**Spinoza and the Puzzle of Attributes: An Essentialist Approach**

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(June 2021)

**Introduction:**

In Spinoza’s ontology, there are only two categories of existing items: an independent entity that is one substance, and dependent entities that are infinite modes; “nothing exists external to the intellect except substances and their affections” (Proof of 1.P.4). Nevertheless, Spinoza introduces a third notion, ‘attribute’, that is defined as “what the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence” (1.d.4). Spinoza’s metaphysics is known for the doctrine of substance monism that indicates that only one substance, God, exists. The substance is supposed to be simple and is not constituted of any parts. Spinoza, however, explicitly states that “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.” These remarks have created a perplexing puzzle regarding the ontological/metaphysical status of attributes in Spinoza’s philosophy. Given this introduction, the main question of this paper is: what is the metaphysical/ontological status of attributes in Spinoza’s metaphysics? In the literature, in general, there are two rival interpretations that put forward different answers to this question.

On the one hand, one approach is to defend the realist position according to which attributes are metaphysically real and they are real constituents of God. On the other hand, one can take the anti-realist position regarding the ontological status of attributes, arguing that attributes are not objects and do not constitute the essence of God, rather they are created in a finite intellect that is capable of understanding the substance. According to this interpretation, attributes do not, metaphysically speaking, belong to substance; rather they are what a finite intellect perceives of substance *as if* constituting its essence.

In this paper, I will provide some textual evidence from Spinoza’s works that contradicts both the realist and the anti-realist interpretations described above. As an alternative, I put forward a new account according to which attributes are not illusory or mind-dependent; rather they are real and objective. Nevertheless, attributes should not be understood as distinct things in Spinoza metaphysics; rather the attributes reveal the ways that the infinite and indeterminate substance is. I try to show that this new interpretation keeps the advantages of both the realist and the anti-realist interpretations without facing their difficulties.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first part, I explain why the notion of attribute creates a puzzle in understanding Spinoza’s metaphysics. The second part examines the defensibility of a version of the realist interpretation proposed by Edvin Curley (1988). In the third part, I explore an alternative interpretation defended by Wolfson (1934) and explain why this anti-realist interpretation does not fully explain the features of attributes in Spinoza’s metaphysics. Finally, I put forward a new interpretation based upon the notion of essence.

**1: Spinoza’s Attribute: A Metaphysical Puzzle**

The notion of attribute, alongside the notions of substance and mode, forms the main structure of Spinoza’s metaphysics. Substance, according to Spinoza, is something that exists “in itself and is conceived through itself” (1.d.3).[[3]](#footnote-3) He clarifies this claim by adding that the “conception of [substance] does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed” (1.d.3). This definition implies that substance is both ontologically and conceptually independent. The substance is self-caused since it does not depend on anything else in order to exist, also the existence of substance is self-explanatory because it is conceived through itself; substance does not need to be conceived through something else. These features of being a substance plus the principle of sufficient reason (that is accepted as a self-evident assumption throughout Spinoza’s metaphysics) make Spinoza believes that there is only one substance (1p14) that necessarily exists and that is absolutely infinite (1p11), and consequently this substance is God (according to Spinoza’s definition, God is an absolutely infinite substance). Since the substance is the most fundamental real thing, accordingly, all other existing things inhere in the substance; this means that the existence of other things is caused and explained by the substance, and the conception of everything is also conceived through the substance.

In addition to the substance, there are modes that are, in Spinoza’s definition, “the affections of the substance.” A mode exists in something else and is conceived through something else (1.d.5). All finite particular things/objects that occupy the world, in Spinoza’s view, are modes of an infinite substance (1p25c). Modes, by definition, do not have independent being; nevertheless, in Spinoza’s ontology, modes should be understood as real and ontologically distinct from the substance. Besides textual evidence in *Ethics*, this issue is explicitly articulated in one of his important philosophical letters, “The Letter on the Infinite,” where Spinoza argues that the existence of modes is entirely different from the existence of the substance. Spinoza writes:

[W]e conceive the existence of Substance to be entirely different from the existence of Modes. The difference between Eternity and Duration arises from this. For it is only of Modes that we can explicate existence [*existentiam explicare possumus*] by Duration. But [we can explicate the existence] of Substance by Eternity, i.e., the infinite enjoyment of existing, *or* (in bad Latin) of being (G 4:54.33- 55.3).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Substance is a self-supporting and conceptually independent entity. A mode, in contrast, is an entity that inheres in a substance through which it is also conceived. Thus, the substance is ontologically prior to its affections, and modes entirely depend on the substance. Given this distinction, Spinoza’s philosophy, ontologically speaking, provides the list of existing items as follows: one substance (God), and infinite modes that depend on God for their existence. He also notes that “[a]ll things that are, are either in themselves or in something else” (1.a.1) which means that, in his ontology, there are only two categories of existing items: independent entity that is one substance, and dependent entities that are infinite modes; “nothing exists external to the intellect except substances and their affections” (Proof of 1.p.4).

As we see, it sounds uncontroversial that Spinoza’s ontology is committed to the existence of substance and modes and nothing else; nonetheless, Spinoza, at the very outset of his major work, *Ethics*, introduces a third metaphysical notion, ‘attribute’, that is defined as “what the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence” (1.d.4). Spinoza also holds that the substance, God, consists of infinite attributes: “by God I mean an absolutely infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence” (1.d.6). To justify this claim, Spinoza argues as follows: since God is an absolutely infinite substance (1.d.6), he is not limited in any way (1.d.2). If there was an attribute that God didn’t have, there would be a limitation in God. So, God, by definition, enjoys all attributes. Thus, Spinoza believes in an absolute substance with an infinite number of attributes.

Spinoza’s remarks on the notion of attributes, however, have created difficulties in understanding his metaphysics. As mentioned above, Spinoza’s metaphysics is known for the doctrine of substance monism that indicates that only one substance, God, exists. In addition, the substance is supposed to be absolutely simple and indivisible (1.p.13); thus, the substance cannot be constituted of any parts. Since parts are ontologically prior to their whole, and nothing is prior to the substance, the substance cannot have parts. Hence, it is wrong to assume that attributes are the mereological parts of God (1.p.12 proof). Spinoza, however, explicitly states that “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists” (1.p.11). These remarks create a perplexing puzzle regarding the ontological status of attributes in Spinoza’s philosophy and raise the questions of whether attributes really constitute the essence of substance, or what Spinoza really means by “God consists of an infinity of attributes” if the substance is really simple and indivisible.

Spinoza’s theory of attribute has been one of the most controversial and even the most complicated aspect of his ontology. Thus, it may not seem surprising that scholars have come up with various solutions regarding how to deal with the mentioned puzzle. Exploring some of traditional interpretations of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, throughout this paper, I investigate whether attributes are distinct entities among other real existing things, or whether attributes should be merely understood as a mental construct that is perceived by an intellect.

In general, most of views regarding Spinoza’s notion of attributes can be classified into two categories that are entitled ‘realist’ and ‘anti-realist’ interpretations throughout this paper. It is worth noting that Spinoza’s writings and terminology themselves are the main source of ambiguity about attributes and open up the possibility of both interpretations. In the definition of attributes, for instance, Spinoza uses the Latin term ‘tanquam*[[5]](#footnote-5)*’ which can be correctly translated into English both as ‘as if’ and as ‘as.’  Scholars who tend to take an anti-realist position regarding attributes translate ‘tanquam’ as ‘as if’, arguing that attributes are not really the essence of substance; rather they appear to be the essence of substance. In contrast, those who defend the realist interpretation of attributes believe that ‘tanquam’ should be translated as ‘as’. Consequently, each attribute really is the essence of substance. Both views find supporting textual evidence from Spinoza’s writings; however, there are remarks that pose difficulties for both interpretations. Reviewing some of the main ideas of both interpretations, in the following paragraphs, I try to show why neither of these interpretations provides a satisfactory account of what attributes are in Spinoza’s philosophy.

