On the Validity of Spinoza’s Argument for Monism: 
A Question of Equivocation

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INTRODUCTION

Spinoza’s case for ontological monism is indeed an interesting one. Beginning with the Cartesian metaphysical principles of substance and attribute, Spinoza believes himself to have demonstrated the underlying substantial uniformity of all beings, as he writes, “Except for God, no substance can be or be conceived.”1 However, the validity of his argument for monism is questionable, for when one considers carefully the meaning which Spinoza attaches to certain concepts, it becomes quite apparent that he fails to use such meaning consistently. More specifically, in the first part of his proof for monism, wherein he argues against the possibility of two infinite substances of distinct attributes, Spinoza equivocates on the term ‘finite’, which thus undermines the validity of his entire demonstration.

The following is divided into five sections. In the first section, a very basic explication of substance and attribute within the Spinozistic metaphysics will be provided. Following that consideration, in the second section, Spinoza’s argument for ontological monism will be clearly outlined and briefly explained. The third section will focus exclusively on Spinoza’s two fold

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understanding of the term ‘finite’. Considered in this section is an altogether crucial distinction that Spinoza himself makes, namely that between infinitude in kind and absolute infinitude. In the fourth section, Spinoza’s proof for monism will be reconsidered, and it will be here shown how such an argument does not necessitate the conclusion of ontological monism. Lastly, the closing section will propose a possible solution, that is, a way in which the proof may be rendered valid.

I. SUBSTANCE AND ATTRIBUTE WITHIN A SPINOZISTIC METAPHYSICS

Spinoza provides the following definition of substance: “By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.”2 From this definition, two points are particularly relevant. First, one should note that, though Spinoza’s definition of substance as something conceived through itself may seem strange, such a definition makes sense in light of the fact that, for Spinoza, the order of ideas perfectly corresponds to the order of things.3 In effect, something whose concept requires that of another is not only conceptually dependent, but is likewise ontologically dependent. That is to say that, when one is required to think of y so as to form an ‘adequate idea’4 of x, then x is dependent upon y, in the same way that an effect is dependent upon its cause. Second, I think it important to point out that, like Descartes, Spinoza identifies substance as self-subsistent being.5 Put another way, the essence of substance contains existence, and, accordingly, substance taken alone provides a thorough account of its own actuality.

To clarify Spinoza’s definition of substance, let’s consider the example of concavity. In order to form a complete idea of concavity, that is, in order to explain the actual existence of concavity, reference must be made to that being in which concavity inheres, as concavity is never found apart from factually existent beings. Nevertheless, after taking into account that being in which concavity is present (e.g., a nose), one’s explanation of concavity is still not exhaustive, as one must next consider the
existence of that nose possessing concavity as its accident. As it is not within the essence of a nose to exist, then one must ascribe a cause to the actual existence of such. Ultimately, during the course of this account, one will arrive at a being whose existence is its essence and which can thus explain the existence of all other beings. It is this being, then, that is the only true substance, for it is only this being that contains within itself a complete explanation of its own nature and existence.6

For Spinoza, while a substance is an independent existent, an attribute is that which the mind knows or apprehends of substance. In Spinoza’s words, an attribute is “what the intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence.”7 As Spinoza will argue, though there is only one substance, it has an infinity of attributes through which it may be considered.8 Here, it is important to observe that the term ‘attribute’ in no way designates a purely arbitrary perspective that one assumes when examining substance.9 Indeed, if the order of ideas really does correspond to that of reality, then it is impossible to think of attributes as subjective interpretations of substance; instead, each attribute reflects in its own way one real aspect of substance, and, what’s more, each attribute provides a complete account of substance under that aspect.10

II. SPINOZA’S ARGUMENT FOR ONTOLOGICAL MONISM
In the first half of his argument for monism, Spinoza presents us with a destructive dilemma.11 Beginning with the supposition that, if there are two or more substances, then such substances would either have to have the same attribute or a different attribute, Spinoza subsequently rules out the possibility of each consequent and ultimately concludes that there is only one substance. Essentially, Spinoza’s argument runs as follows:12

P1: If there are two or more substances, then they either have the same attribute or a different attribute.

