

Spinoza's Appropriation of the Medieval *Being-Thing* Distinction

Stephen H. Daniel*

Abstract

From his earliest writings we learn that, for Spinoza, God is not some identifiable thing (*res*) but is rather the ultimate activity or being (*ens*) by which all things are identified and differentiated. In this way Spinoza shifts the focus of the meaning of “substance” from being something that *has* characteristics to the activity whereby all things come to express characteristics. Like Piero Di Vona, I suggest that this *ens-res* distinction has its origin in Avicenna and is developed by Aquinas, Suárez, and Heereboord. Unlike Di Vona, I argue that Spinoza's distinction of substance, attribute, and mode parallels Suárez's distinction between (1) *ens-as-noun* (*τὸ εἶναι*), (2) *ens-as-participle*, and (3) *res*, in that for both Suárez and Spinoza, the distinction between *ens-as-a-noun* and things (*res*) is intelligible only in terms of *ens* as the principle by which things are identified. Since that principle is not itself a thing but rather the process by which things are differentiated from one another in virtue of their attributes, I propose that “substance” for Spinoza is best described as the *activity* by which all that exists comes to be. I conclude that the attempt to provide subjectivist or objectivist interpretations of attributes inevitably misses the point that Spinoza makes in describing God as the source of existence by treating substance as some *thing* rather than the activity or being (*ens*) in terms of which all things are intelligible.

Keywords: Spinoza, Suárez, Heereboord, being, thing, attribute, substance

1. The Context of the *Ens-Res* Distinction

In 1661 Spinoza tells Henry Oldenburg that by “God” he means “Being, consisting of infinite attributes, each of which is infinite” (*Ens, constans infinitis attributis, quorum unumquodque est*

* Texas A&M University, College Station; sdaniel@tamu.edu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6811-2573>

infinitum).¹ His *Ethics* definition of God as “absolutely infinite being, i.e., substance consisting of infinite attributes” (*ens absolute infinitum, hoc est, substantiam constantem infinitis attributis*) repeats that idea.² But the remark in his letter to Oldenburg tellingly includes a comma after *Ens*, indicating (contrary to most translations) that God is not *a* being who has infinite attributes but rather Activity itself expressed in an infinite number of ways. This is the same point he makes in the *Ethics*. Indeed, the remark in the *Ethics* only makes clearer his claim that in referring to God as “substance,” he thinks of God not as a thing (*res*) at all—even a thing with infinite attributes—but as the Activity or Being (*Ens*) of all things.

The distinction between *being* (*ens*) and *thing* (*res*) has often been overlooked by commentators who assume that things are logically prior to their activities. But beginning with Avicenna (d. 1037), certain philosophers argue that what distinguishes (and thus identifies) a thing is its activities. For them, it is the engagement in certain activities that makes a substance be what it is. That, I propose, is the central insight of Spinoza’s doctrine of God, and it is this doctrine that I want to examine. In particular, I hope to show that by describing God as the activity by which all things exist, Spinoza not only draws on insights from Avicenna, Maimonides, Aquinas, and Heereboord, but also shifts the discussion of God in early modern philosophy from characterizing God’s attributes as either objective or subjective expressions of his nature to revealing how God’s engagement in and with the world is to be understood centrally in terms of his attributes.

To see just how central this point of referring to God as *Ens* is, we need to attend to the ways in which Spinoza contrasts *ens* (being) with *res* (thing). Such a contrast indicates that it is inappropriate to consider God as a “thing” (*res*), for a thing has an identity in virtue of its being differentiated from other things. Such a differentiation is not something for which the thing is responsible, for apart from the differentiation, there is no thing.

Indeed, by alluding to the distinction between *ens* and *res*—a distinction with which thinkers of the period would have been familiar because of positions developed by Avicenna, Maimonides, Aquinas, Crescas, Suárez, and Heereboord—Spinoza emphasizes how “being” (*ens*) is the process or activity whereby a “thing” (*res*) is produced. The activity is not itself a thing but is rather simply the means by which things are identified and differentiated from one another. Being (*ens*) is thus not the activity *of* a thing, for such a thing would itself have to be explained in terms of the activity of yet another thing *ad infinitum*.

