

# SPINOZA'S SUBSTANCE: A REPLY TO CURLEY

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## INTRODUCTION

Any interpretation of the concept of substance must bring with it an interpretation of the concept of modes as both concepts are inter-linked. Spinoza's commentators have much debated about a coherent interpretation of Spinoza's substance and modes as well as trying to understand how exactly such concepts fit into Spinoza's philosophical system.

Three major commentators stand out due to their influence over Spinoza's readers along the years, namely, Pierre Bayle, HA Wolfson and Edwin Curley. Pierre Bayle, the 17<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher, provided the first commentary on Spinoza's writings in his *DICIONNAIRE HISTORIQUE ET CRITIQUE*. There Bayle read Spinoza as a Cartesian, and as such, Bayle understood Spinoza's substance and mode in a Cartesian sense, i.e. that substance is the subject whilst the modes or accidents are the properties which inhere in the subject (It is interesting to note here is that the Scholastics understood these terms in much the same way). That is to say that the relation between substance and modes is something like a subject-predicate relation.

HA Wolfson, a very influential commentator of Spinoza from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in his *THE PHILOSOPHY OF SPINOZA* understood Spinoza as an Aristotelian and that the term substance is to be understood as the *summum genus* or as the highest form of existence or highest form of Being, i.e. Wolfson understands that the substance exists over and above and beyond the totality of its own modes or modifications. Explaining this further: Wolfson understands that when Spinoza says that a mode is 'in' a substance, he is saying that that relation between substance and mode is the same as the relation between a species to a genus. That is, a mode is a sort of species because it is a part, a division, of a higher form of 'Being', and a substance is the *summum genus* because the substance is the highest form of 'Being' and thus it is not a part, not a division, of any form of 'being'.

Thus, Wolfson interprets the relation between substance and mode as a relation between the parts to the whole of a species-genus kind.

The other major interpretation of Spinoza's substance was put forward by Edwin Curley in his *SPINOZA'S METAPHYSICS*. There, Curley argues that by substance Spinoza meant the *natura naturans* only rather than Nature as a whole; the *natura naturata* are now merely regarded as the sum of all created modes.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he identifies the substance, now the *natura naturans*, with the physical laws or principles which reign in our physical world; and the *natura naturata* as the physical world itself. That is to say that Curley reads Spinoza's metaphysics in the light of modern physics. In this paper I want to provide the reader with my critique of Curley's interpretation. I will attempt to demonstrate that Curley's reading is not true to the letter of Spinoza's philosophy and as such it must be rejected. I beg the reader to note that I will neither attempt in this paper to provide an alternative account of Spinoza's substance, nor will I attempt to re-establish either Bayle's or Wolfson's reading as the correct interpretation. My sole aim, as I said, in this paper is to demonstrate the flaws in Curley's account and thus to demonstrate the reasons for my rejection of his reading.

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<sup>1</sup> NB. I am presupposing here that the reader is familiar with Spinoza's metaphysical system. For those who are not acquainted with his system it will suffice here to say that it is a commonly held view among Spinoza's commentators that Spinoza understood that the substance (and he understands that God or Nature is a substance) manifests itself as *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. That is, the substance has an active manifestation, viz. *natura naturans* (i.e. it could be said that this is God as creator or Nature as the essence of all things), and a passive manifestation, viz. *natura naturata* (i.e. it could be said that this is God as creation, which leads us to pantheism since everything is divinised, or Nature as a physical system). Curley's reading breaks away from this traditional reading, as it understands that when Spinoza talks about substance he means only the *natura naturans*. Also, it may strike the reader as rather odd to identify God with Nature, however, Spinoza does identify God as Nature (*Deus sive Nature*) in a few passages of his writings. For matters of space I cannot deal with this issue in detail here, it will suffice to say here that Spinoza was a pantheist.

