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The Rhetoric of the Geometrical Method: Spinoza's Double Strategy

Christopher P. Long

A double strategy may be apprehended in the first definitions, axioms and propositions of Spinoza's *Ethics*: the one is rhetorical, the other, systematic. Insofar as these opening passages constitute a geometrical argument that leads ultimately to the strict monism that lies at the heart of Spinoza's philosophy, they function systematically as grounding principles. However, insofar as they are designed to uncover errors at the heart of the Cartesian system, they function rhetorically as a critique of Descartes's equivocal theory of substance. The geometrical mode of presentation lends an aura of necessity to the systematic strategy and tends to eclipse the rhetorical strategy that functions as a critique of Cartesian dualism.¹ To this extent, the systematic strategy itself functions rhetorically. On the other hand, to the extent that any seventeenth-century attempt to establish a monistic system would inevitably have had to involve a critique of Cartesian dualism, the rhetorical strategy itself functions systematically. Thus, although two distinct strategies are simultaneously discernible in the opening passages of the *Ethics*, the two work together, each arguing on a different front, to establish Spinoza's monism. By focusing on the rhetorical side of this double strategy, the underlying nature of Spinoza's critique of Descartes can be clarified and certain gaps in the systematic, geometrical argument for monism can be explained.

Descartes's theory of substance

The rhetorical strategy Spinoza employs at the outset of the *Ethics* involves a brilliant use of equivocation and ambiguity designed to draw a reader dedicated to Cartesian dualism into the heart of an argument designed to

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undermine this dualism itself. The impetus behind this rhetorical critique is surely Spinoza's dissatisfaction with Descartes's theory of substance.

1. Descartes's equivocation

Descartes's theory rests upon a fundamental equivocation: on the one hand, the term "substance" is meant strictly to designate that which is absolutely self-sufficient, namely, God; on the other hand, Descartes allows for a weaker understanding of substance, which pertains to those things (specifically *res cogitans* and *res extensa*) that require only the concurrence of God in order to exist (*Principles* I, 51–52; AT VIIIA24–25).² Thus, for Descartes, although God is, strictly speaking, the only substance, there remains a sense in which both *res cogitans* and *res extensa* may be understood as substances as well.

Ultimately, this equivocal understanding of substance may be traced to a tension internal to Descartes between the Aristotelian notion of substance as underlying subject and the seventeenth-century mutation of that notion, which came to be defined in terms of causal self-sufficiency.³ Jonathan Bennett traces the source of this mutation back to the view held by Aristotle that the existence of some property depends upon its being instantiated—that is, there can be no courage unless there exists someone courageous. He continues his interesting argument thus:

This suggests that there is a relation of dependence running from properties to the things that have them and not conversely. The dependence would be logical: the thesis must be that "existent but uninstantiated property" is conceptually defective, not merely contrary to physics. Thus, one mark of a genuine thing, or substance, is its not being *logically* dependent for its existence on anything else. (Bennett 1984, 56)

The development of this line of thinking leads to the conception of substance we find both in Descartes's *Principles* and in Spinoza's *Ethics*, namely, that a substance must not causally depend on anything outside of itself for its existence.⁴ However, with Descartes, what emerges out of this tradition is a hybrid understanding of substance in which the term "substance" is not reserved simply for that which is utterly self-sufficient (God), but extends to those things that depend only upon the concurrence of God for their existence (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*). This bifurcated understanding of substance seems to stem from the distinction at work in

Aristotle's *Categories* between primary and secondary substances. In the *Categories*, primary substances are identifiable individuals, like Socrates or an individual horse, while secondary substances are the species under which such primary substances fall.³¹ What Descartes seems to retain from this conception is both the assumption that there exists a plurality of individual substances as well as the tendency to equivocally employ the term "substance" itself.³² Let us consider the latter tendency first.