**2: The Realist Interpretation of Attributes:**

Spinoza believes that attributes are metaphysically distinguishing in the sense that if two things had different attributes, they would be metaphysically distinct from each other: “two or more distinct things are distinguished from one another either by the difference of the attributes of the substances or by the difference of the affections of the substances” (1.p.4). Also, he mentions that attributes add more reality to a thing, “the more reality or being a thing has, the more attributes it has” (1.p.9). This proposition is an emphasis on the metaphysical role of attributes.

In addition, in several places, Spinoza asserts that attributes inhere in and are conceived through themselves. In (1.p.10), for instance, Spinoza holds that each attribute, just like the substance, is conceived through itself “[e]ach attribute of one substance must be conceived through itself.” He relies on this proposition, in (2.p.6), to prove that attributes are causally independent from each other and modes that belong to different attributes cannot have causal interaction. It seems that here Spinoza ascribes the features of substance to attributes. Substance is in itself and is conceived through itself; so are the attributes. “By attribute I understand whatever is conceived through itself and in itself, so that its concept does not involve the concept ofanother thing” (Ep. 2/ G 4:7.24– 28).[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, attributes, similar to the substance, are conceptuallyand causally independent. For Spinoza also, attributes are eternal, indivisible, and infinite; these are exactly the same characterizations of the substance. Furthermore, in one of his letters, Spinoza holds that substance “must be infinite, or supremely perfect *of its kind*” (Ep. 2/ G 4:7.24– 28.)[[7]](#footnote-7) The same characterization is ascribed to attributes in *Ethics* (1.d.6) where Spinoza says that an attribute is a “thing [that] is only infinite in its own kind.”

Based upon these remarks, it is not extravagant to conclude that for Spinoza there is close conceptual connection between substance and attribute. This close connection is the main motivation for some scholars to defend the realist approach regarding the ontological status of attributes. According to this realist interpretation, attributes are ontologically distinct things and each of them really constitutes the essence of God. Now the question is how there can be only one simple substance if this substance is constituted by multiple distinct essences.

Edwin Curley (1988), who is a prominent scholar in the realist camp, approaches this question by holding that “the attributes of substance satisfy the definition of substance” (Curley, 1988, p. 29); accordingly, there are an infinite number of substances that are distinct from each other; each one exists in itself and is conceived through itself. These attributes (or substances), however, come together to form a complex substance that is called God. Put differently, according to Curley, roughly speaking, God is supposed to be a compound substance that is constituted by infinite attributes that constitute the essence of God as a particular complex of “very special elements” (attributes) (Ibid, p. 30).

The very self-sufficiency of each of the attributes, the fact that it is true of each of them that it does not need the others in order to exist implies that there is no real possibility that at any time any one of them does exist without the others. The existence of each one of the attributes implies the existence of all the others. Paraphrasing what Spinoza says in 1p1os, all the attributes of the substance have always been together. Since each of them, considered separately, exists in itself and is conceived through itself, they always had to be in it together. (Ibid, p. 30).

Spinoza’s philosophy, on this interpretation, is still committed to two types of ontological categories: an infinite number of substances (attributes), and the affection of these substances, i.e., an infinite number of modes; there is nothing else outside the intellect through which a number of things can be distinguished from one another. In this picture, an infinite number of substances (attributes) wholly exist together even though each substance exists independently of the other. Since God is supposed to be the collection of attributes (the whole), he does add a further entity into Spinoza’s ontology. Consequently, all the descriptions that Spinoza ascribes to God, are ascribed to attributes. In this way, if he says that God is eternal, it means that all attributes are eternal; or if God is immutable, he means that all of God’s attributes are immutable; or if God exists necessarily, he means that the all God’s attributes exist necessarily; and so forth.