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## CURLEY'S INTERPRETATION

Curley (1969:40-43) argues that when Spinoza talks about substance he is not referring to God or Nature as a whole as previous commentators held but only to the *natura naturans*, i.e. the active self-creating manifestation of God or Nature; *natura naturans* is God as creator or Nature as essence. Thus, in Curley's reading the notion of substance does not apply to the *natura naturata*, i.e. the passive manifestation of God or Nature, which is now regarded as the mere sum of the substance modifications.<sup>2</sup>

Curley's reading can be summarised as defending two distinct thesis, as follows:

- i. that the concept of 'substance' should be understood as denoting solely the active part of nature, or the *natura naturans*, or God as creator or Nature as essence, and not as God or Nature as a whole.
- ii. that the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* corresponds to a distinction between the concepts of 'substance' and 'mode', and this distinction in turn also represents a division of God or Nature as a whole.

I note that Curley's reading of Spinoza's thought is one of the most radical among Spinoza's commentators, and I can identify two criticisms of his interpretation, which, in my opinion, undermine his whole argument.

## TEXTUAL CRITICISM

The first criticism is textual, that is, it is my understanding that Curley is misinterpreting Spinoza's writings so that the textual evidence may match his new reading of Spinozism, as I shall demonstrate now.

It is true that Spinoza divides the substance, or God or Nature, in the *SHORT TREATISE* in *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. In there, by *natura naturans* Spinoza (1985:91) means "*a being that we conceive clearly and distinctly through itself, without needing anything other than itself, i.e. God*", and by *natura naturata* he means "*those modes or creatures which immediately depend on, or have been created by God*" (ST VIII).<sup>3</sup> This extract from the

*SHORT TREATISE* seems to corroborate Curley's interpretation, and he refers to these passages whilst backing up his interpretation that Spinoza's substance is to be identified with the *natura naturans* rather than the whole of Nature. I, however, note that this extract is out of place since the previous sentence of the quoted passage in the *SHORT TREATISE* states that "*Here, before we proceed to anything else, we shall briefly divide the whole of Nature into natura naturans and natura naturata.*" (ST VIII),<sup>4</sup> and earlier Spinoza asserts, "*From all of these it follows that Nature...consists of infinite attributes, of which each is perfect in kind. This agrees perfectly with the definition one gives of God*" (ST II [12]).<sup>5</sup> Thus, Spinoza in the *SHORT TREATISE* does identify his unique substance, with God, and then, with the whole of Nature. After this he takes his argument further and divides the substance, now God or Nature as a whole, into two capacities, viz. *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. After doing so, it appears that he commits an inconsistency by identifying God with the *natura naturans* only, rather than with God or Nature as a whole. One of the reasons that this might be so is that the *SHORT TREATISE* is a forerunner of the *ETHICS*, and thus, it might be seen as a sort of early draft for his final work – the *ETHICS*. That is to say, Curley fails to acknowledge that even if Spinoza is being inconsistent in the *SHORT TREATISE*, Spinoza may have changed his mind or corrected himself in the *ETHICS*, where this inconsistency does not occur.

The following passages of the *ETHICS* corroborate my point. In the *ETHICS* Spinoza is very clear in his views, he does identify the substance with God (which he later identifies with Nature as whole), and he does divide the substance into two capacities, viz. *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* or in creator and creation, as follows:

There are some who think God to be like man in mind and body, liable to all passions. Yet how far this is from a true conception of God must be seen already from what has already been proved. But I will pass by these people; for those who have considered divine nature in any manner have denied that God is corporeal; which they have excellently proved from the fact that by body we understand a certain quantity in length, breadth, and depth, with a certain scope, and what could be more absurd than to say this of God, a being absolutely

<sup>2</sup> Edwin Curley, *SPINOZA'S METAPHYSICS*, Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 1969, pp.40-43.

<sup>3</sup> Baruch Spinoza, "Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well Being", in *THE COLLECTED WORKS OF SPINOZA*, Vol. I, ed. and trans., Curley, E., Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Spinoza, "SHORT TREATISE", p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

infinite? However, from other arguments by which they try to prove this point, they show clearly that they completely separate corporeal or extended substance from divine nature and regard it as created by God. But from what divine power it could have been created they know not, which shows that they do not understand what they themselves are saying. But I at least have proved with sufficient clearness, I think, that no substance can be produced or created from another. Moreover, we have shown that save God no substance can be granted or conceived. Hence we conclude that extended substance is one of the infinite attributes of God. (E I p 15, Note)

and

Before proceeding, I would wish to explain, or rather to remind you, what we must understand by active and passive nature (*natura naturans* and *natura naturata*), for I think that from the propositions we shall agree that by nature active, i.e. *natura naturans*, we must understand that which is in itself and through itself conceived...that is God, in so far as he is considered as free cause. But by nature passive, i.e. *natura naturata*, I understand all that follows from the necessity of the nature of God,..., that is, all the modes of the attributes of God, in so far as they are considered as things which are in God, and which cannot exist or be conceived without God. (E I p 29, Note)