2. Double dualism

In *Principles* I, 51, Descartes warns the reader that ". . . the term 'substance' does not apply *univocally* . . . to God and to other things; that is, there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures" (AT VIII A 24). Thus, a fundamental heterogeneity between God and "his creatures" marks the first of what may be considered a double dualism in Descartes. Here there is a *vertical* dualism based upon the ontological distinction between that which is purely self-caused and that which relies on something else for its existence. The ontological hierarchy that underlies this vocabulary posits God as the highest being and his creatures as ontologically dependent upon God. Whereas the strict definition of substance establishes this vertical dualism, the equivocation by which the status of "substance" is ascribed to those created things that require only the concurrence of God to exist, establishes a second dualism. This *horizontal* dualism refers to a bifurcation limited to the ontological level of created things. On the horizontal level, there are only two things entitled to be called "substance:" *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Here, the term "substance" applies univocally to both mind and body. The weaker sense in which these two things may be considered substances is discussed by Descartes in a passage that not only indicates the nature of the horizontal dualism, but also lends insight into the Cartesian position concerning the role of attributes:

as for corporeal substance and mind (or created thinking substance), these can be understood to fall under this common concept: *things that need only the concurrence of God in order to exist*. However, *we cannot initially become aware of a substance merely through its being an existing thing*, since this alone does not of itself have any effect on us. We can, however, easily come to *know a substance by one of its attributes*, in virtue of the common notion that nothingness possesses no attributes, that is to say, no properties or

qualities. Thus, if we perceive the presence of some attribute, we can infer that there must also be present an existing thing or substance to which it may be attributed. (AT VIII A 25; emphasis added)

There are two striking aspects to this passage; first, Descartes's definition of substance as applied to *res cogitans* and *res extensa* is similar to his definition of God insofar as the requisite factor is a sort of causal self-sufficiency. What justifies Descartes's calling these two things "substance" is their peculiar status as things that require *only* the "concurrence of God in order to exist." The second thing to be noticed in the above passage is what Descartes says concerning the role of attributes. Here he seems to draw a distinction that appears to be collapsed in Spinoza, for Descartes suggests that there is a difference between the existence of a thing and our knowledge of it—that is, its ontological status is independent of our epistemological access to it. This, however, is not the case for Spinoza: "*By substance I understand what is in itself and conceived through itself*" (ID3). Here already, Spinoza is stressing causal self-sufficiency as the criterion for calling a thing "substance." Not only is substance the cause of its own *existence*, but also, as a *concept*, it is self-grounding: one may not apprehend it through any aggregate concepts. However, like Descartes, in his definition of attribute, Spinoza does seem to stress the epistemological side: "*By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence*" (ID4). Although this definition is much disputed, I appeal to it here only to suggest that the notion of attribute used by Spinoza is not radically different from the one used by Descartes. In both, not only is the emphasis placed on the way in which a substance is accessible to the mind, but also, it is the attribute that in some sense constitutes the essence of the substance. This may be seen if Spinoza's "attribute" is mapped against Descartes's "principle property." In *Principles* I, 53, Descartes writes:

To each substance there belongs one principle attribute; in the case of mind, this is thought, and in the case of body it is extension. A substance may indeed be known through any attribute at all; but each substance has one principle property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its properties are referred. (AT VIII A 25)

Here, there is a striking similarity of vocabulary; both Spinoza and Descartes contend that an attribute constitutes the essence of a substance. This linguistic affinity points already to the very heart of Spinoza's rhetorical strategy. By employing this good Cartesian vocabulary, Spinoza is