When Spinoza says to Oldenburg that God is Being, then, he does not mean that God is a *thing* with infinite attributes, for such a thing would itself be the *result* of some activity and not the activity itself. And in those instances when he speaks of God as *res*—for example, where he says that God is a “thinking thing [*res cogitans*]” (E2p1)—his focus is not on God’s being a thing as such but on how nothing can exist or be intelligible apart from its expressing God’s nature in terms of some attribute (e.g., thought).³ No doubt, no particular thing can be understood other than as an expression

1 See Spinoza to Oldenburg, 21 September 1661, Ep 2, G IV 7/C I 165.

2 E1def6/G II 45.

3 For how “being” (*ens*) and “thing” (*res*) have been interpreted as interchangeable, see Michael Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind–Body Problem in Spinoza* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 198n46; Martin Lin, “Spinoza’s Arguments for the Existence of God,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75 (2007), 271, 276; Steven Nadler, “‘Whatever Is, Is in God’: Substance and Things in Spinoza’s Metaphysics,” in *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, ed. Charlie Huenemann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008),

of some attribute, so we might be tempted to speak about God as some kind of thing. But for Spinoza, to think that God is a thing or to imagine that the concept of “things” includes substance would be to treat God as a mode (i.e., as the object of some already determinate activity). So, Spinoza prefers to speak of God as *ens absolute infinitum* (E1def6, E1p11d) rather than as a thing (*res*).⁴

It is likely that Spinoza learned of the *ens-res* distinction from his reading of Maimonides, Crescas, and Heereboord. From Maimonides and Crescas he would have learned how Avicenna appeals to the distinction between a being or “existent” (*mawjūd*) and a thing (*shay'*) to argue that, because God does not have an essence distinct from his existence, he is an activity or *being* without being a *thing*.⁵ From Heereboord Spinoza would have learned how Aquinas and Suárez draw on the Latinized Avicenna to distinguish between existence (i.e., the activity of being) and essence (i.e., being a certain thing). Indeed, for Heereboord, the distinction between *esse existentiae* and *esse essentiae* explicitly allows us to think of the being of an activity without necessarily thinking of it as an existing *thing* (even an absolutely perfect thing), for its identity as that thing seemingly would still have to be designated by another thing.⁶ To avoid having to draw such a conclusion, Spinoza assumes that the *activity* by which a thing is itself does not have to have an essence. That is, the act of being (*ens*) by which a thing (*res*) comes to be need not be any thing at all but rather simply the activity by which the thing comes to be. As such, the contrast between *ens* and *res* is not one between what is absolutely perfect and what is finite, for such a contrast still focuses on the differentiation

54n; Francesca di Poppa, “Spinoza’s Concept of Substance and Attribute: A Reading of the *Short Treatise*,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17 (2009), 937; Yitzhak Melamed, “Spinoza’s Metaphysics of Thought: Parallelisms and the Multifaceted Structure of Ideas,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 86 (2013), 640n; Yitzhak Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 179–181; and Pina Totaro, “Res in Spinoza,” *Quaestio* 18 (2018), 226.

- 4 Melamed (*Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 180) claims that Spinoza mentions God as *res* elsewhere in the *Ethics*; but in none of those places (E1p14c2, E2def1, E2p5, E2p9d) does Spinoza actually say that God is a thing—only that God as *cause of an object* can be considered a thing.
- 5 Cf. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, tr. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 22–32 (secs. 1.5–6). See Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 152–160; Amos Bertolacci, “The Distinction of Essence and Existence in Avicenna’s Metaphysics: The Text and Its Context,” in *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion*, ed. Felicitas Opwis and David Reisman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 257–288, especially 276–277; Therese-Anne Druart, “‘Shay’ or Res as Concomitant of ‘Being’ in Avicenna,” *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 12 (2001), 130–135; John F. Whipple, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 36–50; and Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 86–90. On God as existence without essence, see Harry A. Wolfson, “Crescas on the Problem of Divine Attributes,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, new series 7 (1916), 190–191, 205, 209; Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 2 vols. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 1: 121–130, 198; and Yitzhak Melamed, “Spinoza’s Deification of Existence,” *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 6 (2012), 75–84, 102–103.
- 6 See Piero Di Vona, *Studi sull’Ontologia di Spinoza. Parte I* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1960), 177, 191; and Piero Di Vona, *Studi sull’Ontologia di Spinoza. Parte II* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1969), 11–13, 113–116. Di Vona focuses on the scholastic sources of Spinoza’s distinction of *ens* and *res* and discusses Maimonides and Crescas primarily in regard to Spinoza’s determinism (159–166).

