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THE DIVINE ESSENCE AND THE CONCEPTION OF GOD IN  
SPINOZA

**ABSTRACT.** I argue against a prevailing view that the essence of God is identical with the attributes. I show that given what Spinoza says in 2d2 – Spinoza’s purported definition of the essence of a thing – the attributes cannot be identical with the essence of God (whether the essence of God is understood as the distinct attributes or as a totality of indistinct attributes). I argue that while the attributes do not satisfy the stipulations of 2d2 relative to God, absolutely infinite and eternal power does satisfy those stipulations. Hence, I conclude that absolutely infinite and eternal power is God’s essence and that the attributes are expressions of that power.

A review of recent literature on Spinoza reveals a prevailing view of the relation between God’s essence and the attributes – most contemporary commentators understand the attributes to be somehow identical with the essence of God.<sup>1</sup> The exact nature of this relation, however, varies among Spinoza scholars. Some, for example, claim that the essence of God is identical with the collection of attributes. According to this interpretation, the essence of God is the *sum* of the *distinct* attributes. Others hold the view that the divine essence is identical with the totality of attributes. On this interpretation, God’s essence is a *whole* consisting of *non-discrete* attributes.<sup>2</sup> I will call these interpretations of the essence of God “the collection view” and “the totality view”.

In 2d2 Spinoza says that that which pertains to the essence of a thing is that without which a thing can neither be nor be conceived.<sup>3</sup> I will argue that this rules out the identity between God’s essence and the attributes. Indeed, I will show that given Spinoza’s claim in 2d2 God’s essence cannot be identical with either the collection of distinct attributes or with the totality of non-discrete attributes. I will suggest instead that the essence of God is absolutely infinite and eternal power. That is to say, it is not the attributes but absolutely infinite and eternal power that satisfies the stipulations of 2d2. My interpretation of God and the attributes will be based on the idea that human intellect has an adequate idea of the essence of God.



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## 1. 2D2 AND THE ESSENCE OF GOD

How do we know what the essence of a thing is in Spinoza's metaphysics? Commentators disagree about the subject of 2d2, Spinoza's purported treatment of the essence of a thing. Some say that 2d2 is the definition of the term "essence", while others insist that 2d2 is the definition of the locution "what pertains to (or belongs to) the essence of a thing".<sup>4</sup> Here is what 2d2 says:

I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is [NS: also] necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily [NS: also] taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.

Is this Spinoza's definition of *the essence of a thing* or is it the definition of *that which pertains to the essence of a thing*? The only way to find out is carefully and painstakingly to work our way through this definition. So, here is what Spinoza says in 2d2. When that which pertains to the essence of a thing is given, the thing is given; and when that which pertains to the essence of a thing is taken away, the thing is taken away. Also, when the thing is given, that which pertains to the essence of the thing is given; and when the thing is taken away, that which pertains to the essence of the thing is taken away. The same applies to the conception of a thing. So, when that which pertains to the essence of a thing is conceived, the thing is conceived; and when that which pertains to the essence of a thing is not conceived, the thing is not conceived. Also, when the thing is conceived, that which pertains to the essence of the thing is conceived; and when the thing is not conceived, that which pertains to the essence of the thing is not conceived. Hence a thing's existence entails that which pertains to the thing's essence, and that which pertains to a thing's essence entails the thing's existence.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the conception of a thing entails the conception of that which pertains to the essence of the thing, and the conception of that which pertains to the essence of a thing entails the conception of the thing.

Where does this leave us regarding the essence of God? When we apply 2d2 to the essence of God we get the following. When that which pertains to the essence of God is given, God is given; and when that which pertains to the essence of God is taken away, God is taken away. Also, when God is given, that which pertains to the essence of God is given; and when God is taken away, that which pertains to the essence of God is taken away. The same applies to the conception of God. So, when that which pertains to the essence of God is conceived, God is conceived; and when that which pertains to the essence of God is not conceived, God is not conceived.

Also, when God is conceived, that which pertains to the essence of God is conceived; and when God is not conceived, that which pertains to the essence of God is not conceived. Hence God's existence entails that which pertains to God's essence, and that which pertains to God's essence entails God's existence. In addition, the conception of God entails the conception of that which pertains to God's essence, and the conception of that which pertains to God's essence entails the conception of God.