It is worth noting that since in this view each attribute solely is a substance, attributes are not mereological partsof the substance. As mentioned above, Spinoza explicitly holds that the substance is simple and indivisible (1.p.13). He ascribes the same feature (indivisibility) to attributes (1.p.12). Now a potential problem arises for this interpretation. If the God (as a complex of all elements or attributes) is the combination of an infinite number of substances/attributes, it seems that God is divisible into various parts (attributes). This issue obviously stands in contrast to Spinoza’s view about God’s simplicity. To address this worry, Curley suggests that the particular complex should be understood as a complex of every special element/attribute. Thus, according to this interpretation, every substance would be a complex of attributes and every individual attribute would be a complex with a single element, i.e., an individual substance.

If each of the attributes not only is conceived through itself, but also exists in itself, then it exists without the requiring the aid of any other thing. If it exists in that way, then its existence is necessary. But, if the existence of each of the attributes is necessary, then it is not possible that one of them should exist without the others. For if we said it was possible that one should exist without the others, that would imply that it was possible for the others not to exist. And that isn’t really possible, not if each of the others exists in itself through itself. The very self-sufficiency of each of the attributes, the fact that it is true of each of them that it does not need the others in order to exist, implies that there is no real possibility that at any time any one of them does exist without the others. The existence of each one of the attributes implies the existence of all the others. Paraphrasing what Spinoza says in 1P10S, all the attributes of substance have always been in it together. Since each of them, considered separately, exists in itself and is conceived through itself, they always had to be in it together (Ibid, p. 30).

Additionally, as mentioned at the outset, Spinoza defines attributes as “what the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence” (1.d.4). Thus, there is an important emphasis on the role of an intellect in perceiving the substance. It is an intellect that perceive attributes as the essence of substance. To accommodate this point, the proponents of the realist interpretation hold that the notion of intellect in this phrase should be understood as the infinite intellect.[[8]](#footnote-8) Spinoza explicitly holds that “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists (1.p.11.); however, in his works, he only enumerates two attributes, and it seems that human mind (a finite intellect) is only aware of these two attributes of God: Thought and Extension (2.a.2 and 2.a.5.). Those who are in the realist camp argue that to fully capture what Spinoza mentions here, we should hold that the infinite intellect (that is essentially the mind of God) is capable of perceiving an infinite number of attributes, but human intellects (that are finite) are only aware of two of these attributes. Thus, it is God’s infinite intellect that perceives attributes as in fact constituting the essence of substance.

As the foregoing paragraphs show, the realist interpretation coherently explains some of Spinoza’s crucial remarks regarding the notion of attributes at the expense of diminishing the main doctrine of Spinoza’s philosophy, i.e., substance monism. In the Ethics, particularly in 1.p.14, Spinoza defends the doctrine of substance monism according to which “God is the only substance that can exist or be conceived.” The proponents of the realist interpretation might adjust this thesis by claiming that since God is the complex of all substances (and in that way he is different from each attribute), the notion of God is still unique and distinct from the notion of attributes. Nevertheless, I do not think that this way of reading Spinoza satisfactorily captures what he really means by substance monism according to which God is the only infinite, indivisible, and simple substance that exists. Spinoza’s substance monism is a metaphysical claim that indicates that at the most fundamental level of reality there is only one thing, God, that exists in itself and is conceived through itself. But in the realist interpretation, since God is the combination of all substances, we should say in the hierarchy of reality, at the most fundamental level, there are infinite number of substances, and each of these substances exists in itself and is conceived through itself. This view explicitly rejects substance monism and entails a plenitude view regarding substances. At the most fundamental level of reality, there is no one substance; rather there are infinite substances. Thus, substance monism, that is a central thesis of Spinoza’s metaphysics, is totally lost is the realist interpretation. The realist interpretation, at least the version of it represented here, implies a radical revision in our understanding of Spinoza’s metaphysics. This is a big worry and seriously casts doubt on the success of this way of reading Spinoza.

Besides this big worry, there are also passages regarding attributes, in Spinoza’s writings, that are not properly explained within the framework of the realist interpretations. For instance, in the Scholium of E.1.p.10., Spinoza states that “although two attributes be conceived as really distinct, that is, one without the help of the other, still we cannot deduce therefrom that they constitute two entities, or two different substances.” Here Spinoza explains something about the relation of the attributes to the substance. Namely, the fact that each attribute is conceived independently is not evidence of the existence of independent attributes.