able to seduce the Cartesian reader into accepting the argument even as he subtly hones the meaning of substance, attribute, and mode. Although Bennett suggests that in ID4 Spinoza ought not to have used the term “essence” because it does not seem to carry the same meaning it does in IID2 (i.e. that of necessary and sufficient condition),⁷ I disagree. The problem, Bennett asserts, is that if “essence” did mean “necessary and sufficient condition” in ID4, Spinoza would not need to argue in IP5D for the conclusion that no two substances can share an attribute.⁸ When viewed exclusively from the perspective of the logically rigorous systematic strategy, perhaps Bennett is correct; however, such a reading fails to recognize the rhetorical strategy underlying the opening passages of the *Ethics*. This rhetorical strategy involves the intriguing use of dual language and ambiguity in order to subtly entice a good Cartesian into the flow of the argument for monism. When seen in this light, Spinoza’s choice of the word “essence” in ID4 is far from ill considered, but rather indicates a shrewd and powerful linguistic maneuver. Spinoza *consciously* opts to use the term “essence” here, not necessarily in the strict sense in which it will be used in IID2 or IIP10S but, rather, in order to implicitly link his understanding of attribute to Descartes’s own definition as expressed in the *Principles*. While Bennett takes the fact that Spinoza does not define “essence” until IID2 as a condescension (Bennett 1984, 61), another explanation is possible based on a sufficient appreciation of the rhetorical strategy operating alongside the systematic, strictly logical argument. Further, as will be seen, by employing the term “essence” in this quasi-Cartesian sense, Spinoza implicitly points precisely to the ambiguity in Descartes’s theory of substance that he will ultimately undermine in order to establish God as the univocal substance; namely, the notion that there exists two substances each with its own essence.

Thus, the rhetorical strategy, evident already at the outset of the *Ethics*, points to the heart of Spinoza’s critique of Descartes. Not accidentally, it is directed precisely at the center of Descartes’ theory of substance and takes the form of an apparent agreement. The use of similar language disguises Spinoza’s underlying intent—to undermine the ambiguities endemic to the Cartesian theory of substance. The fundamental ambiguity Spinoza will exploit, however, is not Descartes’s double dualism as much as it is his pluralism—the notion that there may be a plurality of substances with the same essential property. A deeper investigation into Descartes’s theory of substance and the lack of coherence it engenders will further elucidate the impetus behind Spinoza’s rhetorical critique.

3. Pluralism

The peculiar double dualism endemic to Descartes's theory of substance turns, in many passages, into a pluralism as a result of the Aristotelian strain haunting his system. The influence of the *Categories* has already been suggested, and it is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in those passages in which Descartes dubs individual thinking things and individual extended things "substances." In the third meditation he writes,

I think that a stone is a substance, or is a thing capable of existing independently, and I also think that I am a substance. Admittedly I conceive of myself as a thing that thinks and is not extended, whereas I conceive of the stone as a thing that is extended and does not think, so that the two conceptions differ enormously; but they seem to agree with respect to the classification "substance." (AT VII 44)

The term "substance" is overworked by Descartes throughout. It is not sufficient that in its strongest sense it refers to God exclusively and then, in a weaker sense, to both *res cogitans* and *res extensa* in general; but now, as this passage suggests, it applies to individual thinking things and even, it seems, to individual extended things. Descartes's assumption is that there is a plurality of substances with the same principle property. Further evidence for this is found in *Principles* I, 60:

from the mere fact that each of us understands himself to be a thinking thing and is capable, in thought, of excluding from himself every other substance, whether thinking or extended, it is certain that each of us, regarded in this way, is really distinct from every other thinking substance and from every corporeal substance. (AT VIIIA 29)

From this, it seems clear that Descartes would have considered each individual person a distinct thinking substance, thus allowing for a plurality of thinking substances. The case of extended substance is less straightforward, as Descartes seems to vacillate between two quite different positions. On the one hand, as the above passage from the *Meditations* suggests, he seems to consider as substances individual material things like stones. On the other hand, in the synopsis to the *Meditations* he writes:

we need to recognize that body, taken in a *general* sense, is a substance, so that it too never perishes. But the human body, insofar as it differs from other bodies, is simply made up of a certain configuration of limbs and other acci-

dents of this sort; whereas the human mind is not made up of any accidents in this way, but is a pure substance. (AT VII 14)