What do commentators of the collection view and the totality view think about 2d2 relative to the essence of God? Scholars of both persuasions generally agree that the attributes satisfy the stipulations of 2d2. Indeed, this seems to be the consensus whether 2d2 is taken to be the definition of *the essence of a thing* or the definition of *that which pertains to the essence of a thing*. That the attributes satisfy the stipulations of 2d2 relative to the essence of God seems reasonable at first. After all, what other candidate do we have? What else is such that when it is given God is given and vice versa? Probing the standard conclusion about 2d2 and the essence of God, however, reveals problems with the view that the attributes satisfy the stipulations of 2d2.

Let's consider 2d2 and the attributes of God. We know (from 2p1 and 2p2) that there are at least two attributes (and possibly more). If the *particular* attributes satisfy the stipulations of 2d2, then when the attribute of thought is given, God is given; and when the attribute of thought is taken away, God is taken away. Also, when God is given, the attribute of thought is given; and when God is taken away, then the attribute of thought is taken away. Further, if the attribute of thought pertains to the essence of God, then when the attribute of thought is conceived, God is conceived; and when the attribute of thought is not conceived, God is not conceived. Also, when God is conceived, the attribute of thought is conceived; and when God is not conceived, the attribute of thought is not conceived.

On this reading of 2d2, the attribute of extension also pertains to the essence of God. So, when the attribute of extension is given, God is given; and when the attribute of extension is taken away, God is taken away. Also, when God is given, the attribute of extension is given; and when God is taken away, then the attribute of extension is taken away. Once again one can draw the further conclusion that if the attribute of extension pertains to the essence of God, then when the attribute of extension is conceived, God is conceived; and when the attribute of extension is not conceived, God is not conceived. Also, when God is conceived, the attribute of extension is conceived; and when God is not conceived, the attribute of extension is not conceived. This, however, does not seem to satisfy the stipulations of 2d2. 2d2 claims that whatever pertains to the essence of a thing is that

without which the thing cannot be conceived. If the particular attributes are that which pertains to the essence of God, then each attribute is sufficient but not necessary for the conception of God. This, however, conflicts with 2d2. The claim that each *particular* attribute pertains to the essence of God seems to be, *prima facie*, ruled out by 2d2, since that which pertains to the essence of a thing is *necessary* for the conception of the thing.<sup>6</sup> This means that if the attributes pertain to the essence of God at all, then it cannot be the case that when just one of them is conceived, God is conceived. In other words, if the attributes satisfy the stipulations of 2d2 relative to the essence of God, then it must be the case that *all of the particular attributes* taken together are what satisfy the stipulations of 2d2. This results in the following reading of 2d2 relative to the essence of God. When God is given *all of the particular attributes* are given, and when God is taken away *all of the particular attributes* are taken away (since that which pertains to the essence of God is necessary for God to be given, and vice versa). Further, when God is conceived *all of the particular attributes* are conceived, and when God is not conceived *all of the particular attributes* taken together are not conceived (since that which pertains to the essence of God is necessary for the conception of God, and vice versa). It is now clear that each particular attribute alone cannot satisfy the stipulations of 2d2. Indeed, the only way the attributes could possibly satisfy the stipulations of 2d2 is the case in which all of the particular attributes are taken together. It seems that *all of the particular attributes* are either the *collection* (i.e., the sum) of the particular attributes or the *totality* (i.e., the whole) of non-discrete attributes. Could it be that either the collection of particular attributes or the totality of non-discrete attributes satisfies the stipulations of 2d2? That is to say, is either the collection view or the totality view correct?

Let's consider the collection view first. Does the collection of attributes satisfy the stipulations of 2d2? If it does, then it is necessary to conceive the collection of attributes in order to conceive God. This seems impossible if there is an infinity of attributes, since human intellect can conceive only two attributes.<sup>7</sup> What if there are only two attributes, viz, thought and extension? It seems obvious that both the infinite intellect and human intellect can have an idea of the collection of attributes if there exist only the two known attributes. Indeed, this might be good reason to think that there really are only two attributes. The problem with this conclusion is that Spinoza claims in 2p1s that we can conceive an infinite being through one attribute alone.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the conception of the collection of attributes is not required for the conception of God. It seems, then, that the collection of particular attributes cannot be that without which God cannot

be conceived, since Spinoza says that God can be conceived through *any* particular attribute.

