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ON THE THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF SPINOZA'S ARGUMENT FOR MONISM

John Carriero

I compare Spinoza's treatment of philosophical monism (the thesis that there is only one substance) with traditional arguments for theological monism (the thesis that there is only one God). First, I consider arguments that Spinoza presents in his correspondence, where his debt to traditional theology is most obvious, and then show how traditional ways of reasoning are present in the *Ethics* itself. Second, I suggest that a common objection to Spinoza's argument underestimates the importance of divine simplicity in Spinoza's (as in most standard) conceptions of a divine being. Finally, I consider Spinoza's reasons for attributing *necessary existence*, a property traditionally reserved for God, to substance as such.

Spinoza subscribes to what might be called *philosophical monism*, that is, the thesis that there is only one substance. A fixed point in traditional philosophical theology is *theological monism*, that is, the thesis that there is only one God. Since Spinoza identifies the single substance with God, it is natural to wonder how philosophical monism and theological monism are related for him.

Now, in IP7, Spinoza claims, "It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist." From the point of view of medieval philosophical theology this is a pregnant claim indeed. It amounts to claiming that substance as such is divine, as traditionally necessary existence *per se*¹ carries with it divinity. Thus, Henry Oldenburg, when confronted with Spinoza's thesis "That a substance cannot be produced, not even by another Substance," protests, "This proposition sets up every Substance as its own cause, and makes them all independent of one another, makes them so many Gods" (Ep. 3; Curley, p. 169; Geb., IV, 8).² And Spinoza, in his response, does not dispute the connection that Oldenburg draws between necessary *per se* existence and divinity.³

Recognition of the traditional association between necessary *per se* existence and divinity provides us with a way of formulating the issue of the relation of philosophical monism and theological monism in Spinoza. For in traditional philosophical theology there are ways of arguing from God's necessary *per se* existence to his uniqueness, based on the idea that there cannot be more than one necessary *per se* being. Aquinas, for example, argues that there can be only one God because "It is . . . not possible to posit many things



of which each is through itself a necessary being" (SCG I, 42, ¶11).⁴ Scotus's sixth proof in his *Opus oxoniense*, I, D. 2, Q. 3 for the uniqueness of God is based on "the nature of necessary being."⁵ The twenty-ninth of Suarez's *Disputationes Metaphysicae* is devoted to the elaboration and defense of both *a posteriori* and *a priori* arguments for the conclusion that there can be only one necessary *per se* being. We might wonder, then: To what extent does Spinoza's thinking about monism reflect traditional reasoning concerning the uniqueness of God, especially of God insofar as he is a necessary *per se* being? And to what extent does the specific argument presented in the text of the *Ethics* itself reflect such reasoning?

In §1, I begin by considering various arguments in Spinoza's correspondence where his debt to traditional theology is clearest. Then I show how these ways of thinking are present in the *Ethics* itself. In §2, I suggest that a common objection to Spinoza's position, urged from his time to our own, underestimates the importance of divine simplicity in Spinoza's (as in most standard) conceptions of a necessary being. Finally, in §3, I briefly consider some of the reasons, as developed in the opening section of the *Ethics*, which lead Spinoza in the first place to his momentous conclusion that substance exists necessarily *per se*.

1. Philosophical Monism and Theological Monism

Evidence that Spinoza himself is aware of the traditional linkage between necessary *per se* existence and uniqueness is found in a remark in Spinoza's *Descartes's "Principles of Philosophy,"* Part I, P11. After presenting a quite traditional argument for the proposition "There is not more than one God," similar, for example, to one presented by Scotus,⁶ Spinoza comments that "it follows necessarily from the mere fact that some thing involves necessary existence from itself (as God does) that it is unique."⁷ Spinoza repeats this point in an addition to the corresponding section of the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, II, 2 (Curley, p. 318). But more directly relevant is a series of very interesting letters to Huygens. In the first of these letters (letter 34) Spinoza undertakes to provide a "demonstration of the unity of God, on the ground that His nature involves necessary existence" (Elwes, p. 351; Geb. IV, 179),⁸ and in the next two (letters 35 and 36) Spinoza sets out to show that there is "only a single Being who subsists by his own sufficiency or force" from "the fact, that the nature of such a Being involves necessary existence" (Elwes, p. 353; Geb. IV, 181).

The argument of letter 34, slightly generalized, runs as follows: If a number of individuals of a given nature, say, 20 N's, existed, this would be due to something either (a) external, or (b) internal, to the nature Nhood. Now, if Nhood involves necessary *per se* existence, then (a) is eliminated, since necessary *per se* beings are not in any way determined from without.⁹ So the

existence of exactly 20 N's must be owed to the nature of Nhood itself. But no nature specifies the number of individuals possessing it. So the nature Nhood cannot be found in a number of individuals. Now, since the nature *deity*, in particular, involves necessary *per se* existence, it follows that there cannot exist a number of Gods.

