

{ 17 }

## A Glimpse into Spinoza's Metaphysical Laboratory

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPTS OF SUBSTANCE AND ATTRIBUTE

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At the opening of Spinoza's *Ethics*, we find the three celebrated definitions of substance, attribute, and God:

E1d3: By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed [*Per substantiam intelligo id quod in se est et per se concipitur; hoc est id cujus conceptus non indiget conceptu alterius rei, a quo formari debeat*].

E1d4: By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence [*Per attributum intelligo id, quod intellectus de substantia percipit, tanquam ejusdem essentiam constituens*].

E1d6: By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence [*Per Deum intelligo ens absolute infinitum, hoc est, substantiam constantem infinitis attributis, quorum unumquodque aeternam, et infinitam essentiam exprimit*].

We are accustomed to think of these paramount definitions as a fixed and settled formulation of the core of Spinoza's metaphysics, but if we look at the development of Spinoza's thought, the picture we get is quite different. In the early drafts of the *Ethics* and in his early works, Spinoza seems to have experimented with various conceptualizations of the relations between substance, attribute,

and God. Some of Spinoza's works make barely any use of the notions of substance and attribute, and the testimony of Spinoza's letters suggests that, at a certain stage in his philosophical development, the concept of attribute may have been put on the back burner, if not completely dropped. Indeed, another closely related concept—accident [*accidens*—was fated to be pulled out of the system (and for good reasons<sup>1</sup>). The final version of the *Ethics* makes hardly any use of this notion, but Spinoza's letters show that in early drafts of the *Ethics* he used the term “accident” to refer to what cannot be or be conceived without substance.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I will attempt to provide a brief outline of the genealogy of Spinoza's key metaphysical concepts.<sup>3</sup> This genealogy, like any other, can help us to re-examine and reconsider what seems to us natural, stable and obvious.

In the first part of the chapter, I rely on Spinoza's letters to trace the development of his definitions of substance and attribute in the early drafts of the *Ethics*. The letters, whose dates are more or less established, also provide a temporal grid for our subsequent discussions. The second part surveys Spinoza's discussion and conceptualization of substance and attributes in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), and briefly, Spinoza's 1663 book on Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, and its appendix, the *Cogitata Metaphysica*. The third part of the chapter is dedicated to Spinoza's understanding of substance and attribute in the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*. I conclude with some remarks on the stability of Spinoza's final position on the issue, as expressed in the published version of the *Ethics*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 29–30. Unless otherwise marked, all references to the *Ethics*, the early works of Spinoza, and Eps. 1–29 are to Curley's translation in volume I of *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. In references to the other letters of Spinoza, I have used Shirley's translation (*Complete Works*). I have relied on Gebhardt's critical edition for the Latin text of Spinoza. I am indebted to Nick Kauffman and Mogens Lærke for their most helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> “[A1] Substance is by nature prior to its Accidents, for without it, they can neither be nor be conceived. [A2] Except for Substances and Accidents, nothing exists in reality, or outside the intellect” (Ep. 4 | G IV/14/1–3).

<sup>3</sup> Due to limitations on space, I will not discuss here Spinoza's concept of mode and the nature of the substance-mode relation. I elaborate on this issue with some detail in the first chapter of my *Spinoza's Metaphysics*. This discussion, however, is not focused on the diachronic development of Spinoza's understanding of mode.

<sup>4</sup> The formulation of the three definitions in the recently discovered Vatican manuscript of Spinoza's *Ethics* is virtually the same as in the *Opera Posthuma*. There is a tiny and insignificant difference in the definition of God. See Spruit and Totaro, *Vatican Manuscript*, 83. In the definition of attribute, the Vatican manuscript has an erased version, according to which the intellect “forms [*format*]” the attributes. This erased version is replaced by the standard “*percipit*.” I am indebted to John Brandau for drawing my attention to the last point.

