

'Except God, no substance can be conceived': Spinoza on other substances

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1. Introduction

It seems that several of Spinoza's arguments for the existence of God can be used to prove the existence of a non-divine substance instead. The Problem of Other Substances (Garrett 1979, Barry 2019) is to explain why Spinoza does not and could not do this. This paper develops a novel response to this problem, based on the claims that non-divine substances are inconceivable and that every conceivable substance exists. Unlike previous attempts, it locates the source of the inconceivability of non-divine substances not in their apparent conflict with God's existence, but in problems that arise from Spinoza's conceptual barrier between the attributes.

2. The Problem of Other Substances

In the *Ethics* (E1p11), Spinoza gives four arguments for the existence of God, but the first three of these arguments do not depend on any special features of God.¹ They depend on God's being self-caused, his essence's containing his existence and his being more powerful than any finite thing; but these are properties that any substance has. So it seems these arguments could be used to establish the existence of some substance other than God. Because God has all the attributes (E1def6), and every substance has at least one attribute, any substance other than God would share at least one attribute with God. However, E1p5 establishes that, for any attribute, there can be only one substance with that attribute. And so Spinoza could seemingly use his demonstrations in E1p11 to establish the existence of this other substance, and then infer that God does not exist. The Problem of Other Substances is to explain why Spinoza does not and could not do this.

The responses to this problem can be classed into two main groups. On the one hand, some argue that Spinoza held substances other than God to be

1 I refer to the *Ethics* by E, followed by part and proposition (p) number. Additionally I use the following abbreviations: def (definition), dem (demonstration) and s (scholium). So E1p11dem2 is the second demonstration of proposition 11 of Part 1 of the *Ethics*. I refer to the *Short Treatise* as KV, to the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* as TIE followed by paragraph number, and to the *Letters* as Ep. When I refer to longer sections of the text, I include references to Gebhardt's edition (Spinoza 1925; abbreviated as G followed by volume and page number). These page references are incorporated into the margins of Curley's edition (Spinoza 1985, 2016), which I use for all translations.

inconceivable: they have an inconsistent definition. [Garrett \(1979\)](#), who first articulated the problem, took this position. The more common response, however, has been to argue that while these non-divine substances have consistent definitions, they are not really *possible*: something prevents their existence. Versions of this response have been put forward by [Della Rocca \(2002\)](#), [Lin \(2007\)](#) and [Barry \(2019\)](#).

This division reflects a distinction that Spinoza makes in E1p33s1. There he writes that a thing can be called impossible either ‘by reason of its essence’ or ‘by reason of its cause’: a thing is

called impossible . . . either because its essence, or definition, involves a contradiction, or because there is no external cause which has been determined to produce such a thing.

In the first case, a thing is not even conceivable; in the second, while it may be conceivable – it has a consistent definition – there is nevertheless something external to it that prevents its existence. In the latter case, the definition of the thing, together with this external cause, imply a contradiction; in the former, the definition is either self-contradictory or implies a contradiction by itself. Impossibility ‘by reason of a thing’s essence’ will here be called *intrinsic impossibility*, impossibility ‘by reason of its cause’ *extrinsic impossibility*. Conversely, if a thing’s conceivability implies its existence, it is *intrinsically necessary*; when it does so only in combination with some further cause, it is *extrinsically necessary*. (See [Griffin 2008](#) for these terms.) The central question of the Problem of Other Substances is whether these substances are intrinsically impossible – that is, inconceivable – or only extrinsically impossible.

As just noted, the more common response to the problem has been to argue that non-divine substances are *extrinsically* impossible. The most prominent defender of the other position, that these substances are inconceivable already by E1p11, is [Garrett \(1979\)](#); but [Barry \(2019: 485–86\)](#) has in my eyes convincingly shown that Garrett does not succeed in deriving a contradiction from the definition of such substances alone. Even so, there is strong textual evidence that Spinoza rejects the notion of an extrinsically impossible substance, and so something like Garrett’s approach must be right. Consider the following four passages:

Existence belongs, by nature, to the essence of every substance, so much so that it is impossible to posit in an infinite intellect the idea of the essence of a substance which does not exist in Nature. (KV, appendix 1, proposition 4)

[G]iven the definition of [an uncreated] thing [i.e. a substance], there should remain no room for the Question – does it exist? (TIE, 97)

Hence, if someone were to say that he had a clear and distinct, i.e., true, idea of a substance, and nevertheless doubted whether such a substance existed, that would indeed be the same as if he were to say that he had a

true idea, and nevertheless doubted whether it was false (as is evident to anyone who is sufficiently attentive). (E1p8s2)