This way of reasoning about necessary *per se* beings is not unprecedented. Scotus offers an argument for the uniqueness of a necessary *per se* being, based on the claim that "A species which can be multiplied in more than one individual, is not of itself determined to any certain number of individuals but is compatible with an infinity of individuals."¹⁰ Scotus infers from this that the nature of a necessary *per se* being cannot be found in more than one being or it must be found in infinitely many beings; as he takes the latter alternative to be false, he concludes that the nature "necessary *per se* being" cannot be multiplied. But could the number of necessary *per se* beings be fixed by some external reason? Scotus argues not, in a reformulation of his original argument which brings it closer to Spinoza's:

This argument can be reformulated on the basis of [God's] primacy as follows. One thing of a given kind is not related to others of its kind in such a way that it is limited to just this plurality or to a certain number of such things. There is nothing in the nature itself which requires that there be just so many individuals, nor in a cause that says that there must be only so many things caused, unless you insist on what we seek to prove [viz. that the nature is such that it be found in but one individual].¹¹

While there are differences between Scotus's treatment and Spinoza's (especially over the disjunct involving infinity¹²), there is a common argumentative strategy: there cannot be more than one necessary *per se* being of a given nature Nhood, since the number of such beings cannot be fixed externally and no nature internally fixes the number of beings possessing that nature.

It is natural to object that there is a tension between the argument's premise that no nature Nhood fixes the number of its members and the conclusion that there is only one N. It can seem that the fact that one itself is a number has somehow been lost sight of (see, e.g., Bennett §17.5). Now, Scotus's way of putting the question—can God's essence be multiplied or not?—mitigates this concern. Scotus views the question of the multiplicity of God's nature as of a different order from, and prior to, the question of how many Gods there are. Moreover, since God's essence is not multiplicable, God is one or unique in a different sense from the sense in which a single instance of a multiplicable nature is unique. That is, God is unique in a different way from the way in which, say, the last dodo bird was (at that time) unique. As Spinoza himself explains in letter 50, "God can only very improperly be called one or single" because:

nothing can be called one or single unless some other thing has first been conceived which (as has been said) agrees with it. But since the existence of God is His essence itself, and since we can form no general idea of His essence, it is certain that he who calls God one or single has no true idea of God, or is speaking of Him inappropriately. [Wolf, pp. 269-270; Geb. IV, 239-40]¹³

The argument of letter 34, in the generalized form,¹⁴ appears in the *Ethics*, in IP8S2, as an alternate proof of IP5, "In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute."¹⁵ While this shows that Spinoza follows traditional ways of thinking about necessary *per se* beings in the *Ethics*, it does not show that he sees philosophical monism as resting on his thesis that a substance exists necessarily *per se*. This is because the argument's conclusion is not that there exists only one *substance*, but rather that there exists only one being of a given nature Nhood.¹⁶ And while one may easily imagine a strategy according to which the mark of "having the perfection necessary existence" is substituted for "the nature Nhood" in the argument, so as to arrive at the conclusion that there is only one necessarily existent being, Spinoza does not adopt it.¹⁷

Spinoza does, however, offer an argument for philosophical monism based on the necessary *per se* existence of substance in letters 35-36. In these letters he undertakes to show that there is "only a single Being who subsists by his own sufficiency or force" from the fact "that the nature of such a Being necessarily involves existence" (Elwes, p. 353; Geb. IV, 181). (If all substances are necessary *per se* beings, and if there can be only one necessary *per se* being, then clearly there can be only one substance.) We might divide this argument into two parts.

(A) In the first part, Spinoza undertakes to show that there is a single being, God, which possesses all perfections that exist necessarily *per se*. Spinoza begins by arguing that a being that exists necessarily *per se* must have certain properties, namely, eternity, simplicity, infinity, and indivisibility. Spinoza concludes this first part of the argument by observing "that everything, which includes necessary existence, cannot have in itself any imperfection, but must express pure perfection" (letter 35; Elwes, p. 354; Geb. IV, 182).¹⁸ So, if the perfection Nhood has necessary *per se* being, then Nhood is the sort of thing (eternal, simple, infinite, and indivisible)—in short, a "pure perfection"—that can be attributed to an absolutely perfect being, God. Moreover, since God is a Being "which possesses in itself all perfections," if Nhood is a pure perfection, then not only can it belong to God but also it must do so. So God has all perfections which exist necessarily *per se*.

(B) There is still another part to the argument. Granted that every pure perfection is found in God, might it not be the case that that perfection is also found in a substance outside God, so that there are two substances?

Spinoza answers no, at the end of letter 35:

Nor can it [the nature of a necessarily *per se* existing being] exist externally to God. For if, externally to God, there existed one and the same nature involving necessary existence, such a nature would be twofold; but this, by what we have just shown, is absurd. Therefore there is nothing save God, but there is a single God, that involves necessary existence, which was to be proved. [letter 35; Elwes, p. 355; Geb. IV, 182-83]

The argument in the text of the *Ethics* resembles the argument in letters 35 and 36. After showing that substance as such necessarily exists, Spinoza goes on to show that substance must be infinite (IP8) and indivisible (IP12 and IP13). Although Spinoza does not make this explicit, these propositions are necessary for defending the coherence of his conception of God as a being that possesses *formally* every attribute or substantial perfection.¹⁹ In particular, since the perfection *extension* belongs to a necessary *per se* being, namely, extended substance, it can, contrary to the tradition, be formally possessed by God. All of this corresponds loosely to part (A) of the argument found in the correspondence. Corresponding to part (B), Spinoza in the *Ethics* bases his denial that some substance might exist external to God on IP5,²⁰ which precludes the existence of two substances of the same nature: If a substance, with the nature Nhood, existed besides God, then, since God has every substantial nature and so has, in particular, Nhood, there would be two substances of the same nature, contradicting IP5.