of objects rather than on how the active process of differentiation is different from the things differentiated.⁷

For Aquinas, these Avicennian distinctions highlight how *things* are differentiated by their essences. But this is markedly different from the activities (or *beings*) by which essences are differentiated in terms of their ways of existing. As Aquinas puts it:

We can find nothing that can be said of every being [*ente*] affirmatively and absolutely except for the essence by which it is said to be [*esse*]. In this way, according to the principles of Avicenna's Metaphysics, the term "thing" [*res*] differs from "being" because "being" [*ens*] is taken from the act of being [*actu essendi*], whereas "thing" expresses the quiddity or essence of the being [*entis*].⁸

In Aquinas' view, all *beings* as activities of being share the same essence with one another, in that their *being* constitutes their existence. But as *particular* beings—in Spinoza's terms, modes—each thing (*res*) expresses a certain kind of existence that for Aquinas indicates how the *act of being* (*ens*) by which a thing is that thing (*res*) is (at least in thought) prior to *res*.

Like Aquinas, Suárez acknowledges that *res* and *ens* are commonly used as synonyms, but he revises Aquinas' point by noting that *res* and *ens* cannot be linked "in any manner":

For if we want to distinguish *res* and *ens* as strictly as D. Thomas does following Avicenna, such that the quiddity of a thing [*res*] prescinds from actual existence and signifies merely the meaning of the thing [*res*] and not the existence of an actually existing being [*ens*], then *res* will not signify something that happens to *ens* but will be the predication of a quiddity. More significantly, *ens* will signify something other than essence, at least in regard to creatures. At the same time, *ens* cannot be called an attribute of a *res*, for existence is not a predicate of an existing creature.⁹

Suárez's point—something that Spinoza endorses in Elp25 when he says that God is the efficient cause of both the existence and the essence of things—is that existence is not simply added onto some determinate essence; it is rather the designation of a thing precisely as that which cannot exist or be conceived apart from the activity in terms of which it is identified as that particular existence.

7 Cf. Henri Krop, "Esse," in *The Continuum Companion to Spinoza*, eds. Wiep Van Bunge, Henri Krop, Piet Steenbakkers, and Jeroen van de Ven (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 208; and Totaro, "Res in Spinoza," 233.

8 Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate: Truth, Questions 1–9*, tr. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952), q. 1, a. 1 (Leon. 22.1.5), 6. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros sententiarum*, 4 vols., eds. Pierre Mandonnet and Maria F. Moos (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1929–1947), *Scriptum, I Sententiae* d. 25.1.4, sol., and *II Sententiae* d. 37.1.1, sol. Cf. Jan A. Aertsen, "Avicenna's Doctrine of the Primary Notions and its Impact on Medieval Philosophy," in *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages*, eds. Wim Raven and Anna Akasoy (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 29–30; and Daniel De Haan, "A Mereological Construal of the Primary Notions *Being* and *Thing* in Avicenna and Aquinas," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 88 (2014), 352–355. Cf. Totaro, "Res in Spinoza," 226n16.

9 Francisco Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae*, III.2.4, in *Opera Omnia* (1858), vols. 25–26, ed. Charles Berton (reprint Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967), hereafter abbreviated 'DM'.