P2: Such substances cannot have the same attribute, for if that were the case, then there
would be no way to discern one substance from another.\(^\text{13}\)

P3: Neither can substances have distinct attributes. This is so because:

(P3a) Substance must be infinite, for if substance were finite, then such would require the existence of another substance of the same attribute. However, this is impossible, as has been shown in P2.\(^\text{14}\)

(P3b) To have two infinite substances is absurd, as it would mean that each substance contained an attribute that the other lacked. However, by definition, infinite substances must contain all perfections. Consequently, to say that two substances possess distinct attributes is to simultaneously assert that such substances are finite, which is clearly a contradiction.\(^\text{15}\)

P4: Substance cannot be produced by another substance and must therefore exist eternally, for if such were not the case, then a substance would be dependent upon another substance of the same attribute, which is impossible (P2), and an adequate concept of it would require that one consider its cause, which, \textit{ex hypothesi}, a substance cannot have.\(^\text{16}\)

C: Accordingly, since there can be only one substance containing an infinity of attributes, and since God is defined as that being which possesses all positive perfections, God is the only substance.\(^\text{17}\)

Now that the proof for monism has been generally out-
lined, Spinoza’s justification for the third proposition listed above will be considered in greater detail, as it is within this sub-argument that Spinoza gets particularly careless with his terms. However, before examining Spinoza’s defense of the third premise, it is crucial to first reflect upon what Spinoza means when qualifying something as finite.

III. SPINOZA’S TWO-FOLD UNDERSTANDING OF THE TERM ‘FINITE’

In Book I of his Ethics, Spinoza indicates two distinct understandings of the term ‘finite’: (1) finite within one’s attribute and (2) finite across all attributes. Of course, inferable from these definitions are two corresponding notions of the term ‘infinite’: (1) infinite within one’s attribute and (2) infinite across all attributes. In regard to finitude within one’s attribute, Spinoza states, “That thing is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited by another of the same nature.”18 So, for instance, a body can be called finite or limited if it is possible to “conceive another that is greater.” However, a body cannot be limited by thought nor thought by a body, as thought and body consist of altogether separate attributes.19 Accordingly, Spinoza’s distinction between the terms ‘finite’ and ‘infinite’ with respect to one’s attribute can be summed up in the following. Whereas ‘finite’ in this sense denotes that which is less great (i.e., that which requires another being of the same attribute to serve as its cause and explanation), ‘infinite’ refers to that which is most great (i.e., that which is both the cause of and explanation for all finite beings within its class).

To come to an understanding of the second definition of finite, namely that which is limited across all attributes, it is important to consider Spinoza’s definition of God, which is as follows:

By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence..... I say absolutely infinite, not infinite in its own kind; for if something is only infinite in its own kind, we can deny infinite
attributes of it (i.e., we can conceive infinite attributes which do not pertain to its nature); but if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence.20

In this description of God, Spinoza explicitly states that he is not referring to a being infinite within a particular kind, but instead a being infinite across all attributes insofar as it is possessive of each. Given this view, an absolutely finite being, in contradistinction to an absolutely infinite being, is that which lacks at least one positive perfection. Simply put, a being is absolutely finite if it does not possess all attributes or positive perfections.

An important question to address is how these two differing sets of finite and infinite beings relate to one another. That is to say, to what extent does a particular being’s membership in one group necessitate its exclusion or inclusion in another group? Consider, for instance, a being that is finite in relation to other beings possessing a common attribute. As such, this being will necessarily fall into the absolutely finite class, as it cannot possibly possess all positive perfections if it is in fact lesser than another being within its own class. Conversely, a being that is infinite in terms of its own kind does not of necessity fall into either the absolutely finite or absolutely infinite set. This is so because, though this being is infinite within its own attribute, it is still possible for it to lack all attributes across all sets of beings. Similarly, a being that is absolutely finite may nevertheless be infinite with respect to its own attribute; indeed, if one knows only that a being is finite across all attributes, one cannot thereby determine whether such a being is infinite or finite within its own attribute. On the other hand, though it is not possible to determine the appropriate class for an absolutely finite being, it is immediately possible to designate the group wherein an absolutely infinite being belongs. As an absolutely infinite being contains all positive attributes, it is impossible that there should exist any being within a particular class more perfect or greater than such. In effect, if there were to exist an absolutely infinite being,
such would likewise be infinite with respect to each of its individual attributes.