Here the term “substance” is reserved for body “taken in general,” while the specific human body would perhaps be considered in some sense a modification of this substance. This is not unlike what Spinoza will in fact contend on a much broader scale; he considers individual bodies to be modes of God’s attribute of extension.⁹ Descartes’s strange vacillation concerning the precise number of extended substances may be the result of the specter of Aristotle; for the tendency to call individual things substances as well as to treat *res cogitans* and *res extensa* as generic substances under which individual substances fall is consistent with Aristotle’s view in the *Categories*. Furthermore, it is clear that Descartes grants substance status to both *res cogitans* taken in general and to individual thinking things, thereby reaffirming the equivocation endemic to Aristotle’s view in the *Categories*. The temptation to treat *res extensa* in this manner as well would perhaps have been quite strong. Even so, whatever his final position concerning extended substance in fact is, a strong pluralism remains identifiable with regard to *res cogitans*. The Aristotelian tension in Descartes, then, seems to account both for the equivocal conception of substance endemic to his double dualism, and for the transformation of the horizontal dualism into a pluralism. One way, therefore, to thematize the direction of Spinoza’s rhetorical strategy would be to say that it is designed to purge the specter of Aristotle from Descartes’s theory of substance by collapsing the double dualism and pluralism into a strict monism. This, in itself, is no great revelation. However, the manner in which Spinoza undermines Descartes’s pluralism by implicitly affirming a basic Cartesian assumption—namely, that each substance has only one principle property or attribute—reveals the extent to which Spinoza’s rhetorical strategy often eclipses the logical progression of the purely systematic strategy.

Spinoza’s rhetorical strategy

In his monograph, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, Edwin Curley suggests that “some of the most distinctive features of Spinoza’s philosophy arose from internal tensions within the Cartesian system” (4). For this reason, Curley chooses to approach Spinoza’s argument for monism from a Cartesian perspective. His method is to trace precisely when and how the

Cartesian departs from the Spinozistic metaphysic. In so doing, however, Curley implicitly uncovers what is here being called the “rhetorical” side of the double strategy at work in the opening propositions of the *Ethics*. In the following section, I will trace Curley’s reconstruction of the manner in which a potential Cartesian reader of Spinoza’s *Ethics* would have reacted to its opening passages not, as Curley himself suggests, in order to show “that a very natural way of looking at the world contains within it the seeds of Spinozism” (Curley 8), but, rather, in order to suggest that the argument for monism is rhetorically designed to entice the Cartesian into the heart of an argument designed to rectify the incoherence endemic to the Cartesian theory of substance.

1. The argument

The conclusion of Spinoza’s argument for monism is to be found in proposition 14: “*Except God, no substance can be or be conceived.*” Although this statement is obviously anathema to Cartesian dualism, the argument from which it is concluded is less obviously anti-Cartesian. There is a noticeable Cartesian flavor to the propositions from which IP14 derives: IP11, ID6, and IP5. It is the argument surrounding proposition 5 that will prove decisive with regard to Descartes. As Curley (10) suggests, if we assume that Descartes would have accepted ID6, “*By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence,*” then he would certainly have no problems with IP11, “*God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.*” Curley This assumption is admittedly somewhat spurious, but Curley argues that Descartes would have a difficult time rejecting it because of the strategy he himself employs to define God throughout the *Meditations*. This strategy involves both the enumeration of God’s attributes and the application of the principle that defines God as a supremely perfect and infinite being (AT VII 46). The attributes that apply to God are determined by this principle of supreme perfection, and it seems inconsequential for Descartes that the list of attributes so generated is not exhaustive.¹⁰ Curley suggests that this is not far from Spinoza’s position in ID6:

If God is supremely perfect, we cannot conceive of him as lacking any property which involves any perfection, and we must conceive of him as possessing each such property in a way which does not involve any limitation. That

is, if God is supremely perfect, he must be absolutely infinite in the sense in which Spinoza understands that term [in ID6]. (Curley 22)

Let it be granted that Descartes would at least not have rejected IP14 on the grounds of IP11 or ID6, for there is significant evidence that his own view leaves room for a definition of God that affirms his infinite attributes.¹¹ Therefore, Curley focuses his attention on IP5, "*In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute.*" In this proposition, both Spinoza's brilliant use of equivocation and the move beyond a Cartesian position is manifest.