### Substance and Attribute in Spinoza's Letters

In Letter 9, written to Simon De Vries, Spinoza quotes his definition of substance from one of the early drafts of the *Ethics*. The definition is almost identical to the one in the published text of the *Ethics*, apart from an added comment regarding the nature of attributes:

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 such and such a definite nature to substance [*per substantiam intelligo id quod in se est et per se concipitur: hoc est cujus conceptus non involvit conceptum alterius rei. idem per attributum intelligo, nisi quod attributum dicatur respectu intellectus, substantiae certam talem naturam tribuentis*]. I say that this definition explains clearly enough what I wish to understand by substance, or attribute.<sup>6</sup>

No independent definition of attribute appears at this stage of the work (March 1663). Yet, oddly enough, an even earlier draft, quoted in Letter 2 (September 1661), presents a definition of God (which is mostly<sup>7</sup> similar to the published version of the *Ethics*), followed by a definition of *attribute* that is almost the same as the definition of *substance* (!) in the final version of the *Ethics*. Spinoza writes:

I shall begin, then, by speaking briefly about

[D1] God, whom I define as a Being consisting of infinite attributes, each of which is infinite, or supremely perfect in its kind [*Ens, constans infinitis attributis, quorum unumquodque est infinitum, sive summe perfectum in suo genere*].

Here it should be noted that

By attribute I understand whatever is conceived through itself and in itself [*omne id, quod concipitur per se & in se*], so that its concept does not involve the concept of another thing.<sup>8</sup>

Spinoza does not define substance in this letter, but instead presents three propositions that characterize *substance*, the third of which reads:

Every substance must be infinite, or supremely perfect of its kind.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In part 2 of my "Building Blocks," I begin to develop an interpretation of Spinoza's attributes as various *aspects* (or respects) of the one substance.

<sup>6</sup> Ep. 9 | G IV/46/20.

<sup>7</sup> In Ep. 2 God is defined as a Being [*ens*] rather than as substance, and the attributes are not said to express an infinite and eternal essence.

<sup>8</sup> Ep. 2 | G IV/7/24–28.

<sup>9</sup> G IV/10/1 (emphasis added).

Notice that in the published version of the *Ethics* “being infinite in its kind” is the characterization of *attribute* (E1d6e), while God, the one substance, is said to be “absolutely infinite” (E1d6e).<sup>10</sup> Thus, it seems that in Letter 2, Spinoza’s understanding of the roles of substance and attribute is almost the reverse of the way he will later present them in the final version of the *Ethics*: he ascribes the definition of substance (used in the final version of the *Ethics*) to attribute, while ascribing “infinity in its own kind” (which belongs to the attributes in the final version of the *Ethics*) to substance.

Another crucial point we should observe regarding Spinoza’s definition of attribute in Letter 2 is that *it contains no reference to the intellect*. It is only in Letter 9 that Spinoza begins to associate the attributes with the activity of the intellect.

In Letter 4, dated October 1661, just a month later than Letter 2, Spinoza’s definition of substance is very similar to the one in the published version of the *Ethics*:

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 [*per Substantiam intelligam id, quod per se, & in se concipitur, hoc est, cujus conceptus non involvit conceptum alterius rei*].<sup>11</sup>

A few lines below, Spinoza notes:

I have explained [*explicui*] that an *attribute* is that whose concept does not involve the concept of another thing.<sup>12</sup>

This last claim probably refers to the definition of *substance* (in the same letter) “as that whose concept does not involve the concept of another thing,” since Spinoza does not make such a claim regarding attribute anywhere earlier in the letter. Thus, it seems that around this period Spinoza feels perfectly comfortable moving seamlessly between the concepts of substance and attribute.<sup>13</sup> But if these two concepts are interchangeable, can we perhaps do away with one of them?

In Letter 36, dated to probably June 1666, Spinoza discusses in some detail the relationship between God, on the one hand, and Extension and Thought, on the other. Interestingly, the term *attributum* does not appear at all in this letter. Instead, Spinoza systematically refers to Extension and Thought as “what

<sup>10</sup> Shortly, we will see that in Ep. 36 Spinoza drops all talk about attributes, and instead refers to Extension and Thought as things which are “indeterminate and perfect *in their kinds*” while God is defined as “a being that is *absolutely* indeterminate and perfect” (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> Ep. 4 | G IV/13/32–34.

<sup>12</sup> Ep. 4 | G IV/14/8 (emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> This point has already been noticed by Gueroult, *Spinoza*, 1:426–427, and Robinson, *Kommentar*, 136–137.

is indeterminate in its own kind,” while God is said to be “absolutely indeterminate.” Consider, for example, the following passage:

[I]f we suppose that something which is *indeterminate* and perfect *in its own kind* exists by its own sufficiency, then we must also grant the existence of a being which is *absolutely indeterminate* and perfect. This being I shall call God. For example, if we are willing to maintain that Extension and Thought exist by their own sufficiency, we shall have to admit the existence of God who is *absolutely* perfect, that is, the existence of a being who is *absolutely indeterminate*.<sup>14</sup>

It is difficult to draw a firm conclusion from the absence of the term “attribute” in this letter, not so much because it would be an “argument from silence” (indeed, silence can be informative in many contexts), but because the copy we have of the letter is apparently merely a Latin translation of the Dutch original. Thus, it is possible, though not likely, that the terminology of attribute appeared in the original Dutch. It seems more likely, however, that Spinoza’s concept of attribute was put on hold at this stage of the development of his system.