**IV. AN EQUIVOCATION IN SPINOZA’S PROOF OF MONISM**

With the above definitions in mind, this section will now examine Spinoza’s argument for monism, and, more specifically, that part of such containing his defense of the third premise (i.e., that premise which asserts the impossibility of two substances possessing different attributes). In justifying this claim, Spinoza begins by arguing that, “Of its nature... [substance] will exist either as finite or as infinite.” From this, Spinoza next rules out the possibility of substance existing as finite: “But not as finite. For then (by D2) it would have to be limited by something else of the same nature, which would also have to exist necessarily (by P7), and so there would be two substances of the same attribute, which is absurd (by P5).” In effect, if substance is not finite, then, as Spinoza affirms, “it exists as infinite.”

It should be here noted that, in establishing the infinite nature of substance, Spinoza relies upon the first definition of finite discussed above, which maintains that a substance is finite when it is limitable by another substance of the same attribute. It goes without question that Spinoza has indeed successfully demonstrated that substance is infinite within its own attribute, since the possibility of another substance having the same attribute has already been ruled out. Next, from the non-basic premise that substance must be infinite, Spinoza is led to address the further question as to whether there can be two or more infinite substances of distinct attributes. To this, he responds in the negative:

Since God is an absolutely infinite being, of whom no attribute which expresses an essence of substance can be denied (by D6)...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 P5) is absurd.
In denying the possibility of two infinite substances with distinct attributes, Spinoza therefore concludes that substance is one and that it is identical with Deus sive Natura.

Of principal importance to the present inquiry is a consideration of the legitimacy of Spinoza’s appeal to the concept of God. Given what he has established regarding the nature of substance, Spinoza has no reason here to identify God with substance, since he has demonstrated only that substance is infinite within its own attribute and not that it, like God, is infinite across attributes. Indeed, if Spinoza had established the absolute infinity of substance, then certainly it is not possible that there be more than one substance. This is so because, if there were two absolutely infinite and distinct substances, then each would have to have an attribute that the other did not possess. However, such a supposition is impossible, as, by definition, an absolutely infinite substance contains all attributes. Nevertheless, this is not what Spinoza has hitherto demonstrated. In effect, Spinoza has here too hastily equated substance with God, as he has yet to determine that substance, like God, is absolutely infinite and not just infinite in relation to other beings of a particular attribute.

CONCLUSION
In thinking of possible ways to salvage Spinoza’s proof for monism, the following question must be addressed: Is there ever an instance wherein infinitude within one’s kind likewise necessitates infinitude across all attributes? It would seem that there is indeed one such instance, that being when the attribute is identified with Being itself. Undoubtedly, it is only in this special case that it can be so claimed that a thing’s status as infinite within its attribute requires that it likewise have the quality of infinitude across all attributes. If it is possible to conceive the totality of what is under the all-inclusive attribute of existence, and if a thing’s reality is in some way a function of its attributes, then surely that which is the highest manifestation of Being is, at the same time, that which is possessive of all positive attributes. Now, it can certainly be argued that this is precisely what
Spinoza has in mind when equating infinitude within one’s kind and infinitude across all attributes. In fact, Spinoza himself does claim that existence pertains to the nature of substance and that the reality of a thing is the direct product of the number of attributes contained by that thing. Even still, though the idea of exemplary causality is incorporated within the Spinozistic metaphysics, the validity of Spinoza’s argument for ontological monism is put in to question due to his failure to make explicit his reasons for identifying infinitude within one’s attribute and infinitude across all attributes.

