

Spinoza: Substance Monism

Spinoza shows that there cannot be two or more substances that have (share) the same attribute. Then, he shows that there is a substance with all possible attributes, which is God. The conclusion follows neatly: if no two substances can share an attribute, then the existence of a substance that has *all* attributes precludes the existence of any other substance. The argument for EIP14 has three steps that involve a cluster of sub-arguments:

First Step: No two substances can share an attribute. (P5)

1. ‘Two or more different things are distinguished from one another, either by a difference in the attributes of the substances or by a difference in their affections.’ (P4)
The PSR requires that non-identity is explained. We need something that individuates substances, and makes distinct or different two substances $S1$ and $S2$: $S1$ needs to have something that $S2$ lacks, *vice versa*. As Leibniz puts it: ‘no two substances are entirely alike, and differ only in number’ (*Discourse* §9). For $S1$ and $S2$ to count as *two* different substances, they must be discernible either by modes or by attributes.

The argument for P4:

2. If any entity x exists, then x exists either in itself or in something else (A1).
So, x is either a substance (= entity that is in itself) or a mode (= entity that is in, i.e. dependent on, something else) (D3, D5).
3. There is no conception of a substance without attribute (D4). An attribute is the principal property of a substance through which we conceive of it; substance without attribute is inconceivable, or inexplicable (to conceive of x = to explain x). There is a conceptual (but no real) distinction between the substance and its attribute. If so, this is reason to identify substance with attribute. Attributes are sets of fundamental explanations, or sets of basic laws. A mode, in contrast, i.e. a particular modification of an attribute, is conceived ‘through’ its attribute. This mode is explained by its attribute.
4. Hence, if $S1 \neq S2$, then $S1$ must have an attribute or mode that $S2$ lacks, or *vice versa*.
5. Therefore, two or more numerically distinct substances are distinguishable either by their modes or attributes (P4).
6. The difference is *not based on modes*, because modes are (i) accidental or peripheral properties, and (ii) substance is prior to its modes; and hence attributes are prior to modes. (P1, D4)
 - (a) *Two* things might be modified in exactly the same way; so, modes cannot explain the difference between them.
 - (b) Modes are explained, and conceived, through the attribute of which they are determinations: modes are conceptually dependent on attributes (D5). So, any difference between modes implies a difference between attributes. Since attributes are (ontologically and conceptually) ‘prior’ to modes (P1), modes can be ‘put on one side’ (i.e. ignored) (P5D).

7. The difference is *not based on attributes* either. If *S1* and *S2* are distinguished by a difference in their attributes, then any given attribute *A* can be possessed by only one of them (P5D). For if *A* is had by *S1* and *S2*, *A* cannot make the difference between them: *A* is what they *share*. If *S1* and *S2* both have *A*,¹ then *S1* and *S2* are indiscernible. And if *S1* and *S2* are indiscernible, then *S1* and *S2* cannot be numerically distinct; so $S1 = S2$. Therefore, *two* substances with *one* nature are impossible:
8. P5: 'There cannot be two or more substances that share the same attribute.'
Hence every substance is *unique*, or one of its kind: if there is a thinking substance, there is one thinking substance; and if there is an extended substance, there is one extended substance, etc. It is still open whether there are two (or more) substances that do *not* share their attributes. This possibility is eliminated only if there is a substance that has all attributes. Hence:

Second Step: There is a substance that has all possible attributes. (P11)

9. P3: 'If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other'. In order for *S1* to cause *S2*, they must 'have something in common', i.e. they must be conceptually related. And D3 says that a substance is conceived through itself. So, P6 claims that a substance cannot be produced or caused by another substance. Given that causation is a *conceptual* relation (A4), substance is not only self-explanatory but also self-caused. Causal-explanatory rationalism: effects logically follow (are *a priori* deducible) from their causes (A4); causal relations are inferential relations.
10. P7: 'It pertains to the nature of substance to exist.' If a substance is not caused by anything else, then it is self-caused. And if it is coherently conceivable (D1), then it exists.
11. According to P8, a substance is *infinite*, because if it were finite, it would have to be 'limited' by something of the same kind, or sharing an attribute (D2), which is ruled out by P5. So, since no substance is limited, every substance is infinite.
12. Such a substance is God (D6). P7 shows that substance essentially exists, so God's non-existence is inconceivable (A7). This is an 'ontological' argument.

Third Step: The existence of this substance excludes the existence of any other substance. (P14)

'Except God, no substance can be or be conceived': God, *or* Nature (cf. IV *Preface*) is the only substance that exists or can be conceived. Given D3, it swiftly follows that everything is in God *or* Nature and nothing can be, or be conceived, without God *or* Nature (P15). God is not the traditional anthropomorphic and transcendental creator (P15S).

¹ Leibniz objects: what if *S1* has *A1* and *A2*, and *S2* has *A1* and *A3*, say? If this is possible, substances may share some attributes after all (see C. I. Gerhardt, *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, 1875, Bd. I, p. 141).