Before we conclude our discussion of substance and attribute in Spinoza’s letters, let me point out that Spinoza occasionally refers to “divine attributes” that are just figments of the human imagination. Thus, in Letter 21 he refers to “God as God, i.e., absolutely, ascribing no human attributes to him.”<sup>15</sup> Spinoza clearly does not consider *his* understanding of the divine attributes as belonging to the category of human, anthropomorphic, attributes. Indeed, in Letter 6, Spinoza warns his correspondent, Henry Oldenburg, that his understanding of the divine attributes is quite different from that of “the preachers” and indeed “everyone, as far as I know.”<sup>16</sup> I turn now to Spinoza’s early works.

<sup>14</sup> Ep. 36 | IV/185/11–19. Cf. Ep. 36 | IV/185/30–34: “Since God’s nature does not consist in one definite kind of being [*Dei natura in certo entis genere non consistit*], but in a being which is absolutely indeterminate, his nature also demands all that which perfectly expresses being [*omne, quod rō esse perfecte exprimit*]; otherwise his nature would be determinate and deficient. This being so, it follows that there can be only one Being, God, which exists by its own force” (emphasis added). For a detailed discussion of these two passages, see my “*Omnis determinatio est negatio*,” 185–187.

<sup>15</sup> Ep. 21 | G IV/127/24. Similarly, in the third chapter of the TTP, Spinoza claims that the prophets of different nations imagined God under different attributes.

<sup>16</sup> See Ep. 6 | G IV/36/19–23: “I say that I regard as creatures many ‘attributes’ which they—and everyone, so far as I know—attribute to God. Conversely, other things, which they because of their prejudices regard as creatures, I contend are attributes of God, which they have misunderstood.”

### Substance and Attribute in the TIE, TTP, DPP, and CM

The terms *substantia* and *attributum* are virtually<sup>17</sup> absent in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE), which is probably Spinoza's earliest work.<sup>18</sup> In the vocabulary of the TIE, the closest term to substance is an "uncreated thing" [*res increatum*]. In section 97 of the TIE, Spinoza presents three (or four) requirements for a proper definition of an uncreated thing. It is required from such a definition, Spinoza writes,

1. That it should exclude every cause, i.e., that the object should require nothing else except its own being [*suum esse*] for its explanation.
2. That, given the definition of this thing, there should remain no room for the question: does it exist?
3. That (as far as the mind is concerned) it should have no substantives that could be changed into adjectives, i.e., that it should not be explained through any abstractions.<sup>19</sup>

The first two requirements will play a central role in Spinoza's later conceptualization of substance.<sup>20</sup>

The notion in the TIE that is closest to what Spinoza will later call "attributes" are "the fixed and eternal things [*fixi atque aeterni res*]." These fixed and eternal things provide the essence of all singular and changeable things (TIE §101). They are present everywhere, and serve as the universals or genera of the changeable things (TIE §101). "Singular, changeable things" (i.e., finite modes) cannot be or be conceived without the fixed and eternal things (TIE §101). The fixed and eternal things exist all at once [*simul*] (TIE §102). These features fit the latter-day Spinozistic attributes much better than the Spinozistic infinite modes.<sup>21</sup>

The Spinozistic concepts of substance and attribute do not play an important role in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), either. *Substantia* does not appear at all in the text, while *attributum* is used in a sense much closer to Maimonides' negative theology<sup>22</sup> than to Descartes' principal attributes.<sup>23</sup> When

<sup>17</sup> The only exception being note z, at the end of section 76, which briefly asserts that uniqueness and infinity are not "attributes of God that show his essence."

<sup>18</sup> See Mignini's editorial introduction to Spinoza, *Œuvres I: Premiers écrits*, 28–44. Cf. Mignini, "la datazione e l'interpretazione," Mignini, "Nuovi contributi," and Curley's editorial preface, in *Collected Works*, 1: 3–5.

<sup>19</sup> TIE §97 | G II/35/29–34.

<sup>20</sup> The third requirement, the rejection of reifications, would still appear in Spinoza's late philosophy, but it would be somewhat downplayed.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. De Dijn, *Spinoza*, 177. For a brief summary of the debate on the nature of the "fixed and eternal things," see Koyré (ed.), *Traité*, 112.