Notes

2. Ibid., D1.
3. “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (Ibid., II P7).
4. Technically speaking, an ‘adequate idea’ for Spinoza is “an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations of a true idea” (Ibid., D4).
5. Substance for Descartes is something that exists through itself and no other, and therefore, only God can be considered a substance *per se*. In a derivative sense, however, Descartes does maintain that such created beings as mind and body can be regarded as substances insofar as their existence requires only the concurrence of God. In other words, for Descartes, God, who is infinite substance, creates and sustains the existences of certain finite substances (i.e., minds as thinking substances and body as an extended substance). See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Here it should be so noted that Descartes’ substance dualism is something Spinoza will certainly reject; substance is God and God is Being, but God is not this or that individual being.
Further, for Spinoza, to even speak of created or finite substances is a contradiction in terms, as substance is, by definition, independent.

6. See *Ethics* I P8. For Spinoza, substance as self-subsistent being is not separate from the created order; it actually is the created order. To be more clear, according to Spinoza, each individual being is a single mode of one underlying substance, whereas the totality of all existing beings, whether actual or possible, comprises this substance. Consequently, for Spinoza, though God is not this or that factically existing being, there is an identity between *Deus sive Natura* (i.e., God or Nature) and Being (i.e., the totality of actual and possible beings).

7. See Ibid., D4. More specifically, Spinoza provides the following definition of essence: “I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing” (Ibid., II D2).

8. Note that, though Spinoza argues that substance has an infinity of attributes, he only gives two examples of such, namely thought and extension, as he claims that these are the only two attributes of substance accessible to the human knower. For Spinoza’s discussion of these two attributes, see Ibid., II.

9. Seemingly contrary to the above, which asserts that attributes are not merely chance aspects of a single reality, is what Spinoza appears to suggest in his *Correspondence*: “You desire, though there is no need, that I should illustrate by an example, how one and the same thing can be stamped with two names. In order not to seem miserly, I will give you two. First, I say that by Israel is meant the third patriarch; I mean the same by Jacob, the name Jacob having been given, because the patriarch in question had caught hold of the heel of his brother. Secondly, by a colourless surface I mean a surface, which reflects all rays of light without altering them. I mean the same by a white surface, with this difference, that a surface is called white in reference to a man looking at it.” See Benedict de Spinoza, *The Correspondence of Spinoza*, edited and translated by Abraham Wolf (London: Frank Cass, 1966), IX.

10. For an insightful discussion as to how thought and extension, though clearly distinct in essence, can each provide a complete account of one underlying reality, see Thomas Carson Mark, “The Spinozistic Attributes” *Philosophia* 7 (1977): 55-82. In this article, Mark draws an interesting parallel between the attributes of thought and extension and Cartesian and Euclidean presentations of plane geometry.
11. A destructive dilemma is a formal logical argument which assumes the following form: \( p \rightarrow q / r \rightarrow s / \sim q \lor \sim s // \sim p \lor \sim r \). Observe that, in the first half of Spinoza’s proof, only one antecedent is put forth. In effect, this half of the argument can be simplified as follows: \( p \rightarrow q \lor s / \sim q / \sim s // \sim p \).

12. Please note that the proposition numbers used in the above argument outline are not the same as those found within Spinoza’s *Ethics*. For the number designations used by Spinoza, refer to the footnote corresponding to each of the above cited premises.

13. This is somewhat of an over-simplification, as two substances of the same attribute can still have different modes. However, Spinoza provides the following reasoning as to why substances with distinct modes would nonetheless be indistinguishable: “…since a substance is prior in nature to its affections (by P1), if the affections are put to one side and [the substance] is considered in itself, that is (by D3 and A6), considered truly, one cannot be conceived to be distinguished from another” (Ibid., P5). See *Ethics* I P5.


15. Ibid., P14.

16. See Ibid., P6. In support of this premise, Spinoza argues first that “Two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another” (Ibid., P2), and second that “If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other” (Ibid., P3).

17. Ibid., P14.

18. Ibid., D2.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., D6.

21. Ibid., P8.

22. Ibid.

23. See P2 above or Ibid., P5.

24. Ibid., P14.

25. Ibid., P7.

26. “The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it” (Ibid., P9).
Works Cited