Furthermore, in the second part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza lists thought and extension as two of God’s infinite attributes. A few paragraphs later, in the Scholium to E.2.p.7, he notes that “a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways. For example, a circle (coin) existing in Nature and the idea of that coin (which is also in God, that is which is also a part of Nature) are one and the same thing, which is thought or explained through different attributes.” This claim creates a difficulty for the realist interpretations according to which thought and extension are two real distinct attributes, and consequently a mental mode and an extended mode are two distinct real modes. But Spinoza explicitly holds that these two modes are metaphysically the same thing.

These problems, in general, reveal why the realist interpretation, or at least the version of it presented here, does not satisfactorily explain what attributes are in Spinoza’s metaphysics. Having these difficulties in mind, in the following paragraphs, I examine the defensibility of the alternative view, i.e., the anti-realist interpretation regarding Spinoza’ attributes.

**3: The Anti-Realist Interpretation of Attributes**

As mentioned above, the realist interpretation encounters serious problems in explaining what attributes are and how they are connected to the single substance. To avoid those difficulties, some scholars take the opposite approach and argue that Spinoza’s attributes should not be understood as metaphysically real things. As opposed to the realist interpretation that underscores the distinction between attributes, the anti-realist interpretation rejects any kind of metaphysical or objective understanding of attributes.

The proponents of the anti-realist interpretation argue that attributes, ontologically speaking, are not among the real furniture of the world; rather, they are somehow grounded in the mind of those who perceive the infinite substance. Given the ambiguity in Spinoza’s definition of attributes, scholars who defend the anti-realist interpretation believe that attributes are what a finite intellect (a human mind for instance) perceives of substance *as if* (but not in fact) constituting its essence. Thus, attributes, in this view, do not reveal what the substance really is. The substance is merely simple, and consequently it is unknowable and ineffable; thus, the multiplicity of its attributes is merely mental and apparent feature that should be understood at best epistemologically. Put differently, each attribute really indicates a distinct way of conceiving the same infinite substance. The attributes, more precisely, reveal how our minds perceive the infinite substance, not what this substance really is (Shein, 2018).

Various versions of this reading of Spinoza’s attributes have been historically proposed in the literature.[[9]](#footnote-9) One detailed and known account of the view is proposed by Harry Wolfson (1934) who believes that Spinoza’s view on attributes should be understood in the line of the medieval tradition of negative theology according to which God’s essence is incomprehensible and ineffable. In this reading, the claim that God has infinite attributes should be cashed out not in terms of his having multiple essences, but rather because of the nature of the human mind. Since the substance is absolutely simple, it is entirely incomprehensible; so the human mind deploys an infinite series of attributes to perceive this unknowable substance. But this perception is limited and fitted to human understandings. In reality, the absolutely simple and indivisible substance, as it is in itself, is unknowable to finite minds. Thus, the infinity of attributes is not grounded in the substance rather is grounded in the finite mind that is not capable of truly understanding of what the substance is. Thus, attributes are ontologically mental and mind-dependent and even illusory. Accordingly, they do not add further entities to the list of existing objects.

If the expression “which the intellect perceives” is laid stress upon, it would seem that the attributes are only *in intellectu*. Attributes would thus be only a subjective mode of thinking, expressing a relation to a perceiving subject and having no real existence in the essence … According to [this] interpretation, to be perceived by the mind means to be *invented* by the mind (Wolfson, 1934, p. 146).

In this way, one and the same substance can be conceived in various ways. The certain ways in which a substance can be conceived are called “attributes”. This interpretation fully captures the doctrine of substance monism and also explains why there is an emphasis on the role of the intellect in Spinoza’s definition of attributes. Nonetheless, in the following paragraphs, I try to show that this interpretation, similar to its rival theory, does not provide a comprehensive account of Spinoza’s attributes. Wolfson’s interpretation implies that Spinoza defends a version of negative theology. Consequently, if Wolfson is right, Spinoza must have acknowledged that God’s essence is ineffable, and human mind cannot comprehend what God’s essence is. However, ample textual evidence discloses that Spinoza thinks differently. For instant, in E 2.p.47, Spinoza states that “[t]he human mind has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God.” That seems to show that God’s essence is somehow knowable to the human mind.