<sup>22</sup> See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I, chap. 51–57.

<sup>23</sup> See Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, I 53.

we look at Spinoza's use of *attributum* in the TTP, we find that in most cases the term is not reserved, as it is in the *Ethics*, for God's genuine, essential attributes.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it is used to include also the attributes by which various people *inadequately* and anthropomorphically conceive God.<sup>25</sup> Neither Extension nor Thought is described as a divine attribute. It seems that in the TTP, Spinoza tried to avoid the use of technical terminology by employing more traditional terms (for example, by insinuating that God is everywhere in essence [*secundum essentiam*], instead of claiming that Extension is one of God's attributes<sup>26</sup>). There is one interesting footnote in the TTP in which Spinoza clearly refers to the doctrine of the infinity of God's attributes,<sup>27</sup> though intriguingly he does *not* use the term *attributum* here. In this note Spinoza glosses his use of the term "nature" with the following warning:

Note that here I mean not only matter and its affections [*affectiones*],<sup>28</sup> but other infinite things [*alia infinita*] besides matter (G III/83).

It is not completely clear why Spinoza does not use the term "attribute" in this note. It could be a coincidence. Yet, let me remind you that in Letter 36 (1666), Spinoza expounds at great length on the nature of Extension and Thought without once mentioning the term "attribute." As I mentioned before, I think it is possible that in this period Spinoza was still uncertain about the precise nature of beings like Extension and Thought.

It is difficult to give an adequate account of Spinoza's understanding of substance and attribute in his 1663 book on Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* (and its appendix, the *Cogitata Metaphysica*), since one must work very carefully to distinguish between (i) Spinoza's presentation of Descartes' views, (ii) Spinoza's own views, and (iii) his critique of Descartes.<sup>29</sup> Yet, let me attempt to provide at least a cursory overview of Spinoza's understanding of these notions in this work.

Both *substantia* and *attributum* are used in the DPP. At the beginning of part 1, Spinoza defines substance and God as follows:

DPP1d5: Everything in which there is immediately, as in a subject, or through which there exists, something we perceive, i.e., some property, or quality, or attribute, of which there is a real idea in us, is called *Substance*.

<sup>24</sup> G III/169–170 and III/179/20–22 are notable exceptions.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, G III/48/30, 169/12–13, 170/34–35, 171/23, 172/16.

<sup>26</sup> See TTP 14 | G III/178. Cf. my "Metaphysics of the TTP," 135–136.

<sup>27</sup> This note appeared in the original 1670 edition of the TTP and is not a later addition.

<sup>28</sup> I have slightly corrected the translation of Silverthorne and Israel.

<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the precise nature of the *Cogitata Metaphysica* is debatable. I see no reason to enter this debate here since whether the CM reflects Spinoza's own views at the time, or the views of his contemporaries in Leiden, it clearly reflects a certain understanding of substance and attributes that occupied Spinoza's thought at the time.

For of substance itself, taken precisely, we have no idea, other than that it is a thing in which exists formally or eminently that something which we perceive, or, which is objectively in one of our ideas.

DPP1d8: The substance which we understand to be through itself supremely perfect, and in which we conceive nothing which involves any defect or limitation of perfection, is called *God*.

The definition of substance follows Descartes in not making any clear distinction between property, quality, and attribute, and in denying that we can have any knowledge of substance itself.<sup>30</sup> The definition of God adds an interesting element to the Cartesian conception (of God) by stipulating that God must be supremely perfect “*through itself*,”<sup>31</sup> which is presumably an attempt to block criticism which suggests that our notion of the infinite or perfect being is merely an extrapolation from the limited perfections of finite things with which we are acquainted.<sup>32</sup>

In the body of the first part of the DPP, Spinoza expresses some doubts regarding the adequacy of Descartes' conception of the relation between a substance and its principal attribute. In particular, he criticizes Descartes' claim that more power is needed to create and preserve a substance than to create or preserve its attributes (G I/161). However, the overall conceptualization of substance and attributes in the DPP is fairly loyal to Descartes, and the attributes are barely discussed in the DPP.<sup>33</sup>

In the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Spinoza makes some relevant and surprising claims. After explaining that “[B]y affections we here understand what Descartes has elsewhere called attributes (*Principles I*, 52),”<sup>34</sup> Spinoza adds:

[Since] being, insofar as it being [*ens quatenus ens est*], does not affect us by itself alone, as substance, it must, therefore, be explained by some attribute, from which, nevertheless, it is distinguished only by a distinction of reason.<sup>35</sup>

While in the *Ethics* the affections of substance are the modes (which are *modally* distinct from substance), here Spinoza identifies the affections of substance

<sup>30</sup> See Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, I 52 and 56. For a discussion of Descartes on this issue, see my paper, “Building Blocks,” part 2.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, I 14, and his Second Set of Replies (AT VII 162).