[E]xcept God, no substance can be or, consequently, be conceived. For if it could be conceived, it would have to be conceived as existing. (E1p14dem)

Each of these texts asserts a tight link between a substance's *conceivability* and its *existence*, a link that would be broken by extrinsically impossible substances. The first three texts all state some variation of the claim that a substance's conceivability or definition alone settles whether it exists or not. The passage from E1p8s2 suggests that Spinoza believes the alternative of an extrinsically impossible (consistently conceivable, but not existing) substance to be absurd – just as he believes it to be absurd to have a true idea but doubt whether it is true (see E2p43). The fourth passage, besides explicitly stating that non-divine substances are inconceivable, also stresses the same link between a substance's conceivability and its existence. A substance's existence pertains to its essence (E1p7). So if a substance's essence is conceivable, the essence must be conceived as existing. From this Spinoza seems to infer its actual existence. Because Spinoza takes God's essence to be conceivable, and a non-divine substance's existence would be incompatible with that of God, the essences of such substances must be inconceivable.

This claim about the relation between a substance's conceivability and its existence is controversial. But Spinoza clearly did make it, repeatedly and in different writings. So there is a strong presumption in favour of a response to the Problem of Other Substances that shows that non-divine substances are inconceivable and not just extrinsically impossible. This is what this paper provides. It first briefly goes over the basics of Spinoza's notion of attribute, showing that each attribute corresponds to an independent way of conceiving the nature of substance (§3). It argues that, because these ways of conceiving are independent of each other, a non-divine substance cannot be defined in terms of the attributes it does have. Instead, such a substance would have to have some but not all of the attributes. But §4 argues that this renders the essence of such a substance self-contradictory in two different ways. Finally, §5 is a brief comparison with other interpretations.

3. Attributes and the conceptual barrier

One of the questions Spinoza faces in the early propositions of the *Ethics* is how many substances there are. The opening definitions of Part 1 introduce the notions of substance in general (E1def3) and of a substance with absolutely infinite attributes (i.e. God: E1def6). Spinoza also seems to take it for granted that there are multiple attributes (at least, Extension and Thought).

E1def4, in addition, establishes that there is a close connection between an attribute and the essence of the substance having that attribute:

By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence.

Along with most commentators, I assume that the intellect spoken of here is an infinite intellect.² Because the infinite intellect has only true ideas (E2p32), this means that attributes really do constitute a substance's essence, and that a substance is conceived through its attribute(s).

E1def4 is carefully formulated to leave room for E1p10s, which establishes that from the fact that we have two really distinct ways of conceiving a substance, it does not follow that the corresponding attributes belong to two different substances. Additionally, E1p10 states:

Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself.

That is, the concept of any attribute does not involve the concept of any other attribute. For this reason, we cannot infer from the fact that a substance has one attribute to its having any other attribute. (This is one aspect of what is known as the 'conceptual barrier' between the attributes; see [Della Rocca 1996](#): 9–17.)

By this point, then, we have three claims about the relation of substance and attributes:

to conceive an attribute is to conceive a substance with that attribute (E1def4);

there may be more than one way of conceiving a substance (i.e. it may have more than one attribute) (E1p10s);

from conceiving one attribute of a substance, we cannot infer anything about its other attributes (E1p10).

So far, this is uncontroversial. But Spinoza believes we can also make the following inference:

(1) attribute A is conceivable;

therefore

(2) a substance with attribute A exists.

(Or, 'the' substance, because it follows from E1p5 that there can be only one substance with attribute A.)

This is a consequence of the already established link between a substance's conceivability and its existence. If an attribute is conceivable, then the essence of a substance is conceivable. If the essence of a substance is conceivable, then

2 I therefore reject the 'subjectivist' interpretation of the attributes, which is associated with [Wolfson 1934](#). For discussion, see [Guieroult 1968](#): 428–61, [Shein 2009](#) and [Melamed 2018](#): 94–95.

the substance exists. Of course, this conclusion has to be qualified by E1p10 and E1p10s: we do not know, from conceiving of attribute A, that the substance that has A has *only* A and no other attributes.