In addition, in 1.p.31d, Spinoza holds that “what is contained objectively in the intellect must necessarily be in nature.” This proposition shows that, for Spinoza, whatever is perceived by an intellect (no matter what kind of intellect it is) is epistemically reliable. Thus, the intellect’s perception of attributes cannot fail to reveal the true nature of the substance.

Furthermore, considering the definition of attributes at the outset of Ethics, Yitzhak Melamed (2018) argues that in this definition, God is a “substance consisting [*constantem*] of an infinity of attributes” (E1.d.6). This definition is not qualified by any disclaimer such as “God is *perceived as* consisting of infinite attributes. We can and should ask how precisely God consists of the attributes, but I believe it is clear that if the attributes were *only* in the human mind, God would not, in reality, consist of an infinity of attributes” (Melamed, 2018, p. 95). Also, in E1.p.4d, Spinoza says that there is nothing *outside the intellect* [*extra intellectum*] through which a number of things can be distinguished from one another except *substances, or what is the same, their attributes,* and their affections.” Melamed argues that two important consequences are derived from this proposition: “(i) The attributes of substance are also outside the intellect, and (ii) the attributes are in some sense “the same” as the substance” (Ibid, p. 95).

Given the mentioned difficulties, therefore, the anti-realist interpretation, or at least the version of it presented here, that makes attributes ontologically mind-dependent and illusory, does not satisfactorily provide a comprehensive account of what Spinoza’s attributes are.

**4: How to deal with the puzzle of Spinoza’s attributes**

The deficiencies of the aforementioned interpretations reveal a dilemma regarding how to understand Spinoza’s notion of attributes. One the one hand, the attributes should not be treated as distinct entities; otherwise, the doctrine of substance monism is lost. On the other hands, Spinoza’s attributes should not be understood as mind-dependent and subjective things that do not have any ground in reality (how the substance is). An attribute, in Spinoza’s philosophy, is not merely an epistemic concept; rather it should be understood as a real metaphysical item. Nevertheless, attributes must not be treated as distinct entities (things) alongside the absolute substance; also they must not be understood as constitutive parts of this substance either; since the former violates the doctrine of substance monism, and the latter contradicts substance’s simplicity. The lesson we have learned thus far is that a comprehensive account of Spinoza’s attributes has to coherently combine these following dicta together: (i.) attributes are real and metaphysically distinguishing; (ii.) attributes are not distinct entities.

Given this brief introduction, I think that one way of putting (i) and (ii) together is to resort to the notion of essence and unpack this key term in Spinoza’s definition of attributes: “By attribute I mean that which the intellect perceives of substance **as constituting its essence”** (1.d.4).

Although Spinoza’s metaphysical system uniquely belongs to him, and he defines his terminology in an innovative way, it is clear that he was largely influenced by his predecessors and deploys most of the concepts that were used by his contemporaries. In this way, as some commentators have pointed out,[[10]](#footnote-10) Spinoza’s notion of attributes should be understood within the Cartesian framework according to which an attribute is the essence of a thing (a substance). Given Descartes’s substance dualism, he believes that thought is the attribute or the essence of the mental substance (mind), and extension is the attribute or the essence of the physical substance (body).[[11]](#footnote-11) For these reasons, Descartes claims that Thought and Extension are the principal attributes of mind and body and that they are “really distinct” from each other; i.e., they exist independently one from the other. It is important to note that for Descartes, any created substancehas only one principal attribute, as opposed to God who has infinite attributes. Descartes says:

Strictly speaking, a real distinction exists only between two or more substances; and we can perceive that two substances are really distinct simply from the fact that we can clearly and distinctly understand one apart from the other (Principles, I, §60, CSM, I, p. 213, AT 28).[[12]](#footnote-12)

For Descartes, there is an epistemological and ontological distinction between these two known attributes, but this distinction is grounded in Cartesian substance dualism. Thought is ontologically distinct from extension because they belong to different substances. In other words, the real distinction is really between two substances not two attributes. An attribute of a substance is not a distinct entity in addition to the substance; rather, the attribute, as the essence of the substance, shows what the substance is. In other words, an attribute reveals the *way that substance is*.