<sup>32</sup> See the Second Set of Objections to the Meditations (AT VII 123): “I can surely take a given degree of being, which I perceive within myself, and add on a further degree, and thus construct the idea of a perfect being from all the degrees which are capable of being added on.” Cf. the Fifth Set of Objections (AT VII 287). Spinoza seems to read the Objections and Replies quite closely. See KV I 7 | G II/47/10 and DPP1p5s. Cf. Rousset, *Spinoza: Lecteur des objections*.

<sup>33</sup> See my “Building Blocks,” part 2.

<sup>34</sup> CM I 3 | G I/240/5. Cf. Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, I 52: “We can, however, easily come to know a substance by one of its attributes.”

<sup>35</sup> CM I 3 | G I/240/9.



with the attributes that are *rationally* distinct from substance. Earlier in the CM, Spinoza divides being into being “which exists necessarily by its nature, or whose essence involves existence” (i.e., God), and “being whose essence involves only possible existence.” The latter is further divided into Substance and Mode. Notably, Spinoza here does not characterize modes as *affections* of substance.<sup>36</sup> In CM I 3, Spinoza presents a distinction between two kinds of affections; it is not a distinction between attributes and modes, but rather between attributes (affections of being) and denominations (affections of no being):

We say that *affections of being* are *certain attributes, under which we understand the essence or existence of each thing, [the attributes,] nevertheless, being distinguished from [being] only by reason.* I shall try here to explain certain things concerning these attributes (for I do not undertake to treat them all) and also to distinguish them from denominations, which are affections of no being [*quae nullius entis sunt affectiones*].<sup>37</sup>

Denominations, “the affections of no being,” are sometimes called in the CM “beings of reason” [*entia rationis*] or “modes of thinking” [*modi cogitandi*],<sup>38</sup> a notion that Spinoza uses and preserves in his later works; yet the fate of the more familiar Spinozistic modes qua affections of substance remains uncertain in this text.

### Substance and Attribute in the *Short Treatise*

“Of God and What Pertains to Him” is the title of the first part of the *Short Treatise*. The title of the first chapter of this part is “That God Is.” The chapter contains several intriguing and sophisticated proofs of the existence of God, but it does not include any reference to substance, and the causal self-sufficiency of substance plays no role in these proofs. A note tells us that what others commonly consider as God’s essential attributes, Spinoza takes to be mere *propria* of God.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> CM I 1 | G I/236/28.

<sup>37</sup> G I/240/15–21. Later in the CM (G I/244), Spinoza points out duration [*duratio*] as an example of attributes (affections of being), and time [*tempus*] as mere denomination.

<sup>38</sup> See CM I 4 | G I/244/27.

<sup>39</sup> See KV I 1e | G I/18/29–34. Later, Spinoza provides examples of such *propria* of God that are traditionally, yet wrongly, conceived as God’s essential attributes: “We do not see that they give us here any Attributes through which it is known what the thing (God) is, but only *Propria*, which indeed belong to a thing, but never explain what it is. For though *existing of itself, being the cause of all things, the greatest good, eternal, and immutable*, etc., are proper to God alone, nevertheless through those *propria* we can know neither what the being to which these *propria* belong is, nor what attributes it has” (KV I 7 | G I/45/12–20). Cf. KV I 2 | G I/1/27/23.

The second chapter, titled “What God Is,” opens with a definition of God that characterizes God as “a Being” [*een wezen*], rather than a substance.<sup>40</sup>

Now that we have demonstrated that God is, it is time to show what he is. He is, we say, a being of which all, or infinite, attributes are predicated, each of which is infinitely perfect in its own kind.<sup>41</sup>

Immediately following this definition of God (which is itself substance-free), Spinoza turns to justify and explain the definition by proving four characterizations of substance [*zelfstandingheid*]: that substance cannot be limited, that there cannot be two equal substances, that one substance cannot produce another, and that in God's infinite intellect there is no substance that does not exist formally in nature.<sup>42</sup> How, we might wonder, are these four characterizations of substance relevant to the KV's definition of God, which does not mention substance at all?