Now, of the two substages—(A) showing that God possesses all perfections and (B) showing that there is no substantial perfection outside of God—Spinoza clearly regards the former as the more difficult and important aspect of establishing philosophical monism, and it is not hard to see why. For what Spinoza is really arguing for here is that God contains formally the nature of every substance, which is absurd from the point of view of the tradition. The traditional view is that while God does indeed possess all of the perfections found in the natures of (created) substances, he does so not formally but eminently.²¹ Thus, God possesses the perfection *heat* without being material, let alone hot. The idea of necessary *per se* existence plays a key role here, serving as a bridge to link whatever natures happen to be found in substances to pure perfections belonging to God: any nature found in a substance, because it is found in a necessarily existing *per se* being, is a pure perfection; therefore it can and must belong to God.

2. Huygens's Objection and Divine Simplicity

Although Spinoza devotes the most attention to stage (A) in his attempt to establish philosophical monism, his contemporaries and modern readers alike have been more troubled by a problem surrounding (B), a problem that never seemed to bother Spinoza very much. Huygens wanted to know,²² even if one

grants that God possesses formally any nature found in any substance, what precludes the existence of two substances—God, who possesses all substantial natures, and another substance possessing, say, a single substantial nature, Nhood? For similar reasons, the use of IP5 in IP14 is notorious. IP5 is most compelling in a context where the two substances in question each have a single attribute or nature; it less clearly applies in a setting where some substances may have more attributes than others. For example, why couldn't the fact that God has other attributes besides Nhood be used as a ground of difference between God and a substance possessing only Nhood?

The reason for Spinoza's complacency in face of Huygens's difficulty is, I think, that the prevalent ways of thinking in traditional philosophical theology about necessary *per se* beings make the answer absolutely patent. Huygens's objection, and contemporary versions of the same problem, are based on a conception of the divine nature as having distinct parts. That is, if it is possible for a being to be distinguished from God through the fact that God possesses other attributes or perfections besides Nhood, then God's essence must be composed of Nhood (say, extension) and some further reality, the (nonempty) complement of Nhood (say, thought and whatever other attributes or perfections God has). But it is a secure point in traditional philosophical theology that God's nature could not have different parts. And for good reason. If God's nature is composed of Nhood and some (nonempty) complement, what agency could be responsible for their coming to exist as united in God, as opposed to their existing separately? Not God, since God does not exist prior to the formation of his nature. Yet for the agency to differ from God conflicts with God's status as a necessary *per se* being.²³

Although God's simplicity holds a fixed point in the tradition, many commentators have wanted to interpret Spinoza in such a way as to make God composite. This does not, I shall suggest below, accord well with Spinoza's texts. But putting aside the textual issue for now, let's observe that the efforts of commentators²⁴ who write as if a diversity of attributes makes for a diversity of parts in God only serve to underscore just how philosophically difficult it would be to hold on to a conception of God which shortchanges his simplicity or indivisibility.

Gueroult, for example, offers the following account of the union of the divine attributes that is neither "juxtaposition" or "fusion": what is responsible for the parallelism is that there is one and the same causal act responsible for the modal structure found under each attribute. Since this identity of causal act grounds the identity of mind and body, Gueroult infers that the same ought to hold true of God—his attributes ought to be united by one and the same causal act responsible for the divine being: "so the identity of the *causa sui* in each [attribute] is that by which [the attributes] constitute one and the same self-existent substance."²⁵ But this progression from modes to

substance does not make sense. While there is something sufficiently prior to God's modes, namely, the divine substance, that can act causally so as to produce the modes, neither God's substance nor his individual attributes can have a prior, distinct cause (else God's substance and his individual attributes would not be necessary *per se* beings). So if God's attributes remain distinct from one another ("irreducible as to their essences," Gueroult puts it), the fact that they are *causa sui* cannot be used to support the idea that there is a single causal act behind all of them; rather there must be as many causal acts as there are really distinct attributes. As Donagan puts it, "If the infinite substances of one attribute are really distinct, then their *causae* are really distinct as well."

Donagan's own solution to this difficulty, treating the relationship between God's attributes and his essence as primitive, where a "fundamental property of this relation would be that two attributes might on the one hand be really distinct, and on the other constitute or express the same essence" (p. 180), raises more questions than it answers: If the attributes are really distinct in the sense of referring to different parts of reality, how can they express the *same* essence as opposed to the different *parts* of a single essence? Or, if the attributes each express the same essence, how can they be "really distinct" in more than name only?

Curley presents a way to reconcile the apparent complexity of God in Spinoza "without suggesting that substance could somehow be decomposed into its various elements, or that some of these elements might exist apart from others." Curley points out that the complex is of a special kind in that each of its elements exists necessarily and so "there is no real possibility that at any time any one of them does exist without the others" and "the existence of each one of the attributes implies the existence of all the others" (in the same way that, in modal logic, a necessary truth is implied by any proposition).²⁶ However, when Spinoza worries about the destruction of substance in IP12 and IP13, the primary threat is not that its parts might themselves cease to exist, but rather that the substance might cease to exist through the *separation* of its parts. And not only does Curley fail to explain what prevents this separation, he does not offer any explanation as to the difference between the attributes of God existing separately and their existing as united in God.²⁷

To read Spinoza as flouting divine simplicity is, it seems to me, to give him an untenable position. Fortunately, however, there are a number of texts where Spinoza embraces traditional theses about the simplicity or indivisibility of a necessary *per se* being, most notably in letter 35, where he writes that a necessary *per se* being "must be simple, not made up of parts" and must be "indivisible" (Elwes, pp. 353-354; Geb. IV, 181), and in IP12 and IP13, where he defends different aspects of the indivisibility of substance.