The existence of a temporal thing is thus different from the a-temporal principle that accounts for its existence. Indeed, the distinction between temporal existence and eternity is expressed in (1) Suárez's contrast between *ens* as a participle and *ens* as a noun (*DM* II.4.3) and (2) his claim that the predication of something's being "one" or a unity, identifies it as something that signifies only the negation of another (*DM* IV.1.12; IV.2.6).¹⁰

In Spinoza's hands, the distinction between *ens* and *res* appears as the contrast between *natura naturans* (God and his attributes, i.e., creative activity) and *natura naturata* (the universe of modes) (E1p29s). That is, (1) *ens* the noun (substance, *τὸ esse*) and (2) *ens* the participle (the particular attribute or *activity* in terms of which things exist) is contrasted with (3) the way in which things (*res*) exist specifically as modes. In the Dutch *Short Treatise* (KV), Spinoza makes this tri-partite distinction explicit when he appeals to the vocabulary of *wezen* (being), *zaaken* (the participial principles that make things real), and *dingen* (the things that are identified by means of such principles). There he writes:

We have already seen that the attributes (or as others call them substances) are real things [*zaaken*], or to put it better or more properly, a being [*wezen*] existing through itself; and that this being therefore makes itself known through itself. We see that other things [*dingen*] are only modes of those attributes, and without them can neither exist nor be understood.¹¹

The attributes that account for the intelligibility and existence of things (*dingen*) are not things themselves but are rather the identification of those things as intelligible. Considered in itself, such identification is *wezen* (being itself, *τὸ esse*); but to the extent that anything is identified as one kind of thing or another, it is "realized" as an effect of real things (*zaaken*).¹²

This *Short Treatise* account parallels Suárez's distinction between (1) *ens*–as–noun, (2) *ens*–as–participle, and (3) *res*, and Spinoza's *Ethics* distinction between (1) substance, (2) attribute, and (3) mode. Indeed, for Suárez the distinction between *ens* as noun (*ens ipsum*, *τὸ esse*) and things

10 On *ens* as a participle and *ens* as a noun, see Adrian Heereboord, *Meletemata Philosophica* (Amsterdam: John Ravestein, 1665), 179 (col 2)–180 (col 1); and Di Vona, *Parte I*, 257. On how *ens* as a unity signifies a negation, see Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy*, 601–615. Cf. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Shlomo Pines (2 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1, 57: "God's unity is not an element superadded, but he is one without possessing the attribute of unity."

11 *Korte Verhandeling* I.vii (G I 46/C I 90). My translation of *zaaken* as "real things" draws on Shirley's similar rendering of *zaken* (the modern spelling) in KV I.vi/G I 42. It also highlights the point Spinoza makes in KV I.ii Dialogue 2 (G I 34), that God can be said to produce things (*dingen*) immediately by virtue of principles that make those things real: "In order to make things [*dingen*] exist, some things [*zaaken*] are required to produce the thing, and others are required for it to be produced" (C I 79). *Zaken* are thus *beings* in terms of which things (*dingen*) are conceived as specific kinds of existences: that is why *zaken* are properly called *attributes* of substance. In this way, Spinoza's distinction between *wezen*, *zaaken*, and *dingen* is intended to indicate how the indeterminate activity of being (*esse*) is expressed through activities that are reflexively identified as real causes of particular things.

12 See KV II.i (G I 19): God is "a being [*wezen*] of which all, or infinite, attributes are predicated." See also KV I.ii Dialogue 1 (G I 29). In this way, acts of being (*zaken*, *entia*) in terms of which things are real(ized) and intelligible are distinct from the things (*dingen*, *res*) they cause. That is why Spinoza writes, "if we use our intellect well in the knowledge of things [*zaaken*], we must know them in their causes" (KV II.v/G I 64/C I 107), for things understood in terms of their causes are *zaaken*, not *dingen*.