I suggest that the four proofs are intended to undermine the Cartesian conception of substance, which allows for a plurality of finite substances, created by God, and whose existence is not necessary (i.e., they can be conceived by God's intellect while not actually existing).<sup>43</sup> Spinoza's position on the relation between substance and attribute is not completely settled at this point (as we will shortly see), but it is clear to him that the Cartesian position is untenable.

Perhaps the best way to approach Spinoza's discussion of the relation between substance and attribute in chapter 2 and the dialogue that immediately follows it is to look briefly at a retrospective remark of Spinoza in chapter 7 (of part 1), which summarizes his conclusion from the earlier discussion:

We have already seen that the attributes (*or as others call them substances*) are things [*zaaken*], or, to put it better and more properly, a being existing through itself [*een dor zig zelfs bestaande wezen*]; and that this being therefore makes itself known through itself. We see that other things are only modes of those attributes, and without them can neither exist nor be understood.<sup>44</sup>

Spinoza's insistence on calling God a “being existing through itself” rather than “substance” should be noted (as should his reification of the attributes), but most important for us is the parenthetical note, that is, *that he considers as attributes what others take to be substances*. This very same claim Spinoza puts in the mouth of Reason [*Rede*] in the first dialogue that follows chapter 2.

<sup>40</sup> Recall that in Ep. 2 Spinoza also defines God as Being [*ens*], rather than substance.

<sup>41</sup> KV I 2 | G I/19/4–6.

<sup>42</sup> KV I 2 | G I/20/1–23/13.

<sup>43</sup> See di Poppa, “Spinoza's Concept,” 927–932.

<sup>44</sup> KV I 7 | G I/46/26–31 (emphasis added).

Reason approaches its Cartesian opponent, Lust [*Begeerlijkheid*]<sup>45</sup> with the following words:

*Reason*: O Lust! I tell you that what you say you see—that there are distinct substances—is false. For I see clearly that there is only one, which exists through itself, and is a support of all the other attributes.

And if you want to call the corporeal and the intellectual substances in respect to the modes which depend on them, you must equally call them modes too, in relation to the substance on which they depend. For you do not conceive them as existing through themselves. In the same way that you call willing, sensing, understanding, loving, etc., different modes of what you call a thinking substance (all of which you lead back to one, making one of them all), so I also infer, by your own proof, that infinite extension and thought, together with other infinite attributes (*or as you would say, substances*) are nothing but modes of that unique, eternal, infinite Being, existing through itself; and of all of these we make (as we have said) One Unique being or Unity, outside which one cannot imagine anything.<sup>46</sup>

*Reason* is not that interested in disputes about terminology, and hence is willing to let Cartesian *Lust* continue calling extension and thought “substances.”<sup>47</sup> It notes, however, that neither extension nor thought are conceived as *existing* through themselves, that is, both derive their existence from the “One Unique being.”<sup>48</sup> This claim must be conceded by the Cartesian, since in the Fifth Meditation Descartes explicitly argues that “apart from God, there is nothing else of which I am capable of thinking such that existence belongs to its essence.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, infinite extension and infinite thought depend for their existence on the “One Unique being,” and to that extent, claims Spinoza, they must be its modes.

It is intriguing that in this passage Spinoza’s *Reason* is willing to call extension and thought both “attributes” and “modes” of the one substance. It is possible that *Reason* represents here an unstable position that Spinoza considers, but eventually rejects. In Letters 4 and 10, Spinoza would already insist that the

<sup>45</sup> A somewhat surprising appellation for a Cartesian. The views expressed by Lust in G I/28/25–31 are Cartesian (cf. Wolf, *Spinoza’s Short Treatise*, 185), though it is possible that Lust is supposed to represent a certain syncretism of which Cartesianism is only one element.

<sup>46</sup> KV I 2 | G I/29/20–I/30/2 (emphasis added). The crucial passage in italics is neatly observed by Di Poppa, “Spinoza’s Concept,” 929.

<sup>47</sup> Spinoza’s remark in G I/20/16 (“especially a substance which has existed through itself”) implies that not all substances exist through themselves. As we have just seen, Spinoza would prefer to call substances that do not exist through themselves “attributes.”

<sup>48</sup> See Spinoza’s claim in the first paragraph of the above quotation that the one “which exists through itself is a *support* of the all other attributes.”