Consider, for example, letter 35. We noted that at the end of that letter

Spinoza argues that if “externally to God there existed one and the same nature involving necessary existence, such a nature would be twofold; but this, by what we have just shown, is absurd.” While it is not obvious where Spinoza had shown that a necessarily *per se* existent nature cannot be twofold, an attractive possibility is his earlier argument against the divisibility of a necessary *per se* being:

IV. [A necessary *per se* being] is indivisible. For if it were divisible, it could be divided into parts, either of the same or different nature. If the latter, it could be destroyed and so not exist, which is contrary to its definition; if the former, each part would include necessary existence, and thus one part could exist without the others, and consequently be conceived as so existing. Hence the nature of the Being would be comprehended as finite, which, by what has been said, is contrary to its definition. [Elwes, pp. 353-354; Geb. IV, 182]

Assume that Nhood includes necessary *per se* existence. Can the existence of Nhood be “twofold,” that is, can Nhood exist once in God and again in some substance S, external to God? Inasmuch as God and S both have the nature Nhood, Nhood has been “divided in parts . . . of the same . . . nature.” So each of the parts would have to possess Nhood in an eternal, simple, and infinite manner, independently of the other part. But this infringes on, among other things,²⁸ the infinity (with respect to Nhood) of each of the two substances. For as Spinoza understands infinity, in order for a being to be infinite (with respect to Nhood), it must have all of Nhood. If two beings possessed Nhood, then each would possess Nhood in a finite way, bounded by its lack of the Nhood found in the other being.

IP13, “A substance which is absolutely infinite is indivisible,” is also instructive. There, Spinoza’s argument runs: Assume that an absolutely infinite being is divisible into parts (let’s say, infinite extension and some nonempty complement of God’s perfections). On the one hand, if these parts have the character of the whole—i.e., each is an absolutely infinite being—then we have no way of distinguishing them from the original being.²⁹ On the other hand, if these parts do not have the character of the whole—i.e., neither infinite extension nor the complement is an absolutely infinite being—then we have made room for at least the conceptual possibility that an absolutely infinite being could go out of existence, which contradicts its status as a necessary *per se* being.³⁰

Spinoza’s commitment to divine simplicity means that God’s nature cannot be divided into Nhood and some nonempty complement, as envisioned by Huygens and contemporary critics. Rather, Nhood must present the divine essence fully, without leaving out some part of it for the other attributes to latch on to. Similarly, each attribute must present or express the same indivisible nature presented by each of the other attributes.

We see then that underneath Spinoza's philosophical monism is the traditional concept of a supremely perfect, necessary *per se* being. Now, it might be objected that for Spinoza to rely on traditional ways of reasoning about necessary *per se* beings, as I have suggested, is problematic, for his understanding of God as a supremely perfect being is in tension with the traditional conception of a necessary *per se* being as simple. After all, Spinoza's account of God as a being that contains all perfections is doubly novel. First, he claims in opposition to traditional views that God formally (not just eminently) contains all perfections; second, he understands attributes or substantial perfections as conceptually independent *summa genera*. But how can a being which formally contains conceptually independent attributes or perfections fail to be diverse? Indeed, does not the interpretation offered here lead to Wolfson's interpretation, now widely discredited, that the divine attributes are merely subjective, with no foundation in the divine nature?

Although a full treatment of the much discussed topic of Spinoza's conception of divine attributes is impossible here, two points can be made briefly.

First, Spinoza *is* concerned to argue that his account of God as formally possessing conceptually independent attributes is consistent with the high tradition of philosophical theology. In letter 34, for example, he is in effect defending his radical claim that God possesses formally any substantial perfection, by pointing out that, by his lights, any such perfection must be capable of existing in a necessary *per se* being, and so have all the properties—simplicity, indivisibility, infinity, and so on—traditionally associated with divine perfections. Further, Spinoza takes the conceptual independence of the divine attributes to show that a diversity of attributes does not force a diversity in “being” or “substance,” writing, “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” (IP10S).³¹ While it is fair to point out that Spinoza does not explicitly claim here that a diversity of conceptually independent attributes does not prove a diversity of *parts* in a being or substance, still it is hard to see what would license this inference in one case and not the other. Since an attribute is supposed to express the essence of a substance (and not the essence of a *part* of a substance or *part* of the essence of a substance),³² it would seem that the two claims ought to stand or fall together.³³ Indeed, it seems to me most natural to take Spinoza as making this stronger point in the *Short Treatise* I, ii, 17, when he wrote that God's “attributes which are in Nature are only one, single being, and by no means different ones (though we can clearly and distinctly understand the one without the other).”³⁴

Second, it is true that the interpretation offered here is similar to Wolfson's in refusing to compromise on divine simplicity and, accordingly, in maintain-

ing that a difference in attributes does not carry with it a difference in parts of reality. But there are important differences. Wolfson's interpretation involves Spinoza's taking sides on a controversy within medieval philosophical theology, according to which divine simplicity was preserved by the specific means of holding that the divine attributes are merely subjective manifestations of an ineffable divine essence (I, 146ff.). My interpretation does not follow Wolfson this far, and for this reason much of the criticism that his account has received over the years is inapplicable here. For example, it is not the case on my interpretation that the divine attributes are "made" or "invented" by some mind (be the mind in question infinite or finite). The nature *extension* expressed by the attribute extension really exists, in the world, external to any intellect, as does the nature *thought*; they simply turn out to be the same thing.³⁵ Further, it is not the case that the attributes are somehow false to the divine essence. This would be so if a diversity in attributes somehow "told" the intellect that the underlying subject is diverse too. But that is precisely what Spinoza is denying in IP10S and *Short Treatise* I, ii, §17, as I read these texts. What "subjectivization"³⁶ of the divine attributes there is on this view is comparatively minimal—no more than is required in order for Spinoza not to fracture the divine essence. And, as I already pointed out, to interpret Spinoza as holding otherwise—as holding that there is a plurality of parts in the divine nature answering to the diversity of divine attributes—gives him the unenviable task of explaining how the pieces of a necessary *per se* being come to be joined together so as to form a single being.