(*res*) is intelligible only in terms of *ens* as participle; but as with Spinoza, that does not mean that *ens* as participle is a specific thing or being.¹³ Rather, *ens* as participle—or in Spinoza’s terms, an attribute—is a principle by which a thing exists or is conceived to be this or that thing. But the principle does not have its own intelligibility, for that would assume that it has an essence rather than being the cause of something’s having an essence, which in turn would require an explanation for why “it” is the way it is. That would amount to confusing *ens* with *res*.¹⁴

My point in all this is to show how Spinoza describes substance and its attributes as beings (*entia*) but not things (*res*). Because they are beings, substance and its attributes are not things for which we need explanations; they are the principles by which the existence and the intelligibility of things are explained in the first place. This does not mean, though, that substance and attributes are brute facts or simply the kind of things that are inexplicable. Instead, it means that as principles that *account for* existence and intelligibility, they are not the kinds of things that are combinable into unities nor are they enumerable (even infinitely).

2. God Is *Ens*, not *Res*

For Spinoza, then, a substance can have infinite attributes without having an infinite *number* of attributes, because an attribute is not a countable or enumerable thing (*res*). Instead, an attribute identifies a substance as having a specific essence. As such, an attribute is how a substance and its modes (i.e., *things*) are intelligible in virtue of having been conceived in a certain way, but an attribute is not some thing to which substance or modes can be contrasted. As Spinoza tells John Hudde, “since God’s nature does not consist in a certain kind of being [*ens*] but in being [*Ens*] that is absolutely indeterminate, his nature also requires all that which perfectly expresses being itself [*τὸ esse*], since otherwise his nature would be determinate and deficient.”¹⁵ As the absolutely indeterminate cause of whatever has a specific or determinate essence, God is the *activity* that differentiates all things (*res*) with essences from one another; but he cannot be identified or differentiated as a distinctive being (*ens*) because he is the undifferentiated principle of all differentiation.¹⁶ In this way, as *τὸ esse*, God is not a thing at all.¹⁷ So, even to speak of God as a

13 See Spinoza to Tschirnhaus through Schuller, 29 July 1675, Ep 64 (G IV 277/S 918/C II 438). Cf. Samuel Newlands, “Thinking, Conceiving, and Idealism in Spinoza,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 94 (2012): 44–46.

14 It is not my intent to examine the differences between Thomistic, Suárezian, or Heereboordian (Scotistic) answers to the essence–existence distinction. It is only to indicate how certain features in their accounts clarify Spinoza’s view.

15 Spinoza to John Hudde, June 1666, Ep 36, G IV 185/C II 30; *Complete Works*, ed. Michael Morgan, tr. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 859. See Di Vona, *Parte II*, 211–213; Shannon Dea, “The Infinite and the Indeterminate in Spinoza,” *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 50 (2011), 604, 612–613; and Steven Parchment, “The God/Attribute Distinction in Spinoza’s Metaphysics: A Defense of Causal Objectivism,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 13 (1996): 63–64.

16 Cf. Spinoza, *Opere*, ed. by Filippo Mignini and Omero Proietti (Milan: Mondadori, 2007), xxi.

17 Robert Schnepf, *Metaphysik im ersten Teil der Ethik Spinozas* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1996), 148 n59 and 151–154, notes that we should identify *ens* and substance with one another. But by expanding the meaning of *res* to include whatever is cognizable (including *ens*), he undermines Spinoza’s careful distinction between *ens* and *res*.

determinate activity is to adopt the derivative vocabulary of things—which, of course, is already to think of such activity with a specificity that is thoroughly inappropriate.

That is why, when Spinoza insists in E1p25 that God is the efficient cause of the existence *and* essence of things, he does not assume that God has a specific essence other than being the power “by which he and all things are and act” (E1p34d/G II 77). In other words, God is “the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself” (E1p25s), for he is the activity by means of which all things are differentiated in virtue of what they do.

Since God is the activity of identification and differentiation itself, it is thus misleading to say that Spinoza’s definition of essence—“that which, being given, the thing (*res*) is also necessarily posited” (E2def2/G II 84)—applies to the “essence” of God or his attributes, for God does not himself have a *specific* essence other than in the derivative terms in which the existence of things is conceivable.¹⁸ Indeed, if God had such an essence, he would have it in virtue of some other thing, and that other thing would have its essence in virtue of something else—thus setting up an infinite regress.