The argument for IP5 depends heavily upon IP4, "*Two or more distinct things are distinguished from one another, either by a difference in the attributes of the substance or by a difference in their affections.*" Interestingly, in the demonstration Spinoza appeals to an axiom (IA1) and two definitions (ID3 and ID5), all of which Descartes would certainly have affirmed. Axiom 1 simply states an assumption held by most seventeenth-century thinkers including Descartes: "*Whatever is, is either in itself or in another.*" ID3 is Spinoza's definition of substance, which, as I have mentioned, would not have caused Descartes any undue concern, since his own strict definition of substance is quite similar.¹² ID5 is Spinoza's definition of mode. Again we find a striking similarity in vocabulary between Descartes and Spinoza. In the *Principles* Descartes defines modes this way: "*we employ the term mode when we are thinking of a substance as being affected or modified*" (AT VIII A 26). In ID5, Spinoza writes: "*By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived.*" Descartes would have accepted the three sources Spinoza appeals to in the demonstration for IP4. However, these premises are employed to develop a position that is essentially anti-Cartesian. The rhetorically critical strategy is, then, already recognizable in Spinoza's demonstration for IP4:

Whatever is, is either in itself or in another (by IA1), i.e. (by ID3 and ID5), outside the intellect there is nothing except substances and their affections. Therefore, there is nothing outside the intellect through which a number of things can be distinguished from one another except substances, or what is the same (by ID4), their attributes, and their affections, q.e.d.

Spinoza's claim here amounts to a denial of any real distinction between things in the Cartesian sense. In the *Principles*, Descartes identifies three kinds of distinction: real, conceptual (or by reason) and modal. A real distinction, he claims, "exists only between two or more substances; and we

can perceive that two substances are really distinct simply from the fact that we can clearly and distinctly understand one apart from the other" (AT VIIIA 28). However, in proposition 4, although Spinoza *seems* to grant that there may be "two or more substances," he goes on to argue that these substances may only be distinguished by a difference in their attributes or by a difference in their affections. On Descartes's own terms, this would mean that either a distinction of reason or a modal distinction holds between two substances. This is precisely Spinoza's point in the demonstration, for the claim lurking behind this position is that there is only one substance. What for Descartes were two distinct substances (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*) are for Spinoza simply attributes of one substance, God. Here, the strategic impetus behind the interesting, and potentially problematic, identification of "substances" with "attributes" in this passage comes into focus: at the outset of the demonstration for IP4 Spinoza explicitly speaks the dualistic language of Descartes yet, by the end of the demonstration he has surreptitiously indicated the direction of his argument. The swift and subtle identification of substances with attributes already suggests Spinoza's official position that *res extensa* and *res cogitans* are attributes of God. With this strategic maneuver, Spinoza has taken advantage of the horizontal dualism established by Descartes's equivocal use of the term "substance"; for by employing "substances" in the plural, Spinoza implicitly refers to the weaker sense of substance. When he identifies these substances with attributes, he implicitly calls into question the very possibility of the substantial difference endemic to Descartes's horizontal dualism.

Although Spinoza subtly indicates the direction of his argument in IP4, the Cartesian reader may still be convinced to accept this proposition because of its inherent ambiguity. Indeed, even the identification of substances with attributes has precedence in Descartes. As Curley suggests, Descartes's official position is that the distinction between the two is merely one of reason:

a conceptual distinction [i.e., a distinction of reason] is a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible . . . such a distinction is recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we exclude from it the attribute in question. (AT VIIIA 30)

With this it seems as if our very ability to conceive of a substance is parasitic upon our ability to apprehend its attribute. If this is in fact the case, it

would appear that in order to conceive the thing at all we would need to conceive it as having that principle attribute. Thus, the claim that an intellect cannot distinguish things by anything other than their attributes or their affections would perhaps be acceptable to the Cartesian.¹³