<sup>49</sup> AT VII 68 | CSM II 47.

existence of the *attributes* is *not* distinct from their essence, that is, that extension and thought exist by virtue of their essence.<sup>50</sup>

An argument similar to the one that we have just examined appears also in the second chapter of the first part of the KV, where we also find Spinoza's familiar reference to the ultimate reality as "Nature."<sup>51</sup> The argument here is slightly different from *Reason's* argument above, since it relies on the claim that one substance cannot produce another substance, which is one of the four characteristics of substance that Spinoza proves at the beginning of the chapter.

As we have already seen, one substance cannot produce another, and if a substance does not exist, it is impossible for it to begin to exist. We see, however,<sup>f</sup> that in no substance (which we nonetheless know to exist in Nature) is there, so long as it is conceived separately, any necessity of existing. Since no existence pertains to its particular essence, it must necessarily follow that Nature, which comes from no cause, and which we nevertheless know to exist, must necessarily be a perfect being, to which existence belongs.

Note f: I.e., if no substance can be other than real, and nevertheless *no existence follows from its essence if it is conceived separately*, it follows that it is not something singular, but must be something that is an attribute of another, viz. the one, unique, universal being.

Or thus: . . . when our intellect understands substantial thought and extension, we understand them only in their essence, and not in their existence,<sup>52</sup> i.e. [we do not understand] that their existence necessarily belongs to their essence. *But when we prove that they are attributes of God, we thereby prove a priori that they exist.*<sup>53</sup>

Note f, presumably a somewhat late addition by Spinoza,<sup>54</sup> might indicate the crucial point at which Spinoza decides that infinite extension and thought cannot be modes ("something singular"<sup>55</sup>) of God (or Nature), but only attributes; by being attributes of (i.e., merely rationally distinct from) a being whose

<sup>50</sup> Ep. 4 | G IV/13/7. Cf. Ep. 10 | G IV/47/16.

<sup>51</sup> In another passage in the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza argues explicitly for the identification God and Nature: "Of Nature all in all is predicated, and that thus Nature consists of infinite attributes, of which each is perfect in its kind. This agrees perfectly with the definition one gives of God" (KV I 2 | G I/22/9). Cf. KV II 22 | G I/101/20: "Since the whole of nature is one unique substance, whose essence is infinite, all things are united through Nature, and united into one [being], viz. God."

<sup>52</sup> Here again, Descartes' Fifth Meditation seems to be in the background.

<sup>53</sup> KV I 2 | G I/23–24 (emphasis added).

<sup>54</sup> For a detailed discussion of the nature of the notes to the KV, see Mignini's editorial introduction to Spinoza, *Korte verhandeling/Breve trattato*, 63–66.

<sup>55</sup> Singular things are beings whose essence does not involve existence, i.e., modes. See TIE §100, and CM I 2 | G I/238/30.

essence involves existence, the attributes themselves become beings whose essence involves existence (or, as Spinoza puts it here, insofar as extension and thought are attributes of God, we can “prove a priori that they exist”). In chapter 7 of part 1 of the KV, Spinoza makes this last point explicit: “[the attributes] as attributes of a being existing through itself, exist through themselves” (G I/47/1).

There is a significant similarity between the argument for the existence of God in note f and the one we have encountered earlier, in Letter 36 (G IV/185/11–19). In both texts Spinoza relies on the existence of Extension and Thought, which he argues are less perfect than God, to show that the absolutely perfect being must exist.<sup>56</sup> Spinoza refers to such proofs as “a posteriori demonstrations” of God’s existence (since they rely on the existence of other entities to prove God’s existence), and in the *Ethics*, he would adduce another variant of the same family of demonstration.<sup>57</sup>

Before we turn to a discussion of the intriguing first appendix to the KV, let me point out that throughout the book, Spinoza insists on the epistemic self-sufficiency of the attributes.<sup>58</sup> Another consistent element in Spinoza’s discussion of the attributes in the KV is his claim that Thought and Extension are the only genuine divine attributes with which we are acquainted. Thus, in a rather famous note, he writes:

Regarding the attributes of which God consists [. . .] So far,<sup>59</sup> however, only two of all these infinite attributes are known to us through their essence: Thought and Extension.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, it is noteworthy that already in the KV, Spinoza affirms that God is “the cause of himself.”<sup>61</sup>

The first appendix to the KV, presumably a somewhat late addition to the main text,<sup>62</sup> is written *more geometrico*, yet *it has no definitions*. The text we have consists of six axioms and four propositions. Spinoza provides a demonstration

<sup>56</sup> In Ep. 36, unlike note f of the KV, Spinoza is willing to grant his rival that Extension and Thought “exist by their own sufficiency” (G IV/185).