3. Substance as Divine

I have been defending an understanding of Spinoza's monism which sees that doctrine as drawing heavily on the necessary *per se* existence of substance. Although the central idea of this paper is to show how Spinoza employs the resources of traditional theology in working from divinity of substance to its uniqueness, it would be worth sketching how Spinoza argues for the conclusion that substance necessarily exists *per se*. After all, it is here that the novelty of Spinoza's position lies.

Viewed by the lights of traditional philosophical theology, the necessary *per se* existence of substance established in IP7, "It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist," is remarkable indeed. How does Spinoza defend this surprising claim? His basic argument is continuous with a point that he made in a letter to Oldenburg, in which Spinoza argued that the generability of a body counts against its substantiality.³⁷ Here, in IP1 through IP7, he argues that the producibility of any entity counts against its substantiality. Thus, Spinoza's argument for IP7 runs through IP6, "One substance cannot be produced by another substance," and its corollary, "A substance cannot be

produced by anything else.”³⁸ Spinoza’s development of these latter claims—like so much of his philosophy—can be understood as the working out of traditional theses in a post-Cartesian world. He argues that substance as such is unproducible because no two substances have enough in common for one to be the cause of the other. The underlying ideas in this argument—that a cause and an effect must have something in common (IP3) and that no two substances share the same nature or attribute (IP5)—are very abstract traditional principles which Spinoza interprets novelly.

Let’s begin with the second thesis, IP5, “In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute.” For all the attention this proposition receives in standard interpretations of Spinoza’s monism, it is not easy to say what is new about IP5, or, more precisely, about the line of argument represented by IP4 and IP5. IP4 insists that things must be distinguished by real differences (that is, by things “outside the intellect”); and that, since real being is divided into substance and accident, things must be distinguished either by their substance (or attributes) or affections. This view about permissible grounds of individuation is entirely traditional.³⁹ IP5 adds to IP4 that substances cannot be distinguished by their modes or affections. But this is traditional as well. It is part and parcel of the Aristotelian tradition’s thinking about the substance-accident distinction that the ontological priority of substance to accident requires that a substance’s individuating principles be prior to its accidents.⁴⁰

Part of the novelty associated with Spinoza’s use of IP5 lies in his disregard of any number of technical scholastic explanations as to how universal essences become individuated.⁴¹ Aquinas, for example, held that it belonged to Peter’s essence to be of this flesh or this bone and to Paul’s essence to be of that flesh or that bone, which makes Peter’s essence in a sense different from Paul’s.⁴² Scotus, rejecting Aquinas’s theory, holds instead that each essence must be individuated through an internal principle of *thisness*, again making it the case that Peter’s essence in a sense differs from Paul’s (inasmuch as Peter’s essence involves Peter’s internal principle of *thisness* and Paul’s, Paul’s). Spinoza’s neglect of such devices puts him in a situation reminiscent of Aquinas’s well-known position on angels. Angels, being immaterial, cannot be individuated through the inclusion of this matter as opposed to that matter in their essences; accordingly, Thomas held that there can only be one angel per angel species.

However, what seems to give IP5 a special sharpness in Spinoza’s own mind has to do with his understanding of “nature or attribute.” If IP5 is to play its role in the argument for the unproducibility of substance, then it must not simply show that two substances have distinct natures, but rather that they have natures so distinct that the substances cannot enter into causal relations. As an earlier version of the proposition, “two substances cannot

exist in nature unless they differ in their whole essence" (Ep. 2; Curley, p. 166; Geb. IV, 5), suggests, Spinoza is denying that two essences, natures, or attributes might overlap. In this, he is viewing essences along the lines that Descartes views the principal attributes thought and extension, where each attribute has somewhat the character of a *summum genus*.⁴³ This stands in marked contrast with a medieval Aristotelian conception of essence, according to which individuals share certain realities or perfections while disagreeing on others. Such possibility for agreement and disagreement is written into the genus-species structure of the definition of an essence. Consider, for example, the essence of Socrates and the essence of Bucephalus: they overlap with regard to animality but not rationality, as is revealed through the fact that the definitions agree through the genus *animal* but disagree through the differentia *rational*. Spinoza, by interpreting the traditional requirement that substances must be individuated through real, internal principles in light of a Cartesian conception of nonoverlapping essences, arrives at the conclusion that distinct substances do not have enough in common to enter into causal commerce.