Let us now scrutinise these two passages of the ETHICS. In the note to proposition 15, Spinoza clearly states that he understands his unique substance (or God or Nature, as he identifies the substance with God, and then God with Nature later in the ETHICS) to be extended. That is to say that Spinoza is identifying his substance (God or Nature) with the world as a physical and self-contained system. And thus, he is going against the established trend of his time, which holds the view that God is a transcendent entity, i.e. an entity set apart from the world. For Spinoza, the substance (God or Nature) is immanent to all things that exist. That is, Spinoza is defending a pantheistic view of the world, as he is divinising everything that exists, the world is God or Nature. Further support for this is found on the note to proposition 29. Here Spinoza clearly states that the substance, or God or Nature, manifests itself as *natura naturans*, i.e. creator or essence, and as *natura naturata*, i.e. creation or physical system. That is,

Spinoza understands that Reality is God or Nature both in so far as it is a physical self-contained system or *natura naturata* as well as creator insofar as it is the essence of everything or *natura naturans*, i.e. everything is a modification of the substance, or a modification of God or Nature, and everything is created by the substance, or created by an immanent God or Nature.

But why does Spinoza understand that the substance manifests itself into those two capacities? One can answer this question on two levels. On a theoretical level, I mean, when Spinoza is devising his metaphysical system about the ontology of the world, he understands that substance is *causa sui*, I quote: "*Existence appertains to the nature of the substance; A substance cannot be produced from anything else: it will therefore be its own cause, that is, its essence necessarily involves existence, or existence appertains to the nature of it*" (E I p 7). Since God or Nature is a substance, then God or Nature is *causa sui* also, and this entails that God or Nature is necessarily simultaneously creator and creation. Thus, Spinoza holding that God or Nature manifests itself as *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, or a creator and creation. On a different level, I mean, on a more practical level, i.e. when Spinoza is applying his views to reality, Spinoza holds this view because he understands that the world is in constant change, or in movement and rest, as he puts it, and thus if the substance manifested itself merely as a physical self-contained system, i.e. creation, then the world would be a place without change, a place in stillness. So since the world is dynamic, since it is in constant change, then the substance must have an active power, an essence, which serves as the moving force or life force to all things in the physical world. This is the reason why Spinoza divides, in proposition 29, his unique substance, i.e. God or Nature, into two manifestations, one active, i.e. *natura naturans* or God as creator or Nature as essence, the other passive, i.e. *natura naturata* or God as creation or Nature as a physical self-contained system. Explaining this further: when one speaks of God or Nature, one can speak of God as creator and of Nature as the essence of a thing, and one can also speak of God as creation (i.e. one can divinise the world, one can be a pantheist) and that Nature is a physical self-contained system. Spinoza combined those distinct meanings in his metaphysical theory and this is the reason why he ascribed his unique substance, or God or Nature, with two manifestations, one creative, the other created.

Let us now refer the above to Curley's second thesis. This thesis, i.e. that the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* corresponds to the distinction between substance and modes, does not hold, because the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* is not a distinction between substance and mode, rather it is a distinction of how the one substance manifests itself, that is, as creator and as creation, or as essence and as a physical system. In fact, I contend that Curley, by holding to the thesis that the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* is a distinction between substance and mode, is in danger of turning Spinoza's God or Nature into a transcendental entity, rather than the immanent one, which is without a doubt the view which Spinoza holds.

Hence, it is my understanding that Curley is misreading Spinoza's argument, since Spinoza's argument in the *ETHICS* can be summarised as:

- i. there is only one substance.
- ii. God is a substance.
- iii. God is Nature, Nature as a whole.
- iv. God or Nature manifests itself in two manners, i.e. the creative manifestation or *natura naturans*, and the created manifestation or *natura naturata*.

Curley understands Spinoza's argument differently:

- i. there is only one substance.
- ii. God is a substance.
- iii. God is the active manifestation of Nature, i.e. the *natura naturans*.