In referring to God’s attributes, we thus refer only to what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting his essence (E1def4). In this way, when we speak of God, we make no claim about his essence as such or even whether he has an essence (other than in a derivative sense), for the activity by which we would identify such an essence would have to be understood in some way other than in terms of the activity.

Accordingly, the divine activity of *positing* anything is simply being itself (*τὸ εἶναι*). It is also why the cause of a determinate thing (*res*) is not another thing but rather the activity or being (*ens*) in terms of which it is understood as that determinate thing. As the cause of a thing, such a being (*ens*) is identifiable only in virtue of undifferentiated causal activity. That is why Spinoza tells Hudde that “God is being [*Deus est ens*] which is indeterminate in essence and omnipotent absolutely and not merely in a particular respect” (Ep 36, G IV 186/S 859/C II 30). Even on those rare occasions when Spinoza calls God *res cogitans* or *res extensa* (E2p1, E2p2), he does not mean that God is a particular thinking or extended *thing* at all, for that would mean that God is a thing whose essence or nature is differentiated by his unique existence. But God’s existence is *not* differentiated by his essence, so he is not *one* being or one thing in *any* sense, because:

a thing [*res*] can be called one or single only in respect of its existence, not of its essence [...]. Now since the existence of God is his very essence, and since we can form no universal idea of his essence, it is certain that he who calls God one or single has no true idea of God, or is speaking of him very improperly.¹⁹

18 Cf. Michael Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Substance Monism,” in *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, ed. Olli I. Koistinen and John I. Biro (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19; Sherry Deveaux, “The Divine Essence and the Conception of God in Spinoza,” *Synthese* 135 (2003): 329–338; and Sherry Deveaux, *The Role of God in Spinoza’s Metaphysics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 63–64. I am here suggesting that the definition of essence at E2def2—“to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is also necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is also necessarily taken away”—applies to *things* (E2 p7) but not to *beings*.

19 Spinoza to Jarig Jelles, 2 June 1674, Ep 50 (G IV 239–240/S 892/C II 406). Also see E1p20d, and CM I.6 (G I 245–246/S 186–187/C I 311–312). Cf. Mogens Laerke, “Spinoza’s Monism: What Monism?” in *Spinoza on Monism*, ed. Philip Goff (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 249–250.

In other words, God's existence (i.e., *esse ipsum*, activity itself) identifies his essence (E1p20d), but he is not differentiated from other things in virtue of his existence, for that would suggest that God's existence is somehow different from existence itself. When we say, then, that God is a thinking or extended thing (*res*), what we mean is that insofar as his essence is expressed in "a certain and determinate way"—that is, in terms of existence—he must be understood in terms of an attribute (E2p1d/G II 86). Indeed, it is only in terms of the expression of that attribute as a determinate (and thus derivative) thing that God is said to be a thinking or extended thing (*res*). So, despite the fact that God's activity of being (i.e., his existence) is the basis for the existence of all else that can be thought in terms of essence, he himself cannot be thought of as having an essence apart from that activity.

3. The Interchangeability of Substance and Attributes

That Spinoza thinks of substance and its attributes as interchangeable is apparent when he speaks of substances "or what is the same, their attributes" (E1p4d/G II 47–48; see also E1p19, E1p20c, E1p29s). As Curley notes, evidence of this interchangeability occurs as early as 1661, when Spinoza tells Oldenburg that, "by attribute I understand whatever is conceived through itself and in itself, so that its concept does not involve the concept of another thing."²⁰ A month later he writes, "by substance I understand what is conceived through itself and in itself, i.e., that whose concept does not involve the concept of another thing."²¹ And to Simon de Vries he writes in 1663:

By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., whose concept does not involve the concept of another thing. I understand the same by attribute, except that it is called attribute in relation to the intellect, which attributes a certain such nature to substance.²²