The story with the second claim underlying Spinoza's argument for the unproducibility of substance, IP3, "if things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other," is very much the same. It, too, is a highly abstract principle well grounded in the tradition. Aquinas, for example, uses the claim "whatever perfection exists in an effect must be found in the effective cause" as the basis of an argument that God must contain all of the perfections found in creation.⁴⁴ But Spinoza innovates here as well. Thomas recognizes two different ways in which a cause could have something in common with its effect. A first way is where a cause contains the perfection of its effect in the same form as in the effect, as Aquinas puts it, "in the same formality [*secundem eandem rationem*], if it is a univocal agent—as when man reproduces man." But this cannot be the manner in which God contains the perfections found in creation, as God is the first cause of, say, the perfection heat, without being hot. So Aquinas allows that the cause might contain the perfection of the effect "in a more eminent degree [*eminentiore modo*], if it is an equivocal agent—thus the sun is the likeness of whatever is generated by the sun's power." (Of course, Descartes, too, subscribes to a doctrine of eminent causation.) Spinoza, however, firmly rejects the idea of eminent causation.⁴⁵ If God is the cause of an extended being, Spinoza maintains, God must possess the perfection of extension formally, that is, must be extended. And so when Oldenburg objects, "the fourth axiom—*If things have nothing in common with one another, one cannot be the cause of the other*—is not so evident to my dull intellect that it does not need more light shed on it. Surely God has nothing formally in common with created things, yet nearly all of us regard him as their cause" (Ep. 3, Curley, p. 169; Geb. IV, 8), Spinoza responds, "As for your contention that God has nothing formally in common with created things, etc., I have

maintained the complete opposite of this in my definition. For I have said that God is a Being consisting of infinite attributes, of which each is infinite, or supremely perfect in its kind" (Ep. 4, Curley, p. 172; Geb. IV, 11).⁴⁶

Spinoza is not very forthcoming in his reply to Oldenburg about his reasons for rejecting eminent causation, giving the impression that it is a basic starting point in his metaphysics. It is reasonable to suppose, however, that his rejection is motivated at least in part by the difficulty of locating the idea of eminent causation within Cartesian physics. Consider the very example that Aquinas uses to illustrate the idea of eminent causation, namely, the sun's agency in the generation of animate beings on earth. From the point of view of Cartesian physics, it is difficult to make sense of the idea that the sun is able to bring about the production of a tree or cow because it contains the perfection *treehood* or *cowhood* in some higher form. To be sure, the sun affects what happens on earth. But it does so through the way in which its matter acts on surrounding matter and that matter acts on matter surrounding it and so forth. And this requires that the sun be "formally" similar to things that it affects. In short, the sorts of causes that Spinoza takes as paradigmatic do not support the idea that there can be causes and effects that do not share anything formally.

Spinoza's first step toward monism, the one that marks his most profound break with tradition, involves, then, many innovative elements—his rejection of the traditional conception of the generability of a substance, his disregard of scholastic devices for individuating conspecific individuals, his acceptance of a Cartesian picture of substantial essences as *summa genera*, and, finally, his refusal to have any truck with the traditional notion of eminent causation. These departures are all motivated to one degree or another by his acceptance of the Cartesian new science. While it is perhaps not surprising that one's picture of science should drive an argument for the unproducibility of substance as such—an argument that, I claim, is the ultimate basis of Spinoza's philosophical monism—this factor tends to be obscured in the interpretations of monism that emphasize Spinoza's views on substance or individuation.

Conclusion

Current interpretations of Spinoza's philosophical monism, which concentrate either on his views about individuation or on his conception of substance, have treated Spinoza's arguments for philosophical monism in isolation from traditional arguments for theological monism. And while, to be sure, it is often recognized that Spinoza's argument for philosophical monism cannot be carried through until one takes into account that the unique substance is in fact God, commentators have not seriously pursued the connection between Spinoza's philosophical commitments and traditional philosophical theology.

Spinoza's thinking about philosophical monism, I have argued, is pro-

foundly indebted to traditional thinking about theological monism. The significance of this claim reaches beyond its not inconsiderable historical interest. For taking into account the theological background to Spinoza's monism enables us to better understand his position and evaluate it, in at least two ways. First, it helps us to see how the argument that Spinoza offers in the text of the *Ethics* is really a two-stage affair, where the first stage establishes that substance as such is divine, and the second one, relying on traditional patterns of argument, establishes that there can be only one divine being. Second, it helps us to appreciate the crucial role that divine simplicity plays in fending off certain objections to Spinoza's monism.

Finally, my purpose in calling attention to Spinoza's debt to medieval philosophical theology, it should be clear, is not to suggest that he is merely rehashing old ideas. Quite the contrary. By sifting out what is traditional in Spinoza's doctrine, we come to have a clearer picture of what is original. In particular, such an investigation suggests that by far the most important step on the path to Spinoza's philosophical monism is his thesis that substance as such necessarily exists *per se*, a step which, I have suggested, is greatly motivated by the new science. In a very real sense the argument for philosophical monism is over at this point; once it is conceded that substance as such exists necessarily *per se*, traditional resources carry us very quickly the rest of the way.⁴⁷

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NOTES

1. A being exists necessarily *per se* if it exists necessarily through its own power, unlike a being which exists necessarily through the agency of another being. See the first paragraph of §2 of my "Spinoza's Views on Necessity in Historical Perspective," *Philosophical Topics*, 19, no. 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 47-96.

2. All citations of Spinoza are taken from Edwin Curley, ed. and trans., *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), I; henceforth cited as "Curley." Original language references are to Carl Gebhardt, ed., *Spinoza Opera* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), in 4 vols.; henceforth cited as "Geb."

3. Spinoza responds, "the . . . Proposition does not make many Gods, but only one, consisting of infinite attributes, etc." (Ep. 4; Curley, p. 172; Geb. IV, 11).

4. I have used the translation of SCG by Anton C. Pegis, Vernon J. Bourke, James F. Anderson, and Charles J. O'Neil, 4 pts. in 5 vols. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975; first published 1955-1957).

5. I have used the edition by Allan Wolter, trans., *Philosophical Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 85.