On this reading, the early propositions of the *Ethics* establish that there are many ways of conceiving of substance and that any conceivable substance necessarily exists. They do not establish that these different ways of conceiving correspond to really distinct substances. It is also established that there can be only one substance per attribute (E1p5). None of this, of course, precludes there being only one substance that has all the attributes. E1p11 shows that this is in fact the case. Each of the attributes corresponds to a way of conceiving of God. While there are many *ways of conceiving* of substance, there is only one actually existing substance, and substances other than God are inconceivable. The early propositions of the *Ethics* represent Spinoza's attempt to find out how many substances ultimately correspond to these infinite ways of conceiving.

4. *Non-divine substances are inconceivable*

On this interpretation, Spinoza does not consider the Problem of Other Substances because he does not think the diversity of ways of conceiving of substance reflects the conceivability of any non-divine substances. He does not think that it is possible to demonstrate the existence of any substance that is not God. Because, again, by demonstrating the existence of a substance with any given combination of attributes, we do not establish that that substance is not God. So we *could* use the first three demonstrations of E1p11 to demonstrate the existence of a substance with any consistent combination of attributes. But that substance would be God. On this reading, once we realize that E1p11 can be used to demonstrate the existence of a being with all the attributes, we realize that any other substance that it could be used to demonstrate would not really be a *different* substance at all.³

This naturally raises the question of what it would take for a substance to be numerically distinct from God, and why Spinoza thinks such substances are inconceivable. Again, it is not possible to distinguish two substances just in terms of their attributes. For if we conceive substances S and T as having the same attribute, then we are not conceiving them as different at all (E1p5dem); whereas if we conceive them under different attributes, we cannot infer from that fact alone that $S \neq T$. Instead, what we need is a proof that S has an attribute that T does *not* have (or vice versa). In other words, we need a

3 Note that, while I take any (combination of) attribute(s) to constitute a *way of conceiving* of God, I do not think these are all equally good ways of *defining* God. As we shall also see later on, Spinoza thinks a definition should express everything that is included in a thing's essence (E2def2). Spinoza presumably thinks that only E1def6 amounts to a definition of God. Even so, there are many ways of conceiving God's essence that are not (real) definitions of God.

way of conceiving a substance from which it follows that it does *not* have some attribute or other.

Such a definition is most naturally expressed using a negation. A few examples of such definitions are the following:

- the substance with the *single* attribute A;
- the substance with *only* the attributes A, B, C;
- the substance with attribute A *and no others*.

The italicized parts can all be naturally expressed using a negation. In effect, all these formulations are just different versions of the third (which can of course be changed to include any combination of attributes). Because they all turn on a negation, Spinoza would consider them unacceptable definitions.⁴

There are several texts that support the claim that, for Spinoza, a negation cannot be part of a substance's essence, and so of its real definition.⁵ For one, Spinoza holds that definitions should give a thing's cause (E1p8s2). But a negation is not a thing, and so it cannot be a cause either. Similarly, TIE, 96 states that 'every definition must be affirmative'.

Ep34–36 to Hudde contain several statements that also support the idea that definitions of substances cannot contain negations. In Ep34, Spinoza gives as one condition on definition that 'There must necessarily be a positive cause of each existing thing, through which it exists' (G IV, 179). A *positive* cause, so not a negation. In Ep35, he states that 'whatever involves necessary existence [i.e., substances] cannot have in it any imperfection, but must express pure perfection' (G IV, 182). A negation does not express perfection, so it cannot be part of the essence of a substance.⁶

The *Ethics* contains sources parallel to the Ep35 statement on perfection. Spinoza associates a thing's perfection with its reality (see e.g. E1p9). But to not have something is not a perfection, and so it cannot contribute to a thing's reality. Now, by the definition of essence (E2def2), an essence should include everything that expresses a thing's reality, and nothing more: it should include that which 'being given [*dato*], the thing is . . . necessarily posited and which,

4 It is possible to express these statements without using a negation: for example as 'substance S has attribute A, and, for any attribute X, if S has X, then X = A.' While this is true, this formula still quantifies over attributes other than A. This is the crucial point in my argument that such a definition is inconsistent, which will be set out below.

5 I will restrict myself to the definition of substances in this paper. Several of the texts cited in what follows support the claim that *no* definition whatsoever, whether of a substance or something else, can involve a negation for Spinoza. However, for discussion of worries that *finitude*, and so the essence of finite modes, might involve negation, see Hübner 2015 and Lin 2019: 130–32.

6 Arguably, negation does not express *imperfection* either – Spinoza refers to what expresses imperfection as 'privation' (e.g. Ep21, at G IV, 128–29; Ep36, at G IV, 184–85). But it is sufficient for the argument that negation does not express perfection.

being taken away, the thing is necessarily ... taken away'. To be 'given', it seems something must possess reality, which negations do not. So, by this definition, negations cannot belong to a thing's essence.