What about the totality view? Does the totality of non-discrete attributes satisfy the stipulations of 2d2? If it does then it is necessary to conceive the totality of non-discrete attributes in order to conceive God. There is a problem with this view whether there is an infinity of attributes or only two. In 1p10 Spinoza says that each attribute is conceived only through itself; and in 1p10s Spinoza says that the attributes are conceived as really distinct.<sup>9</sup> This means that it is impossible to conceive a totality of non-distinct attributes. The attributes are just not conceived that way – they are conceived as distinct from one another. Since the *totality* of attributes cannot be conceived, the totality of attributes cannot satisfy the stipulations of 2d2.

We still don't know whether 2d2 is the definition of *the essence of a thing*, or the definition of *that which pertains to the essence of a thing*. What we do know is that neither the collection nor the totality of attributes satisfies the stipulations of 2d2 relative to the essence of God. If the attributes do not satisfy this definition, then what is it that is necessary to conceive in order to conceive God? In considering this question it will become clear that 2d2 is, indeed, the definition of the essence of a thing.

According to Spinoza, the adequate idea of an entity requires the idea of the essence of that entity. So, the adequate idea of God requires the idea of the essence of God. 2d2 tells us that there is some X that must be conceived in order to conceive God, and that when we conceive God we always conceive X. I have claimed that there is only one thing that can satisfy this definition relative to the essence of God. That is to say, since X is both necessary and sufficient for the conception of God, X cannot be a multiplicity of things. I have considered whether the attributes satisfy the stipulations of 2d2. I have shown that neither the particular attributes, nor the collection of attributes, nor the totality of attributes satisfies the stipulations of 2d2. There is only one thing that is both necessary and sufficient for the conception of a thing according to Spinoza, and that is the essence of the thing. It seems, therefore, that 2d2 is just the definition of the essence of a thing. What is the essence of God if it isn't each particular attribute, the collection of attributes, or the totality of attributes? What is it that must be conceived in order to conceive God? In order to answer this question we need to know what it is to be the essence of a thing.

## 2. THE ESSENCE OF A THING

What is a thing's essence? In 1p34 Spinoza says, "God's power is his essence itself". Is 1p34 the claim that a thing's power is identical with its essence? Spinoza explains that certain things necessarily follow from the *essence* of a thing.<sup>10</sup> Further, Spinoza claims that a thing's *power* lies in a thing's striving to persevere (i.e., the actions of the thing insofar as it strives to endure or persist), and that the striving of a thing is nothing but the actual *essence* of the thing.<sup>11</sup> We can say, then, that a thing's causal power is coextensive with what can be conceived through its nature, and its nature is its essence. Hence, a thing's power is its essence and whatever a thing actively does, it does through its essence (i.e., as a consequence of things following from its essence). So, it seems that a thing's power is identical with its essence. Since God's essence (or power) is absolutely infinite, nothing can interfere with or defeat the power of God. That is to say, there is nothing outside of God; hence, there is nothing to defeat the activity of God. Since God's activity is perfect, there is nothing that can take away God's being. God's essence is absolutely infinite and eternal power; hence, absolutely infinite and eternal power satisfies the stipulation of 2d2. Therefore, the conception of absolutely infinite and eternal power is necessary and sufficient for the conception of God. How is the essence of God conceived by human intellect?

## 3. THE TRUE CONCEPTION OF GOD

What is the true conception of God, and what role do the attributes play in the conception of God? We know that the conception of God requires the conception of the essence of God. God's power is God's essence. Hence, human intellect must conceive absolutely infinite and eternal power in order to conceive God. In 1d4 Spinoza says that the attributes are what the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of substance.<sup>12</sup> So when an attribute is conceived, the essence of God (absolutely infinite and eternal power) is conceived. There are at least two attributes. It is reasonable, then, to ask how the same essence (absolutely infinite and eternal power) is conceived through different attributes. In 1p16d Spinoza says that each attribute "expresses an essence infinite in its own kind". According to this demonstration, each attribute is the expression of the essence of God in a particular *kind*; an attribute is a different *way* in which absolutely infinite and eternal power is expressed. So, the essence of God is expressed as absolutely infinite thought, absolutely infinite extension, etc.<sup>13</sup> I suggest that the essence of God can be conceived in different ways precisely because

the essence of God is *expressed* in particular ways or kinds; it is those very expressions of absolutely infinite and eternal power that are conceived.

