this, for Spinoza speaks there of “existing as finite or infinite” (*vel finita, vel infinita existere*), and shows that substance “exists as infinite”. This suggests that Spinoza is speaking here of infinite existence, which is infinite-in-a-kind, where the kind in question is that of being or reality. Existence or reality is, for Spinoza, a property, and the demonstration to proposition 8 establishes that substance is infinite with respect to that property (cf. the beginning of the Appendix to part I). Substance, in short, in being necessarily real, is infinitely so; it is infinitely real.

This can help us understand a central step in the argument, which in itself may seem rather puzzling - I P9: “The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it” (Spinoza doesn’t even bother to argue for this, and claims it to be evident from D4). Now, if that is so, what has being infinitely-in-its-kind, what is infinitely real, must have infinite attributes, or be absolutely infinite, which, by definition, is God. The centrality of this idea for understanding I P14 is manifested by the fact that in the crucial corollary 1 of P14, Spinoza refers the reader to the Scholium to P10, in which he says emphatically: “Indeed, nothing in Nature is clearer than that each being must be conceived under some attribute, **and the more reality, or being it has, the more it has attributes** which express necessity, or eternity, and infinity.”⁹

This route, I believe, makes in a skeletal way, a cogent argument, as follows:

- A. A substance is a cause-of-itself (*causa sui*).
- B. Anything which is a cause-of-itself is necessarily real (has necessary being).
- C. Anything which is necessarily real is infinitely real (is infinite-in-a-kind with respect to reality).
Hence, a substance is infinitely real.
- D. A thing has more reality in as much as it has more attributes.
- E. Anything which is infinitely real cannot have less attributes than anything else. In other words anything which is infinitely real has all attributes, or is absolutely infinite.
- F. Whatever is absolutely infinite is unique. There cannot be two distinct beings which are both absolutely infinite.
- G. Hence, from the fact that a substance is infinitely real, it follows that it is absolutely infinite, which, by definition, is God.

Here then we have a version of Spinoza's argument from the very idea of substance – of something which is *causa sui* – to its being the only substance: necessarily real, absolutely infinite, and unique.

In F above I assume that substances are distinguished, if at all, by their attributes. This may be challenged, and deserves a defense on its own (it has been defended, for instance, on the ground that mode-difference supervene on attribute-difference). But in any case this is much weaker and more plausible than P5. Two of the premises deserve special emphasis. Both are metaphysical principles that involve many factors, particularly that of being infinite-in-kind with respect to an attribute or a quality, but one is more modal, the other more ontological in character:

1. What necessarily is, what is necessarily real, is infinitely real, infinite-in-a-kind with respect to being.
2. What is infinitely real has infinite attributes, and the more attributes something has the more real it is, the more reality it has. (This of course presumes that being or reality is a graded notion, so that one can talk of something as being more or less real than another, in proportion to the wealth of attributes it has).¹⁰

We have noted above the centrality of P9 (basically our C above) in the route to P14, which is echoed in the reference P14C1 makes to P10S. If we now re-read the demonstration to P14 in light of this we can see, I believe, that it is not very far from the proposed interpretation. In essence, Spinoza proves God's uniqueness by appeal to his absolute infinity and to his necessary being or reality. What is missing in the official demonstration is the ontological principle of P9, which Spinoza fills in here by the reference corollary 1 makes to it through P10S. Its significance lies in its bridging one of the great gaps in Spinoza's moves in the first 11 propositions: he never explicitly establishes that God is a substance. The gap is blurred by his wording in D 6 (and then again in P 11 and many other places) in which he *assumes* that God is a substance. In our reconstruction above, P 9 is of special importance in bridging this gap.

Notes

- 1 All citations are from Ethics (E. Curley, translation), Penguin, 1996 unless otherwise indicated, and are in the customary manner: I P14C2 for instance refers to corollary 2 of proposition 14 of book I of the Ethics.
- 2 There are, of course, other senses of “monism”. A particularly important one, for instance, is associated with the “identity thesis” that every mental event is identical with a physical one. Something similar is expressed in Spinoza’s proposition 7 of book II. There is, of course, a connection between the two, and for Spinoza, the second is implied by the first, but I shall not go into this here.
- 3 The route taken in the Short Treatise is different: God’s existence and uniqueness are derived directly from his absolute infinity. It is then argued (in a rather complicated manner, which we shall not reconstruct here) that substance, or nature, exists in infinite attributes, which “agrees” with God’s definition (part I, ch. II, (12)). The move in the Ethics I try to reconstruct in the text is, I believe, simpler and bolder. The assumption that the more being something has the more attributes it has is common to both.
- 4 See for instance, J. Bennett, A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics, Hackett, 1984; and more recently again in his “Spinoza’s Metaphysics” in D. Garrett (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza, 1996, 61-89.
- 5 Two notable recent defenses of IP5 are Don Garrett: “Ethics IP5...” in Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy, J.A. Cover and M. Kulstad eds., Hackett, 1990, 69-108, and M Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Substance Monism”, in Koistinen & Biro (eds.) Spinoza, Oxford, 2002, 11-37. There are important differences between Garrett’s and Della Rocca’s approaches, but the general tenet of their “solutions” to the main problem IP5 raises is similar: The gist of Garrett’s solution relies on the assumption that an attribute of a substance determines (the set) of its affections uniquely. The gist of Della Rocca’s seems to be that an attribute individuates – determines the identity of - its substance (uniquely). The two come to much the same thing, and both seem to me to raise a similar problem: If an attribute determines a substance and its affections uniquely, it is difficult to see how attributes of the same substance – being *ultimate* modes of individuation of the substance and its modes – differ from one another. The emphasis on “ultimate” is important. I cannot expand on it here, but the reader can get a grip of what I mean by comparing the attribute/substance relation here with the sense/reference relation in Frege’s philosophy. A reference has many senses, each determining it uniquely. Frege could still hold these senses to be different just because they are not ultimate in this sense – they have components and are themselves parts of other senses.
- 6 It is worth noticing that in his detailed explanation of the notion of infinity and various confusions pertaining to it, in the famous letter to Meyer of April 1663, Spinoza explains various relevant distinctions, but the notion of infinite-in-a-kind does not appear at all (See Ep. 12; The Correspondance of Spinoza, A Wolf Translation, Allen &Unwin, 1928). In the Short Treatise, he says of both an attributes and a substance that they are “perfectly infinite in its kind”, (e.g. ch. II, (1)-(2)).
- 7 I ignore here Spinoza’s distinction between ideas which are only in the understanding, or in the imagination (like number, time, duration), and real ideas (of

the intellect); Since what I say below pertains to the notion of being or existence, the distinction is of no special moment for my present concerns.

- ⁸ Spinoza's special doctrine of attributes, the exact relationship between the notions of attribute and of substance, on the one hand, and the distinction between attributes and qualities (or properties in general) on the other, are central and much discussed topics. We need not enter here into a detailed discussion of it. For reasons I spell out below, I assume that "kind" here (*genere*) is used as somewhat neutral as between attributes and qualities in their strict technical sense, and that even if this is not true in general, it applies to "being" or "reality".
- ⁹ This, almost in the same words, appear also in an answer to a letter from De Vries, (of January 1663), Ep. 9.
- ¹⁰ This idea, which for many people is perhaps the most difficult to accept in the argument, but without which not only Spinoza's, but much of classical ontological metaphysics cannot be understood, is connected, I believe, with Spinoza's conception of truth and adequacy, but I cannot explain it here.