It is my understanding that Curley is misreading Spinoza's argument by bypassing step iii. of Spinoza's argument, i.e. God is Nature, and jumping straight onto step iv. of Spinoza's argument, i.e. Nature has two manifestations, one active, the other passive. By bypassing step iii. of Spinoza's argument Curley is able to conclude that God or the unique substance is solely the active manifestation of Nature, i.e. *natura naturans*. Moreover, he is able to do so because of an inconsistency in Spinoza's writings, which is present in the *SHORT TREATISE*, but not in the *ETHICS*.

## PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICISM

My second criticism is more philosophical than textual and it is directly related to Curley's first thesis,

i.e. that by substance Spinoza meant only the active part of nature, and not to Nature as a whole. This criticism was first noted by Williamson (1973:159), I quote:

To take it that 'substance' denotes only the active parts of Nature cannot be consistent with Spinoza's statement that 'in the nature of things only one substance exists, and that is absolute infinite'. That which is absolute infinite cannot be less than the totality of things, since then there would be something other than the absolute infinite, and that would involve a contradiction.<sup>6</sup>

To which Curley (1973:163) replied that:

Now I thought there was a plausible interpretation of the absolute infinity of substance which would not entail that it is the totality of things. Substance is absolute infinite because it consists of infinitely many attributes, each of which 'expresses eternal and infinite essence' (E ID6). The question is: what is to be understood by saying that an attribute, like extension, expresses eternal and infinite essence? I suggested that this meant that the fundamental laws of the science of extended objects, those laws that characterise the nature of extension, are absolutely necessary and strictly universal propositions which are not spatially or temporarily qualified in any way.<sup>7</sup>

Again, I understand that Curley is bending the argument towards his desired conclusion. Spinoza understood that Metaphysics is the 'science of Being', that is, the purpose of metaphysics is to enquire into the nature of Reality.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Spinoza also

<sup>6</sup> RK Williamson, "On Curley's Interpretation of Spinoza", in *AUSTRALASIAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY*, Vol. 51, No. 2, August 1973, p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> EM Curley, "Reply to Williamson", in *AUSTRALASIAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY*, Vol. 51, No. 2, August 1973, p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> NB. Bubner (1997:xi-xvi) makes an interesting point in his book *GERMAN IDEALIST PHILOSOPHY*. He traces the study of metaphysics back to the Ancient Greek philosophers and establishes that, then, metaphysical enquiry was an enquiry into the nature of Reality. That is to say, that metaphysical enquiry was a study into Being, i.e. a study that aimed to establish knowledge of what really exists, why it exists and the way it exists. It is only later, with the rise of Christianity and the Scholastics, that the nature of metaphysical enquiry shifts into an enquiry about knowledge of the Deity, the soul and immortality. Bubner was making a point regarding Kant's philosophy, but this does not need to concern us here. The point I am making here is that Spinoza breaks away from the Cartesian and Scholastic metaphysical trend, and tries to re-establish Metaphysics as a Science of Being. True he still uses the terminology [CONTINUA]



subscribed to the philosophical tradition which understood that philosophy had to be systematic, that is, from one single and simple principle, one should be able to derive and construct a whole coherent philosophical system. For Spinoza such a principle is substance. Thus, for Spinoza, substance, or God or Nature, represents the highest form of existence, i.e. the highest form of 'Being', and the simplest single principle out of which the whole of Reality could be explained. An attribute is supposed to be a true and complete account of the unique substance and Spinoza reminds us that the substance possesses an infinite number of attributes, of which human beings have access to only two, namely, the mental and the physical attributes. Now, Curley says that there is a way by which his substance can be seen as absolutely infinite, such way being to identify the substance with the physical laws or principles which reign in our physical Universe (and within the extension attribute). I take issue with Curley's views at this point. To say that something is the underlying physical laws or principles which constitute our physical Universe, is to say that they are infinite, because every material thing within the Universe is constructed under such principles, but it is not to say that this same thing is the absolute infinite, as Curley suggests it to be. To say that something is 'absolute infinite', is to say that it encompasses all that exists, it is to say that it is the whole of Reality, as Spinoza puts it: "in the nature of things only one substance exists, and that is absolute infinite" (E I p 10). Curley's understanding that the substance is absolute infinite because it is the underlying physical laws or principles of our physical Universe does not stand because it does not represent the whole of Reality, it does not account for matter or mental concepts for instance, and hence it could be said that it is 'infinite' because it is after all the underlying principles in our Universe, but not that it is 'absolute infinite', since it does not account for the whole of Reality. In contrast, the interpretation that by substance Spinoza meant God as creator and creation and Nature as the essence of all things and as a physical self-contained system is perfectly compatible with the statement 'absolute infinite', and thus, I argue that it ought to be preferred to Curley's interpretation.