For Spinoza, in contrast, all the attributes belong to the same substance. This issue creates a difficulty in understanding the plurality of attributes within the framework of substance monism. As mentioned above, Spinoza’s attribute should not be understood as a mere epistemic notion that is not rooted in reality. In addition, we are not allowed to multiply the number of substances in Spinoza’s metaphysical system. Now the question is how to understand “really distinct attributes” in his monistic system. The answer to this question is embedded in the phrase that these really distinct attributes are the essences of a single **indeterminate and infinite** substance. All these attributes are real since the substance is real; nevertheless, they do not add further entities into Spinoza’s ontology since the essences are just *the ways that the substance is*.

To clarify this point, it is incumbent upon this paper to elaborate what the ‘essence’ of a thing means.[[13]](#footnote-13) It is worth noting that ‘thing’, in this context, is assumed as any sort of entity whatever. To be a thing means to have an essence, and this essence reveals what the thing is. As Jonathan Lowe puts (2018) it, the essence of a thing, in this view, “in the ‘proper original signification’ of the word, is ‘the very being of any thing, whereby it is, what it is’. In short, the essence of something, X, is what X is, or what it is to be X. In another locution, X’s essence is the very identity of X — a locution that I am happy to adopt, provided that it is clearly understood that to speak of something’s ‘identity’ in this sense is quite different from speaking of the identity relation in which it necessarily stands to itself and to no other thing” (Lowe, 2018, p. 3).

Based upon this definition of essence, it is not extravagant to assumed that to be an entity means to have an essence, but this essence does not certainly add a further entity to one’s ontology. It is wrong and incoherent to assume that an essence of a(n) thing/entity is a further thing/entity in the world. If the essence of a thing were a distinct further entity, then there would need to be a third entity as the essence of the second entity, and this issue ends up with an infinite regress that precludes the existence of anything. To exists means to have an essence; if this essence depends on the second essence for its existence, and this series goes on ad infinitum, then the existence of the very first thing is also does not take place. Thus, it is wrong to assume that an essence is an entity. This issue, however, does not diminish the reality of essences. An essence in this picture is not merely an epistemic notion. The essence of a thing reveals what the thing is; if a thing enjoys reality, so does its essence. The reality of the essence, nonetheless, does not add a further entity to the world; rather the essence of a thing shows itself through *the way that the very thing is*. Put differently, *the way that a thing is* properly depicts the reality of the essence of the very same thing in a metaphysical sense. Thus, we can properly hold that the distinction between a thing and its essence is metaphysical distinction.

Having the mentioned discussion in mind, I think that the foregoing distinction between things and the essences of things (*the ways things are*) can be applied to the distinction between substance and attributes in Spinoza’s metaphysics. Substance is a thing, but *the way that this substance is* reveals its attributes. Now the question is how a single substance can have an infinite number of attributes. As mentioned at the outset of the paper, Spinoza’s single substance is infinite and indeterminate. The infinity and indeterminacy of the substance provide the ground that the substance manifest itself in infinite ways. In other words, there are infinite ways of being an infinite and indeterminate substance. If the substance were determinate, it would have exactly one attribute. For instance, in Descartes metaphysics, a created substance is determinate; thus, there is one way to be this substance. Accordingly, there is only one attribute for this substance. For Spinoza, however, the substance is metaphysically indeterminate, this indeterminacy enables the substance to manifest in infinite ways.

Each of this way reveals an attribute of the very same substance. These attributes are the essence of the substance; they all show what the substance is. In addition, these attributes are the infinite *aspects* of one and the same thing, so they do not add further entities in the world. In this manner, I think both mentioned dicta (i) and (ii) can be combined together without making the attributes illusory or without violating the doctrine of substance monism. In the following paragraphs, I explain why this new interpretation of Spinoza’s attributes is preferable to the realist and the anti-realist accounts explained in this paper.