6. *Opus oxoniense*, I, D. 2, Q. 3, "*prima via*," as Curley points out in connection with a version of the same argument given in *Cogitata Metaphysica* (Curley, p. 318); Wolfson

offers a fuller account of the argument's history in *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York, NY: Meridian Books, 1960; orig. pub. 1934), I, 81n1.

7. William Charlton notes this in "Spinoza's Monism," *Philosophical Review*, **105**, no. 4 (October 1981), p. 507. I disagree with Charlton's conjecture that Spinoza is thinking of the proof given in IP8S2, for reasons that will become clear shortly.

8. R.H.M. Elwes, trans., Benedict De Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding, The Ethics, Correspondence* (New York: Dover, 1955).

9. The restriction to necessary *per se* is important here; obviously, an externally necessitated being can be determined from without.

10. *Opus oxoniense*, I, D. 2, Q. 3, "sexta via"; Wolter, p. 88.

11. *Opus oxoniense*, I, D. 2, Q. 3, "sexta via"; Wolter, pp. 88-89.

12. As Olli Koistinen has pointed out to me, Leibniz offers a response on behalf of Spinoza to the possibility that there might be an unlimited number of such beings in his note on IP8 in his manuscript "Ad Ethicam B. d. Sp." in C. I. Gerhardt, ed., *The philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz* (Berlin, 1875-1890), I, 144; translated in Leory E. Loemker, trans. and ed., *Philosophical Papers and Letters* (Boston: D. Reidel, 2d ed. 1969), 200.

13. In A. Wolf, trans., *The Correspondence of Spinoza* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1928), pp. 269-270. I am grateful to Olli Koistinen for bringing this passage to my attention.

14. I.e., in the form that applies to variable *N*, rather than specifically to God.

15. For a different account of the twenty-man argument in IP8S, see Charlton, "Spinoza's Monism," pp. 524-525. Charlton thinks that Spinoza's point is that "the possibility of a number of things of the same nature depends on the presence of material for that nature to inform" and that such a dependence would be incompatible with substance's independent character. But on the hylomorphic conceptions of substance prevalent in Spinoza's day, a substance's matter is supposed to be part of the substance; Socrates's dependence on his matter would not, on these conceptions, show that he depends on anything separate from him.

16. As Gueroult observes, *Spinoza* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), I, 225.

17. Scotus does this in his original argument, mentioned above, where he tries to show that "the perfection of necessary existence" cannot be "multiplied in more than one individual" (Wolter, p. 88).

18. See his comment, "Thus we see that, in attempting to ascribe to such a Being any imperfection, we straightaway fall into contradictions. For, whether the imperfection which we wish to assign to the said Being be situate in any defect, or in limitations possessed by its nature, or in any change which it might, through deficiency of power, undergo from external causes, we are always brought back to the contradiction, that a nature which involves necessary existence, does not exist, or does not necessarily exist" (letter 35; Elwes, p. 354).

19. This is consonant with Gueroult's point that Spinoza intends to provide a "genetic" definition of God. See, for example, *Spinoza*, I, i, Ch. 4, §20.

20. Although Spinoza appeals to IP5 in his demonstration of IP14, he could equally well have argued in the manner that I've suggested he argues in letter 35. That is, he could

have argued that if there existed two substances, God and infinite extension, this would compromise God's infinity with respect to extension (as well as infinite extension's infinity). And while it is true that Spinoza rests the infinity of substance (with respect to a given attribute) in IP8 on IP5, he offers an alternative demonstration of this in IP8S1 which is very close to the demonstration in letter 35.

21. See §3 below.

22. Spinoza writes, "and yet you [Huygens] say, that your whole difficulty remains (inasmuch as there may be, you think, several self-existent entities of different nature; as for instance thought and extension are different and perhaps subsist by their own sufficiency)" (letter 36; Elwes, p. 357; Geb. IV, 185).

23. Aquinas puts the point thus:

Every composition, likewise, needs some composer. For, if there is composition, it is made up of a plurality, and a plurality cannot be fitted into a unity except by some composer. If, then, God were composite, He would have a composer. He could not compose Himself, since nothing is its own cause, because it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now, the composer is the efficient cause of the composite. Thus, God would be an efficient cause. Thus, too, He would not be the first cause—which was proved above. [SCG, I, 18, pp. 103-104]

24. Bennett offers an interesting and particularly original treatment of this problem in §35 of *Spinoza*. However, as Margaret Wilson points out (*Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 78 (1981), pp. 584-586) and Bennett concedes (§35.5), it involves denying that Spinoza takes seriously the traditional priority of substance over accident, a denial that I find quite implausible (see §4 of "Spinoza's Views on Necessity in Historical Perspective" and my "On the Relationship Between Mode and Substance in Spinoza's Metaphysics," to appear in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*).

25. I, p. 238; Donagan's translation in "Essence and the Distinction of Attributes," p. 176.

26. *Behind the Geometrical Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 30 (see n. 40 [p. 148]).

27. Olli Koistinen offers a similar criticism in his dissertation "On the Metaphysics of Spinoza's *Ethics*" (University of Turku, 1991), pp. 35-36.

28. In letter 35 Spinoza builds the *reductio* around infinity alone; in letter 36 he is less particular, writing, "if we adopt the . . . view [that a necessary *per se* being could be divided into parts of the same nature], we should be in contradiction with the first three properties [i.e., eternity, simplicity, and infinity]" (p. 356; Geb. IV, 184).

29. Notice that this same problem seems to arise even if only one of the parts is absolutely infinite, a case which is overlooked in Spinoza's presentation of the argument. As Andrew McRea has pointed out to me, it is not clear why we need to assume that the resulting absolute infinite being is distinct from the original one. Perhaps there is some principle at work here to the effect that a whole cannot be identical with a (proper) part. I am grateful to members of the graduate section in my fall 1993 Harvard course on the rationalists for discussion on this point.