The argument for monism, then, seems to come down to proposition 5, for it remains possible to convince a good Cartesian to accept each of the other premises upon which IP14 rests. Proposition 5 asserts: "*In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute.*" The demonstration begins simply with a restatement of proposition 4 and then proceeds to consider the specific possibilities presented in that proposition. First, what follows from the assumption that we can distinguish between things only by a difference in their attributes? Spinoza concludes that if this is the only distinguishing factor, then "*it will be conceded that there is only one of the same attribute.*" Curley suggests that there seems to be a tacit assumption here, which is elucidated by the objection leveled by Leibniz against this step of the demonstration. Leibniz asks why there can't be two substances, one with attributes A and B, the other with attributes B and C. In this case, although the substances have the same attribute, they can still be distinguished on the basis of that attribute which they do not have in common, namely either A or C (Curley 15). This seems reasonable if it is assumed that a substance can have more than one attribute. Certainly, Spinoza suggests just such a possibility already in ID6 when he claims that God is a substance consisting of infinite attributes. However, a possible response to this issue is hinted at in Spinoza's restatement of this proposition in the demonstration of IP8, "A substance *of one attribute* does not exist unless it is unique (IP5)," which suggests that in IP5 Spinoza was operating on the Cartesian assumption that there is only one attribute for each substance. If this is indeed the case, then it seems that the good Cartesian would fall victim to this argument. If each substance only has one attribute (or principle property) and the only thing differentiating the two substances is a difference in their attributes, then it follows that there is only one of the same attribute.¹⁴ It would be difficult to see how a Cartesian would explain how one being could remain one being while having two attributes. As Curley points out, on Descartes's view, there is no conception of substance save through its principle property, "so what are we saying of a substance when we say that it is one, yet has two properties?" (Curley16) It appears as if the Cartesian would end up deriving a conclusion that he would reject, namely that there are no two substances with the same attribute, from propositions that he, arguably,

would accept. Furthermore, Spinoza is attacking the Cartesian system precisely at the point where it turns from a dualism to a pluralism; this proposition is designed to deny that individual things like Socrates or Callias deserve the label "substance." The Cartesian, on the other hand, would like to consider them distinct substances with the same attribute, namely, thought. This, Spinoza has argued, is not possible.

There is, however, a significant problem with this reading of the first part of the demonstration for proposition 5. As Bennett (69) points out, the demonstration for proposition 14 depends on combining the premise, "there is a substance consisting of infinite attributes," with proposition 5, "two substances cannot share any attribute." From this premise and proposition, Spinoza concludes that there is only one substance, but one with infinite attributes. However, if proposition 5 was based on the assumption that there is only one attribute for each substance, then there seems to be an essential contradiction built into the argument for monism. Perhaps the ambiguities inherent in this argument derive from the rhetorical strategy Spinoza employs throughout. If he is attempting to draw the good Cartesian into the argument for monism, it would be expedient for him to implicitly endorse the Cartesian assumption that each substance has one principle property that constitutes its essence, although his own position posits that there is only one substance but with infinite attributes expressing its infinite essence. While IP5 is geared outwardly to the specific Cartesian assumption that each substance has only one principle property, its inner logic seems based upon the contention that if there were indeed two substances sharing the same attribute, they would limit one another and thus would not be, by definition, substances. Indeed, Spinoza's own definition of substance requires that it be infinite (IP8) and by ID2,¹⁵ if something is limited by another of the same nature, it is finite. Therefore, it is not surprising that when Spinoza appeals to IP5 in the demonstration for IP14, he treats the very notion of two substances with the same attribute as "absurd":

Since God is an absolutely infinite being, of whom no attribute which expresses an essence of substance can be denied (by ID6), and he necessarily exists (by IP11), if there were any substances except God, it would have to be explained through some attribute of God, and so two substances of the same attribute would exist, which (by IP5) is absurd.

By ID2 this is not only absurd but self-contradictory: it is tantamount to saying that something which by definition is infinite (substance) is finite.