My point in citing these passages is to indicate how, for Spinoza, conceiving of a substance or its attributes does not involve conceiving of anything else. But to conceive of a substance or its attributes, we have to conceive of one or the other—that is, we have to conceive of one in terms of the other. "Substance" and "attribute" are interchangeable because a substance can be conceived only in terms of a certain nature or essence, which itself is intelligible only as an attribute. An attribute, in turn, can be conceived only as the activity by means of which a substance is identified as having a certain nature.²³ This is not to say that an attribute *has* a nature or essence. Rather, as that in terms of which

20 Spinoza to Oldenburg, Sept 1661, Ep 2 (G IV 7/C I 165). For Curley's comment, see C I 165n4.

21 Spinoza to Oldenburg, Oct 1661, Ep 4 (G IV 13/C I 171).

22 Spinoza to de Vries, March 1663, Ep 9 (G IV 46/C I 195). See also Spinoza, KV I.7 (G I 44/C I 88n) and AppIp3 (G I 115/C I 151). Cf. A. D. Smith, "Spinoza, Gueroult, and Substance," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88 (2014): 671.

23 On Spinoza's interchangeable use of substance and attribute, see Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza: Dieu* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1968), 426–427; and Melamed, "Glimpse," 275. On his interchangeable use of "essence" and "nature," cf. John P. Carriero, "On the Relationship between Mode and Substance in Spinoza's Metaphysics," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33 (1995): 252; and Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 50–51.

things are intelligible, an attribute is that in terms of which a thing exists and is conceived as that particular kind of thing.

It is not surprising, then, that Spinoza refers to the essence of a *thing* (*res*) as “that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived” (E2def2) to highlight how nothing can exist apart from its being conceivable in terms of some attribute. But unlike things, a substance and its attributes can neither be nor be conceived in terms of anything else, because they are the principles in terms of which things are said to exist and be conceivable.

As I have suggested, this way of thinking about attributes as principles (i.e., *beings*) by which things (*res*) are understood is presented in Spinoza’s *Cogitata Metaphysica* in terms of the act of being (*esse*) by which things are said to exist and be differentiated.²⁴ But since the *esse* of modes is intelligible only in terms of specific attributes, and attributes are only attributes of a substance, then the *esse* of the existence and essence of things can be properly described only in terms of God and his attributes and not in terms of any thing (*res*).²⁵

In the *Ethics*, the scholastic vocabulary promoted by Heereboord (e.g., *esse essentiae*, *esse existentiae*) is put aside, but Spinoza makes the same point. By insisting that “in nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute” (E1p5/G II 48), he insists that the identity of a substance consists in nothing other than its attributes. So “although two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct (i.e., one may be conceived without the aid of the other), we still cannot infer from that that they constitute two beings [*entia*], or two different substances” (E1p10s/G II 52), for as principles of distinction, attributes cannot themselves be *distinct* beings (*entia*) or substances—especially if both beings and substances are properly understood as principles of identification and differentiation. That is how, as the identification of a substance in terms of a certain nature or essence, “each [attribute] expresses the reality or being [*esse*] of substance” (E1p10s) in a way that makes things (*res*) intelligible without “itself” being understood as having an identity.²⁶

The being (*esse*) of a thing (*res*) can thus be distinguished in terms of its essence and existence, but the being (*esse*) of beings (*entia*)—substance and its attributes, that is, the activity of identifying and differentiating beings—cannot, because it constitutes their essence. Accordingly, it is of the essence of substance to be and to express the existence of all things in determinate, intelligible ways.²⁷ That is why Spinoza tells de Vries, “God’s existence and his intellect are not distinguished

24 See CM I.2/G I 238/C I 304. On Heereboord and Spinoza, see Di Vona, *Parte I*, 179–180, 259; and Di Vona, *Parte II*, 11.

25 The *Cogitata Metaphysica* is thus consistent with Spinoza’s later work. Cf. Melamed, “Glimpse,” 274–278; and Yitzhak Melamed, “The Building Blocks of Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance, Attributes, and Modes,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 91–94.