[CONTINUAÇÃO DA NOTA 8] used by Cartesians and Scholastics, such as God, substance and modes, however he applies different meanings to those terms, such as in the case of God, who is not a transcendental being, but Nature as a whole. R. Bubner, GERMAN IDEALIST PHILOSOPHY, London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1997, pp. xi-xvi.

## CURLEY'S MOTIVATION

Let me now assess Curley's motivation for defending this reading of Spinoza's substance. Curley's motivation in putting forward such interpretation was, in the main, to provide a new coherent interpretation, i.e. Curley understands that all previous interpretations are flawed for one reason or another. Curley (1969:78) says:

Such...is the interpretation of the concepts of substance and mode in Spinoza which I am proposing. It has the advantage of being a fairly definite interpretation. It has, also, the advantage of presenting Spinoza's metaphysics as one which, in my judgement, is coherent and plausible. And it has the advantage,..., of rendering intelligible many things which are otherwise obscure.<sup>9</sup>

I agree with Curley's point here that his interpretation of the concepts of substance and mode in Spinoza's philosophy is very attractive. It is tantalising to try to make sense of Spinoza's metaphysical system by interpreting the concept of substance as the laws of nature, and the concept of modes as the physical world. However, I understand that Curley's interpretation is in fact a re-interpretation of these concepts, that is, it does not truly portray what Spinoza meant by those terms, it merely re-interprets it in the light of what we now know about the nature of our Universe. Curley seems to be aware of this fact since in the same page he says:

Another objection, which must inevitably arise, is that I have provided, not an interpretation, but an anachronistic reinterpretation in the light of subsequent thought.<sup>10</sup>

To which he replied in the following page:

This is a charge to which I must concede substantial merit. No doubt my preference for translating Spinoza's language into the language of logical atomism is due...to my upbringing. But...there are a number of things to be said in my defense. First the seventeenth century is not...a very remote ancestor of our own century...In particular, it (the seventeenth century) gave prominence to the idea that laws play an essential role in explanation. Even if this did not occur in Spinoza, we should have to recognise it in Descartes. Moreover, we ought not to underestimate the intelligence of these men by

<sup>9</sup> Curley, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

supposing that, because they lacked the means we have for expressing ourselves, they could not see what we see. I have attributed to Spinoza the insight that laws alone are not sufficient for the explanation of any particular fact. It does not strike me as implausible that an intelligent man, well acquainted with the science of his time, should see this.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Curley tries to brush aside that his is a re-interpretation of Spinoza's doctrine of substance and mode by maintaining that Spinoza was a very intelligent and well-acquainted man. I am sure he was, since to this date we are still studying his doctrines. But this does not support Curley's reading at all. Curley fails to provide the hard evidence, demonstrating that Spinoza understood that substance is the laws of physics that reign in our Universe, and that modes are the physical things in the world. Curley's statements here are sheer conjecture.

#### CONCLUSION

In light of this, I argue that Curley's interpretation of Spinoza's views ought to be rejected because it is neither compatible with Spinozism nor does it comply with the textual evidence. Curley's views seem to form a coherent and appealing system, since it reads Spinoza's metaphysics in the light of modern physics. But this is not to say that Curley's interpretation truly portrays Spinozism as Spinoza envisaged it. With respect to this, Curley is not alone, as so many commentators have failed to truly grasp Spinoza's work and have provided a distorted view of his doctrines. One could perhaps say that Curley's views may be called something like Curleyism or Neo-Spinozism – a doctrine built upon Spinoza's doctrines, but not Spinozism per se.

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<sup>11</sup> Curley, op. cit., p.79.