Although each attribute is the expression of the essence of God in a particular kind, only one attribute (i.e., one way in which the essence of God is expressed) need be conceived in order to conceive the essence of God; this is because the attributes are parallel in nature.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, because each attribute expresses the very same essence, the essence that is conceived under a particular attribute is identical with the essence conceived under any other attribute. Each attribute is simply a different way in which God's essence or power is expressed. The attribute of thought is absolutely infinite and eternal power expressed in a thinking kind, and the attribute of extension is absolutely infinite and eternal power expressed in an extended kind. Therefore, human intellect can conceive the essence of God via the attribute of thought or the attribute of Extension.<sup>15</sup> The infinite intellect can, of course, conceive God's essence under any attribute that exists.

The essence of a thing is its power. 2d2 says that the essence of a thing must be conceived in order to conceive the thing. God's essence is absolutely infinite and eternal power. Therefore, absolutely infinite and eternal power must be conceived in order to conceive God. The attributes are the ways in which the essence of God is expressed; therefore, human intellect conceives the essence of God (absolutely infinite and eternal power) through the attributes.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will not discuss the question of whether the attributes are subjective or objective in nature. The stance that the attributes have no existence outside the intellect is an interpretation of the attributes that has been thoroughly rejected by contemporary commentators.

<sup>2</sup> Edwin Curley, for example, holds the first view. See Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 43. Steven Parchment holds the second view. See "The God/Attribute Distinction in Spinoza's Metaphysics: A Defense of Causal Objectivism", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 13 (1996), p. 63. According to Parchment, the "totality of attributes" is a unity wherein the particular attributes are undiscoverable.

<sup>3</sup> A note to the reader regarding the citation of propositions, definitions, scholia, etc: 2d2 refers to *Ethics*, Part 2, Definition 2; 1p8s2 refers to the second scholium of *Ethics*, Part 1, Proposition 8; 3p4d refers to the demonstration of *Ethics*, Part 3, Proposition 4; etc. Unless otherwise noted, all quoted passages from the *Ethics* and Spinoza's Correspondence are taken from: Edwin Curley (ed. and tr.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).



<sup>4</sup> Curley, for example, holds the former view. See Curley, p. 111. Donagan holds the latter view. See Alan Donagan, "Essence and the Distinction of Attributes", in *Spinoza, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), pp. 180. Also, see Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> It might seem to lead to an absurdity in Spinozistic terms to say that "that which pertains to a thing's essence entails the thing's existence", viz, this claim appears to require that a finite durational thing's existence is entailed by its essence. It is, however, impossible for Spinoza that a finite durational thing's existence is entailed by its essence since all things other than God are contingent; hence, the essence of anything other than God *does not* entail existence (since things other than God do not exist of necessity).

There is, however, no real absurdity in the claim that a finite durational thing's existence is entailed by its essence. The justification for this claim lies in the understanding of the term "be" in 2d2. In order to avoid the seeming absurdity we must understand Spinoza's use of the term "be" in the following way: For a thing to "be" means that the thing exists in actuality (i.e., space and time). On this reading, then, a thing cannot be (exist in space and time) unless that which pertains to the essence of the thing is given in space and time, and if that which pertains to the essence of the thing is given in space and time, then the thing exists in space and time.

If we do not understand the term "be" in this way, then it seems that we must accept the alternative reading that for something to "be" means that it exists in eternity. For a finite durational entity to exist in eternity must simply mean that the *essence* of the thing exists eternally (since a finite durational thing cannot and does not exist eternally). On this reading, a thing cannot be (i.e., exist as an essence in eternity) unless that which pertains to the essence of the thing is given in eternity, and if that which pertains to the essence of the thing is given in eternity, then the thing's essence exists in eternity.

It seems unlikely that Spinoza would define the essence of a thing in terms of that which pertains to a thing's essence. This reading simply tells us that the essence of a thing is just everything that pertains to the essence of the thing, so that if everything that pertains to the essence of a thing is posited in eternity, then the essence of the thing exists in eternity and, vice versa, if the essence of a thing exists in eternity, then everything that pertains to the essence of the thing is posited in eternity. Reading "be" as "existing as an essence in eternity" renders 2d2 a rather feeble definition – a definition incapable of accomplishing much philosophical work.

Since the first reading of "be" avoids the absurdity that the essence of a thing in eternity entails that the thing exists in space and time, it seems that the first reading of "be" in 2d2 is the more preferable of the two. On this reading, a thing cannot be (exist in space and time) unless the thing's essence is given in space and time, and if the essence of a thing is given in space and time, then the thing exists in space and time. Hence, the claim that a thing's essence entails a thing's existence results in no absurdity.