Finally, there is one piece of historical testimony that suggests that Spinoza would not accept substances defined through a negation. Leibniz explicitly held the view that God's perfections were all positive. Because they did not involve negation and so could not contradict each other, he argued that they were all compatible with each other and could exist in a single substance. In a report of his conversations with Spinoza in November 1676, he claims to have shown this argument to Spinoza and that the latter 'thought it sound' (Leibniz 1989: 168). Spinoza therefore apparently agreed that a substance's perfections – that is, its attributes – must all be positive, and hence that its essence must be positive.

These texts show that Spinoza would have difficulty accepting a substance defined through its *not* having certain attributes. But what is the inconsistency involved in such a definition? In fact it is possible to show *two* inconsistencies: one relating to the non-divine substance's *attributes* and the other to its status as a *substance* itself.

The first contradiction results from the tight connection between attributes and their substance's essence that has already been indicated. Suppose that a substance S has attribute A and is distinct from God. By E2def2, positing A should be sufficient for positing S. But, in this case, it is not sufficient, because positing A by itself is compatible with the substance that has A being God. Therefore A is not an attribute of S after all, leading to a contradiction.

The second contradiction is that S cannot truly be conceived through itself. It is partly conceived through something that is external to itself, namely through the attributes that it does not have. This means that it fails to meet the conditions on substance-hood (E1def3), contradicting our initial definition.

Incidentally, this second argument shows another, related reason why a non-divine substance's essence is self-contradictory: its essence involves a relation to something external to itself, contrary to E1def3. (Clearly there is a close connection between the two reasons: because the essence involves a negation, it must make reference to what the substance is not, which necessarily is something outside of the substance.)

For these reasons, substances other than God are intrinsically impossible for Spinoza: they are internally inconsistent. This is not evident early in the *Ethics*, when the definition of such a substance can easily be confused with that of a substance that is defined positively just through its attributes. But it does become clear once it is established, in E1p11, that God exists. Then the need for distinguishing substances with fewer than all the attributes from God becomes clear, and it can accordingly be seen that such substances are intrinsically impossible.

5. *Comparison to other interpretations*

At first sight, my interpretation seems to have many similarities to that of [Gueroult \(1968\)](#). But Gueroult's view is widely considered to be problematic. So, in this final section, I should briefly show how my interpretation is different, and which interpretations it resembles instead.

Gueroult also argued that every conceivable substance necessarily exists ([1968: 134–35](#)). So he also saw no tension between proving the existence of any substance and proving God's existence ([1968: 181](#)). Gueroult believed that only single-attribute substances and God are conceivable. By E1p7, each of these substances exists. But Gueroult then faced the question of how these different substances can 'compose' God, who is single and indivisible. How can infinitely many distinct things, each of which is identical to an essence of God, constitute a single thing? (For discussion, see [Shein 2009](#), [Marshall 2009](#) and [Smith 2014](#).)

Gueroult's troubles derive from assuming a 'substantialist' interpretation of the attributes: the view that each attribute is a distinct substance ([Lin 2006: 148](#); [Marshall 2009](#) defends this view). To a substantialist, E1p7 establishes a multiplicity of numerically distinct substances. By contrast, my interpretation does not make this assumption and therefore does not face this problem. As we saw, Spinoza believes that, for any attribute A, the substance with attribute A exists. But from this nothing follows about whether this substance is distinct from the substance with attribute B. My interpretation faces the problem that every interpretation of Spinoza faces: how can God have infinite attributes if each of these attributes is conceived independently yet has a very tight connection (arguably, is identical) to God's indivisible essence? But it does not complicate the answer to this question by assuming a multiplicity of single-attribute substances.

In fact, my interpretation is compatible with a recent trend in the literature that sees the attributes as only *conceptually* and not *really* distinct ([Shein 2009](#), [Melamed 2018](#), [Lin 2019: 74–101](#)). However, apart from rejecting subjectivist and substantialist interpretations of the attributes, my interpretation does not take a definite stance on the nature of attributes and so should be compatible with a range of interpretations.⁷

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Abstract

This paper argues that Spinoza held substances other than God to be inconceivable. It uses this claim to develop a novel response to the Problem of Other Substances (Garrett 1979, Barry 2019), the problem of explaining why some of Spinoza's proofs for God's existence cannot be used to prove the existence of a non-divine substance instead.

Keywords: Spinoza, Problem of Other Substances, ontological argument, substance, conceivability