As mentioned, in Spinoza’s definition of attributes, there is a special emphasis on the role of the intellect: an attribute is “what the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence” (1.d.4). For proponents of the realist interpretation, the notion of intellect in this proposition is understood as the infinite intellect (God’s mind), where the anti-realists believe that this notion should be interpreted as a finite intellect (the human mind). According to the interpretation defended in this paper, since the substance is infinite and indeterminate; it is always understood and perceived by an intellect through the lens of attributes. Put differently, the understanding of the substance by an intellect, no matter what kind of intellect it is, is always formed through the lens of some attribute. The finite intellect is limited, consequently, it can perceive the substance through only two attributes of thought and extension. There is no such a limitation when it comes to the infinite intellect. Accordingly, the infinite intellects can perceive the substance in infinite ways.

As I mentioned in the previous section, the realist interpretation, that treats attributes as distinct substances, diminishes the doctrine of substance monism that is an essential aspect of Spinoza’s metaphysics. In the view defended in this paper, attributes are metaphysically real and have all the characteristics of the substance; nevertheless, attributes are not distinct things. Consequently, it is plausible to hold that there is an infinite and indeterminate substance which has infinite real attributes. In general, the realist interpretation is right about the fact that attributes should be understood as metaphysically real in Spinoza’s metaphysics; nevertheless, all the problems is the realist interpretation are rooted in the assumption that attributes are treated as distinct things. If attributes are understood as essences of the substance in the sense described above, then my interpretation of Spinoza’s attributes keeps the advantages of the realist interpretation without facing its difficulties.

In addition, I believe that this new account of attributes is preferable to the anti-realist interpretation that makes attributes metaphysically subjective and unreal. As I explained in the previous section, there are Spinoza’s remarks that indicates that attributes are metaphysically real and objective. Furthermore, according to the anti-realist interpretation, at least the version of it defended by Wolfson, the substance is entirely incomprehensible and ineffable, and the human mind cannot know what the substance is. If we understand attributes as *the ways that the substance is*, we can properly explain how attributes are metaphysically real without violating the doctrine of substance monism, and why Spinoza mentions that “[t]he human mind has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God.” Since we know that God is infinite and indeterminate, we know that he has an infinite number of attributes; nevertheless, some of God’s essences (Thought and Extension for example) are adequately knowable to the human mind. Therefore, my interpretation does not make the substance epistemically unknowable, rather the substance is adequately known (even by a finite intellect) through the lens of some attributes.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, I believe that the distinction between the substance and its infinite attributes should be understood as the distinction between the substance and its essences (infinite *ways that the substance is)*. The distinction is metaphysical and real, so my account keeps the advantages of the realist interpretation that treats attributes as metaphysically real. Nevertheless, since the essences of substance do not add further entities in the world, having a substance with infinite essences does not violate the doctrine of substance monism. Consequently, there is no need to espouse the anti-realist interpretation to defend this doctrine.

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3. All of these notations refer to Spinoza’s *Ethics* published in “Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources, Edited by Ariew and Watkins, Hackett Publishing Company, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Spinoza, 1985, p. 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Per attributum intelligo id, quod intellectus de substantia percipit, tanquam ejusdem essentiam*

   *constituens* (E1d4). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Spinoza, 1985, p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, p. 165 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Among the scholars who defend that the infinite intellect perceives attributes as the essence of substance we can mention: Bennett, 1984; Delahunty, 1985; Della Rocca 1996. These scholars have their own account of attributes; nevertheless, they all agree that it is the infinite intellect that perceives [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One version of this interpretation, for instance, is traced back to Hegel, who believes that “what has utmost reality for Spinoza is the absolute (or the infinite substance) and that anything else (finite modes, in particular) are ways of negating this absolute.” See Shein 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Shein 2018 and Melamed 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Descartes, Principles, I, §53, CSM, I, p. 210, AT 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Descartes, René (2009), p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. To know more about this concept of essence see: Hashemi 2017, Ch. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)