In addition to this discussion about the existence of a thing (either as a thing existing in space and time or as a thing existing in eternity), it would seem that one could claim that according to 2d2 the *conception* of a thing entails the *conception* of the essence of the thing since for Spinoza a thing is conceived only through its essence (see 1p10s2 and 2p29d).

<sup>6</sup> In 1d4 Spinoza defines the term "attribute" as that which is perceived by intellect as constituting the essence of substance. This may seem to conflict with the claim that no particular attribute can satisfy the stipulations of 2d2 relative to the essence of God. This seeming incongruence is addressed and set aright in the concluding section.

<sup>7</sup> Curley holds the view that there is an infinity of attributes.

<sup>8</sup> In 2p1s Spinoza tells us that we can conceive God through one attribute. “So since we can conceive an infinite Being by attending to thought alone, Thought (by 1D4 and 1D6) is necessarily one of God’s infinite attributes . . . .” Spinoza has already proved (in 1p14) that there exists only one substance and that substance is God. Hence, the infinite being that is conceived through thought alone must be the unique infinite being, i.e., God. Moreover, Spinoza concludes in 2p1s that thought is an attribute of God, i.e., the unique infinite being. So, human intellect can have an adequate idea of God through the attribute of thought alone. Since the attributes are parallel in nature, it follows that human intellect can have an adequate idea of God through the attribute of extension alone. That is to say, by 2p7, everything that is expressed under any particular attribute is also expressed under every other attribute. Hence, if human intellect can have an adequate idea of God via the attribute of thought, then human intellect can have an adequate idea of God via the attribute of extension. So (by 1p1s and 2p47) human intellect has an adequate idea of the essence of God through either the attribute of thought or the attribute of extension. 2p47: The human Mind has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence.

<sup>9</sup> 1p10: Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself.

1p10d: For an attribute is what the intellect perceives concerning a substance, as constituting its essence (by D4); so (by D3) it must be conceived through itself, q.e.d.

1p10s: From these propositions it is evident that although two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct (i.e., one may be conceived without the aid of the other), we still can not infer from that that they constitute two beings, or two different substances. For it is of the nature of a substance that each of its attributes is conceived through itself, since all the attributes it has have always been in it together, and one could not be produced by another, but each expresses the reality, or being of substance.

So it is far from absurd to attribute many attributes to one substance. Indeed, nothing in nature is clearer than that each being must be conceived under some attribute, and the more reality, or being it has, the more it has attributes which express necessity, or eternity, and infinity. And consequently there is also nothing clearer than that a being absolutely infinite must be defined (as we taught in D6) as a being that consists of infinite attributes, each of which expresses a certain eternal and infinite essence.

But if someone now asks by what sign we shall be able to distinguish the diversity of substances, let him read the following propositions, which show that in Nature there exists only one substance, and that it is absolutely infinite. So that sign would be sought in vain.

<sup>10</sup> See 3p7d.

<sup>11</sup> See 3p6 and 3p7.

<sup>12</sup> 1d4: By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence.

<sup>13</sup> We can see a parallel between the essence of modes and the essence of God. Consider a particular mode, for example, human being A. We would not want to say that the endeavor of human mind A to persist in its own being is the essence of human being A. Nor would we want to say that the endeavor of human body A to persist in its own being is the essence of human being A. Rather, the conatus or power of the mode itself (i.e. human being A) is the essence of human being A. This conatus or power is, in turn, expressed in two ways; the power or essence of human being A is *expressed* as a mind and a body. So, the endeavor of human mind A is the essence or power of human being A expressed as thought; and the endeavor of human body A is the essence or power of human being A expressed as extension. Just the same, we would not want to say that the attribute of thought or the attribute of extension is the essence of God. Rather it is God’s power that is God’s essence,

and this absolutely infinite and eternal power is of more than one kind; it is *expressed* as infinite thought and infinite extension.

<sup>14</sup> 2p7: The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.

2p7s: Therefore, whether we conceive nature under the attribute of Extension, or under the attribute of Thought, or under any other attribute, we shall find one and the same order, *or* one and the same connection of causes, i.e., that the same things follow one another.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, if something were expressed under one attribute and not another then the attributes would not express the same essence. Since there is only one substance – and the attributes express the essence of that substance – the attributes are necessarily parallel.

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