<sup>57</sup> See E1p11d | G II/53/29–36.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, KV I 7 | G I/46/29–I/47/3, and KV I 2 | G I/32/29–30.

<sup>59</sup> The tentative tone (“so far”) of Spinoza’s claim about our inability to know the other attributes will disappear in his late work, and for good reason. In the KV, Spinoza still allows for some causal interaction among entities belonging to different attributes. Once such an interaction is banned, the interaction between ideas representing entities belonging to different attributes would be ruled out as well. If our mind cannot interact with ideas representing modes of attributes other than Extension and Thought, then our mind cannot know these attributes, *in principle*. For a detailed discussion of this crucial yet difficult issue, see my *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, chapter 6.

<sup>60</sup> KV I 7a | G I/44/23–35. Cf. KV I 2 | G I/27/12.

<sup>61</sup> KV I 7 | G I/47/15. Cf. the sixth axiom of the First Appendix to the KV (G I/114/19).

<sup>62</sup> See Curley’s editorial note in Spinoza, *Collected Works*, 1:150 n. 1.

for each of the propositions. From these demonstrations we can learn that this text never included a definition section, since the demonstrations rely only on the axioms (and previous propositions). The question of what Spinoza was up to in writing such a bizarre geometrical text with no definitions is truly puzzling.<sup>63</sup>

In the third proposition of the appendix we find Spinoza's assimilation of substance and attribute, with which we should be familiar by now: "Every attribute, or substance, is by its nature infinite, and supremely perfect in its kind." The demonstration of this proposition is ridden with gaps and assumes a certain understanding of the divine attributes that has not been stipulated previously.

Dem.: No substance is produced by another (P2); consequently, if it exists, it is either an attribute of God or it has been a cause of itself outside God. If the first, then it is necessarily infinite and supremely perfect in its kind, as are all God's other attributes. If the second, it also must be such; for (by A6) it could not have limited itself.

The following proposition asserts (*pace* the Cartesians) "existence belongs to the essence of every substance." The corollary to this proposition—which also concludes the appendix—provides an outline of a nice demonstration for the identity of God and Nature, based on rudimentary version the identity of indiscernibles.

Nature is known through itself, and not through any other thing. It consists of infinite attributes, each of which is infinite and perfect in its kind. Existence belongs to its essence, so that outside it there is no essence or being. *Hence it agrees exactly with the essence of God*, who alone is magnificent and blessed. (G I/116/28–32; emphasis added)

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have traced several interrelated strands in the development of Spinoza's conceptualization of God, substance, and attribute. Remarkably, we have found that in the very early drafts of the *Ethics*, God is *not* defined as substance, and the definition of attribute (if there is any) does not mention the intellect at all. Perhaps part of the problem motivating Spinoza's various attempts to determine the precise relation between the notions of God, substance, and attribute was the need to negotiate between the Cartesian conception of

<sup>63</sup> I study this issue in "Why could the Cause-of-Itself not possibly have limited itself?—On the First Appendix to Spinoza's *Korte Verhandling*."

substances (each having only one principal attribute) and some medieval views, adopted by Spinoza, which ascribe to God an infinity of attributes.<sup>64</sup> Both the medieval conception of divine attributes and the poorly developed Cartesian notion of a substance's primary attribute play at the background of Spinoza's own attempt to conceptualize the substance-attribute relation. Many of the tensions pointed out in this chapter were never fully resolved, not even in the final version of the *Ethics*. Consider, for example, Spinoza's claim in E1p10s that "although two attributes may be *conceived* to be *really* distinct we can still not infer from that that they constitute two beings."<sup>65</sup> This formulation seems as ambivalent as possible on the rather crucial question of whether the distinction between the attributes is *real* or merely *conceptual*.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> See Crescas, *Or ha-Shem*, Book II, iii 3 (page 106 in Fisher's edition). Cf. my paper, "Crescas and Spinoza on Actual Infinity."

<sup>65</sup> Cf. KV I 2 | G I/23/16: ". . . all these attributes which are in Nature are only one, single being, and by no means different ones (*though we can clearly and distinctly understand the one without the other*)" (emphasis added).

<sup>66</sup> In part 2 of my paper, "Building Blocks," I show that Spinoza's understanding of the distinction between the attributes in the final version of the *Ethics* is very close to the scholastic notion of a "distinction of reasoned reason [*distinctio rationis ratiocinantæ*]."