26 On “expression,” cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* [1968], tr. Martin Joughlin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 42–49; Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 89; Deveaux, *God*, 69–71; and Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Substance,” 20–21. For my purposes, “expresses” simply means “constitutes and thus identifies.”

27 Cf. Charles Jarrett, “Spinoza’s Distinction between Essence and Existence,” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2001), 245. On how Spinoza draws on Maimonides on this point, see Melamed, “Spinoza’s Deification,” 75–80, 87–93.

from his essence,” and “the existence of the attributes does not differ from their essence,”²⁸ for the beings (*entia*) in terms of which things exist constitute the intelligibility (i.e., essence) of those things but are not the things (*res*) themselves.

The concept of a substance, like that of an attribute, thus does not involve the concept of another thing, for substance and attributes are not things (*res*) that are intelligible in terms of other things; they are rather the causes of the existence and intelligibility of things. This means that the celebrated dispute about whether the E1def4/G II 45 definition of an attribute (“what the intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence”) is a subjectivist *invention* of the intellect or an objectivist *discovery* of a feature in a substance is beside the point, because talk of substance and attributes is not about the definition of some *thing*.²⁹ Indeed, substance cannot be conceived *as if* it has a certain identity which the intellect perceives (as the “subjectivist” interpretation of attributes suggests), for it is what accounts for existence and identity without itself existing in a certain way.³⁰ Furthermore, since substance is intelligibility itself, it makes no sense to ask what makes substance intelligible, for that would be like asking what makes intelligibility intelligible.

The objectivist interpretation of attributes is likewise misleading, in that the differentiation of attributes is not based on any essential differences in substance. Again, the key here lies in focusing on how substance is not a thing *at all* but rather the activity by which everything becomes intelligible in its own way (i.e., in terms of its attributes). The question of why there are multiple attributes is thus not resolved by thinking of them as different ways of perceiving substance, or by thinking of each attribute as characterizing its own substance, but by thinking of an attribute simply as what makes substance intelligible.

So, in the same way that no substance can be conceived or exist apart from its essence, no essence can exist or be conceived apart from its being expressed by an attribute (E1def6). That is why “each attribute of a substance expresses the reality or being [*realitatem sive esse*] of a substance” (E1p10s). And since “each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself” (E1p10), no attribute of a substance is conceivable in relation to any other attribute, and no substance is conceivable in relation to another substance (E1p14d).

The supposed difficulty created by the concept of attributes—namely, as being either ways of thinking about substance or ways in which substance is already intelligible—is overcome by noting how the distinction between *ens* and *res* shifts attention away from thinking about substance as if it were a thing to the process by which things are identified and related. Indeed, the fundamental distinction between a “being” and a “thing” to which Spinoza draws our attention indicates how

28 Spinoza to de Vries, March (?) 1663, Ep 10 (G IV 47/C I 196). Cf. Pierre Macherey, “The Problem of the Attributes,” in *The New Spinoza*, tr. Ted Stolze and ed. Warren Montag (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 75.

29 On the subjectivist–objectivist ways of reading Spinoza, see Wolfson, *Spinoza*, 1: 146–157; Gueroult, *Spinoza*, 428–461; and Francis S. Haserot, “Spinoza’s Definition of Attribute,” *Philosophical Review* 62 (1953): 507–512.

30 Cf. Alan Donagan, “Essence and the Distinction of Attributes in Spinoza’s Metaphysics,” in *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 164–181; Parchment, “God/Attribute,” 55–72; Thomas M. Lennon, “The Rationalist Conception of Substance,” in *A Companion to Rationalism*, ed. Alan Nelson (New York: Blackwell, 2005), 19–27; Deveaux, *God*, 5–6, 39–41; Della Rocca, “Substance Monism,” 18; and Noa Shein, “The False Dichotomy between Objective and Subjective Interpretations of Spinoza’s Theory of Attributes,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17 (2009), 509–511, 525.

substance and attributes should not be understood as things at all. That is why any effort to compare the activity by which something is identified and differentiated with the product of that activity risks objectifying that activity in a way that threatens the creativity of substance.

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