Spinoza did not opt to explicitly argue in this manner; rather, in IP5, he attempted to exploit the Cartesian assumption that each substance has one principle property that constitutes its essence. Therefore, a strange dynamic is evident in Spinoza's argument for monism: the inner logic of this argument is not always the logic offered explicitly. Thus, in IP5, although Spinoza argues in such a way as to refute Descartes's pluralism while outwardly adhering to the Cartesian assumption that each substance has one attribute (IP8D), he could have argued for IP5 without recourse to the one substance one attribute position. Indeed, ID2 already provided him with the requisite premise from which to conclude that if two or more substances had the same attribute they would limit each other and would not, by definition, be substances. Furthermore, if we understand the term "essence" in ID4 in the manner in which Spinoza defines it in IID2 (that is, a necessary and sufficient condition), the argument in IP5 becomes superfluous, since "attribute" would already be defined in such a way as to deny the possibility that two substances could share the same attribute (Bennett 61). Thus, Spinoza already had the premise he needed to argue for IP14 ("two substances cannot share any attribute") without committing himself to the one attribute, one substance position. That he opted to argue extensively for IP5 on the basis of this Cartesian position indicates the rhetorical strategy of his argument. This rhetorical critique of Descartes culminates in IP5, in which Spinoza, arguing in explicitly Cartesian terms, denies the possibility of ascribing the term "substance" to individual finite things. Within the scope of the argument for monism in general, IP5 marks the decisive moment in which Descartes's theory of substance is superseded and a more rigorous, univocal conception of substance is established. It is here that Aristotelian tension behind Descartes's pluralism is effectively denied.

This more rigorous conception of substance has far-reaching ramifications. By establishing God as the *only* substance, Spinoza is able to develop a theory of substance that is far more consistent than Descartes's. As we have seen, the inconsistencies endemic to Descartes's dualism arise out of a deep tension between two different theories of substance, the one essentially Aristotelian, the other characteristic of the seventeenth century. Spinoza's argument for monism amounts to the rejection of the specter of Aristotle in favor of the seventeenth-century conception, which defines substance strictly in terms of causal self-sufficiency.

2. Double Strategy

In establishing this conception of substance, Spinoza needed not only to construct a logically sound argument, but also to subvert the Cartesian dualism that was quickly establishing itself as the common sense view of the world. Spinoza's argument for monism, while it employs the geometrical method in order to establish the fundamental grounding principles of his philosophy, also offers a subtle and decisive critique of Descartes's equivocal theory of substance. The rhetorical strategy of critique and the systematic strategy directed toward the establishment of a strict monism function together to both elucidate and eradicate certain inconsistencies endemic to the Cartesian system. This double strategy also accounts for the peculiar asymmetry between the inner logic of Spinoza's argument for monism and the explicit manner in which he chooses to develop this argument. On the one hand, from the outset, Spinoza is dedicated to establishing God as the only substance. Indeed, this may already be seen in the first definition of the *Ethics*: "*By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.*" Here, already an implicit appeal to God is established in such a way as to conform to the seventeenth-century conception of substance defined in terms of strict causal self-sufficiency. This points to the goal of the system-grounding strategy employed by Spinoza. On the other hand, the explicit argument for monism involves significant gestures to Cartesian dogma. Spinoza is found speaking with a strong Cartesian accent in his definitions of substance, attribute, and mode. In IP5, he precisely calibrates the argument so as to coincide, at least apparently, with the Cartesian assumption that each substance has only one principle property. The faint polemical tone of these opening passages and the equivocal use of Cartesian language indicate the second aspect of Spinoza's double strategy: the rhetorical critique of Descartes. The impetus behind this critique was twofold. First, as we have seen, Descartes's theory of substance is inherently inconsistent. Spinoza surely would have been aware of the incoherence engendered by such an equivocal understanding of substance. He, too, saw the inherent advantages of a more rigorous understanding of substance in addressing the perennial problems haunting Cartesian philosophy. The second impetus behind the critical strategy was perhaps more political, for any attempt to establish a monistic philosophy in the seventeenth century would have inevitably had to defend itself against Cartesian dualism. The opening of the *Ethics* already anticipates its opponents' criticisms by arguing in a language and,

indeed, in a manner that would have found some resonance with them. Thus, Spinoza hides a sophisticated rhetorical apparatus behind the objective geometrical method. By opting to argue not only in terms familiar to a Cartesian reader, but also, at times, with Cartesian assumptions, he is able to surreptitiously undermine the entire Cartesian system. The order of the propositions, the language employed and, indeed, the strategic silence with regard to certain key terms such as “essence” are the tools of Spinoza’s rhetorical critique. Yet these are precisely the tools employed to argue for the monism that lies at the ground of his system. Together, the two strategies of rhetorical critique and systematic grounding account for the peculiar difficulties surrounding Spinoza’s argument for monism and mark the underlying brilliance endemic to the opening passages of the *Ethics*. To see in these passages only the logical progression of the geometrical argument is to fall victim to the very rhetoric it is designed to eclipse; it is to fail to recognize one of the most expedient tools Spinoza employs in establishing his argument for monism.

