

Existence.

The distinction between *essence* (*essentia*) and *existence* (*existentia*) plays a major role in Spinoza's metaphysics. Although the distinction did not originate with Avicenna, it is primarily through Avicenna's influence that it became widespread, if not ubiquitous, in both Jewish and Christian medieval philosophy (e.g., Ogden 2021). Spinoza was clearly familiar with this important distinction through his study of Maimonides, Crescas, and Descartes, and it is particularly useful to examine Spinoza's employment of the distinction in contrast to Descartes'. In the *Meditations*, Descartes relies on the distinction in a proof of God's existence, and in his exploration of the essence of material things (both in Meditation Five). For Descartes, extension – which is the principal attribute of all bodies – is separable from existence. For this reason, Descartes thought he could provide an adequate account of extension independently of the question of whether bodies exist (the existence of bodies being proved only in the Sixth Meditation). The same considerations also apply to Descartes' understanding of minds, finite thinking substances, which do not exist just by virtue of their nature, but rather by virtue of the cause which created them: God. For Descartes, only God exists just by virtue of its essence (AT VII 68 and 242-3). The essence of all other things contains possible existence (AT VII 166), and they require a cause which will actualize this possibility.

In a stark opposition to Descartes, Spinoza argues that existence pertains not only to the nature of every substance (E1p7), but that even the attributes involve existence (E1p19d, Ep. 4; IV/13, and Ep. 10; IV/47). If we take literally Spinoza's claims in E1p20 – “God's existence and his essence are one and the same” – Spinoza would seem to hold that God's essence is *identical* with (i.e., is nothing but) existence. The attributes, as what the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of a substance, are just the most fundamental kinds, or manners, of existence (Melamed 2012; Garrett 2017). Since Spinoza defines God as a substance having an “infinity of” attributes (E1def6), he seems to be committed to there being infinitely many fundamental manners of existence, a view which Garrett (2017) calls “strong ontological pluralism.” Extension and thought

are the two kinds, or manners, of existence in which we operate and which are accessible to us (E2ax5), but there are infinitely many other domains of existence (infinitely many unknown attributes), which are just as real as our world of thought and extension, though we have no cognitive or causal access to these realms (Eps. 64 and 66. Cf. Melamed (2013), 156-61).

In his celebrated “Letter on the Infinite,” Spinoza employs the distinction between things which exist merely by virtue of their essence and things which do not exist merely by virtue of their essence to ground the distinction between eternity and duration (“the difference between eternity and duration arises [*oritur*] from this” [Ep. 12; IV/54]). The existence of substance – whose essence “involves” existence – is “explicated” (i.e., spelled out or revealed) by eternity, while the existence of modes – whose essences do not involve existence – is explicated by duration (Ep. 12; IV/54-55). In the *Ethics*, similarly, Spinoza defines “eternity” as “existence insofar as it conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing” (E1def8). For Spinoza, an adequate definition captures the essence of the thing defined (TIE[95]). Thus E1def8, Spinoza’s circular definition of eternity, amounts to the assertion that eternity is nothing but self-necessitated existence and that an eternal thing is that which exists necessarily by virtue of its essence alone. Spinoza explicates his definition of eternity by noting that such an existence “cannot be explained by duration or time, even if the duration is conceived to be without beginning or end” (E1def6). In other words, the eternity which Spinoza defines in E1def8 is not existence in all times.

Although eternity is the existence of God, Spinoza’s unique substance, there is *a sense* in which Spinoza is willing to speak even of modes (finite and infinite) as eternal. In E2p45s Spinoza suggests that when we conceive singular things (i.e., modes) as completely embedded in God we may ascribe to them “the very nature of existence” (i.e., eternity, and not merely duration); when we conceive modes in such a way, they enjoy the eternity of God: their substance (and such a conception of the modes is truly a conception of the substance). Spinoza makes a similar point in his discussion of mind eternity toward the end of the *Ethics* (E5p29s and E5p30d).

In E2p7, Spinoza introduces his pivotal doctrine of Ideas-Things Parallelism (“The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things”). The doctrine basically asserts a causal isomorphism between the totality of ideas and the totality of things. In E2p8, Spinoza extends the scope of the features that fall under the Ideas-Things parallelism to include – in addition to the causal order – also the *kind of existence* things and ideas have. Things which *endure* are accompanied by an *enduring* idea, while things which do not have duration have ideas which do not have duration.

Spinoza’s tendency to identify God with existence is expressed nicely in a statement in the *Cogitata Metaphysica* 2.1: “the existence of God is God himself.” Along the same lines, Spinoza approves the traditional Jewish view of the Tetragrammaton as denoting God’s innermost essence: pure being (TTP Ch. 13 (III/169). Cf. Ch. 2 (III/38)).

The terms ‘*esse*’ (being) and ‘*realitas*’ (reality) are close to ‘*existentia*.’ However, for Spinoza *esse* and *realitas* come in degrees (see, for example, E1p10: “The more reality or being a thing has, the more attributes belong to it”), whereas existence is usually a binary state: it either obtains or not.

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Key passages: Ep. 10 (IV/47); Ep. 12 (IV/54-55); TTP Ch. 13 (III/169); E1d8; E1pp19-20; E2p45s

See also Attributes; Essence; Extension; God; mind eternity; Substance; Time; Thought

For further reading:

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