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Notes

1. In *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, Harry Wolfson points to the rhetorical dimension of Spinoza’s geometrical method when he argues that one of the reasons Spinoza may have opted for this literary form was to avoid the need to explicitly lay out and argue against each of the positions of his opponents—as would have been required had he followed the methods of the scholastic and rabbinical traditions. Wolfson (58) suggests that Spinoza did not like to explicitly expose the errors of others. What Wolfson does not explicitly develop is the manner in which the geometrical method itself functions rhetorically to *implicitly* expose the errors of others. This rhetorical strategy is most perspicuously seen if we follow Edwin Curley’s suggestion that the early passages of the *Ethics* are fundamentally guided by Spinoza’s deep engagement with Cartesian philosophy (Curley 8).

2. All quotations from Descartes are taken from Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch and will be cited in the text according to the standard Adam and Tannery (AT) edition of the *Oeuvres de Descartes*.

3. See Bennett 55–56.

4. See AT VIII A 24 (*Principles*, 51) and *Ethics* ID3. All quotations for Spinoza are taken from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1. Edwin Curley, trans. References to the *Ethics* are cited in the text according book, definition/proposition/axiom number and scholium/demonstration/corollary.

5. See 2b15–ff., Minio-Paluello.

6. It is striking that in the transformation of the theory of substance from Aristotle to Descartes a hierarchical reversal seems to have occurred; for while Aristotle considered individual things like Callias, Socrates, and even individual horses as primary substances in the *Categories*, Descartes and especially Spinoza use the term to indicate the highest being—God. The upward mobility of the concept of substance throughout the centuries, that is, its ascent from individual horses to God is perhaps not as strange as it might first appear to be; for the common feature of substance as individual and substance as God is precisely the notion that whatever is called “substance” is that principle which itself depends on no

other being for its existence. Descartes's theory of substance seems to be caught in the confusion of this transition, for he is forced to affirm an equivocal conception of substance precisely in order to hold onto both God and individual things as substances.

7. Definition 2 of Book II begins: "I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away."

8. Bennett writes: "If Spinoza were defining 'attribute' so as to secure that if x has attribute A then nothing else can have A , he would not have needed a later, intricate argument for the conclusion that no two substances can share an attribute. (IP5D)" (61).

9. See IP25C and IID1.

10. Curley quotes from the *Meditations*: "Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive that is real and true and implies some perfection, the whole of it is contained in this idea [of a supremely perfect being]. It does not matter that I do not comprehend the infinite, or that there are innumerable things in God which I cannot comprehend, and perhaps will not even be able to attain any conception of." (AT VII, 46), (Curley 1988, 22). For examples of Descartes's strategy of enumerating God's attributes, see AT 40, and 45. For Descartes's contention that God has many attributes, see *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, AT VIII B, 348.

11. Indeed, Curley suggests that Spinoza infers his definition of God directly from Descartes's by citing an early letter of Spinoza's: "I define God as a being consisting of infinite attributes, each of which is infinite, or supremely perfect, in its kind . . . That this is a true definition of God is clear from the fact that by God we understand a being supremely perfect and absolutely infinite" (Letter 2, IV/ 7/ 24–8/ 3); (Curley 1988, 23).

12. Descartes's strict definition of substance runs as follows: "By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence" (ATVIII A, 24). Spinoza's definition at ID3 runs: "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."

13. Curley develops this line of argument on page 13 and the following.

14. Bennett suggests that, in an analogous manner, if I can only have one father and "if I don't share all my fathers with you then I share no fathers with you" (69).

15. ID2: "That thing is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited by another of the same nature."

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