30. The necessity of the existence of a necessary *per se* being is so strong that it precludes even the conceptual possibility of such a being's nonexistence.

31. I understand the content of Spinoza's claim that "two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct" (*duo attributa realiter distincta concipiuntur*) to be exhausted by the explanatory clause "i.e., one may be conceived without the aid of the other" (*hoc est, unum sine ope alterius*). Alan Donagan seems to take this phrase to mean something stronger in "Essence and the Distinction of Attributes" in Marjorie Grene, ed., *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), pp. 164-181.

32. Cf. ID4: "By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence."

33. Indeed, the general point of IP10, as I see it, is to use the conceptual independence of the attributes to answer a compossibility worry. Further, there's a way in which the conceptual independence of attributes actually supports the possibility that the underlying subject is simple: if the attributes were not conceptually independent, then they might conflict in a way that would force us to place them in distinct entities or at least distinct parts of the same entity.

34. Spinoza is thinking along fairly traditional lines in the *Short Treatise*, where an attribute has the place of a perfection. I do not discern a major difference here with the *Ethics*. Cf. his comment in IP10S, "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." For the view that Spinoza altered his position on the ground covered in the *Short Treatise* I, ii, 17, see *Behind the Geometrical Method*, p. 147n.38.

35. Thus, the identification of a substance with its attributes in IP4D poses no problem for this view.

36. If that's the correct term. I take it that, for Spinoza, there is something like a distinction of reason between the different attributes, an idea that is encouraged by the mention of the intellect in ID4. But does this show that distinctions among attributes are grounded "subjectively"? At any rate, however one explains the diversity of God's attributes, it is not the case that that diversity depends on the actual perception of some given intellect. That is, a distinction of reason would obtain between God's justice and God's mercy, even if *per impossibile* no intellect noticed this. In this way, we avoid some of the problems raised by Francis S. Haserot against Wolfson's interpretation in "Spinoza's Definition of Attribute" in S. Paul Kashap, ed., *Studies in Spinoza: Critical and Interpretive Essays* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 28-42.

37. Oldenburg had objected to a precursor of IP5:

For regarding the first [Proposition, i.e., that two substances cannot exist in nature unless they differ in their whole essence], I consider that two men are two Substances, and have the same attribute, since each has the capacity to reason; from that I conclude that there are two Substances of the same attribute. [Ep. 3; Curley, p. 169; Geb. IV, 8]

Oldenburg wants to know, Why it is not the case that inasmuch as there are, for example, two human beings, there are (at least) two substances? Spinoza responds:

As for your objection to the first Proposition, I ask you, my friend, to consider that men are not created, but only generated, and that their bodies already existed before, though formed differently. [Ep. 4; Curley, p. 172; Geb. IV, 11]

I take the force of this reply to be that since a human body is merely a reconfiguration of

already existing matter, its appearance in the universe does not mark the entry of a new fundamental item in the universe's inventory, i.e., a new substance. In other words, its generability (in, of course, a new-science sense of generability) counts against its substantiality. For a fuller account of how Spinoza is opposing a new-science account of the human body's generation to a traditional medieval account of generation, see my unpublished manuscript "Monism in Spinoza."

38. A second way of seeing this, according to Spinoza (IP6C, alternative demonstration), is that in order for A to cause B, A must be understood through B, which conflicts with the independence that A, as a substance, possesses.

39. Since we will be concerned with the uniqueness of a divine being, it is worth noting that claims similar to IP4 often come up in medieval demonstrations of God's uniqueness. For example, Scotus begins an argument for God's uniqueness with the claim that "If several necessary beings existed, they would be distinguished from one another by some real perfections," *Opus oxoniense*, I, D. 2, Q. 3 (Wolter, p. 89). Scotus offers a similar argument in Q. 1 for the unity of the divine nature, which begins, "If two necessary natures existed, some reality proper to each would distinguish one from the other" (Wolter, pp. 50-51). Similarly, one of Aquinas's arguments in *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG) against a plurality of Gods is that it is impossible that "there . . . be something distinguishing the nature in this and that god" because "the divine nature receives the addition neither of essential differences nor of accidents" I, 42, 16. I owe the reference to Aquinas to Charlton, "Spinoza's Monism," p. 507.

40. See Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), II, 672-673, and I, 14-15. See also §4 of "Spinoza's Views on Necessity in Historical Perspective" and "On the Relationship Between Mode and Substance in Spinoza's Metaphysics."

41. This is not meant as a criticism of Spinoza. It seems to me that this disregard is well motivated, if for no other reason than that the scholastic devices for individuating particulars within the same species arise in the context of explaining how universal natures become individual, a problem that has a very different character in their physical universe, where the universal natures are quasi-physical constituents of physical individuals. In the universe of the new science, it is not the case that horsehood, for example, is a quasi-physical constituent of Bucephalus, over and above a certain sort of configuration of matter in motion. Thus, it is unnatural in such a universe to begin with the essence or nature *horsehood* and add certain further "real principles" that "explain" how equinity is individualized.

42. Cf., e.g., Chapter Two of *De Ente et Essentia*.

43. See also the Appendix to the *Short Treatise*. The first proposition, which is another forerunner of IP5, reads, "To no substance which really exists can we relate the same attribute that is related to another substance, or (what is the same) in Nature there cannot be two substances unless they are distinguished really"; and Spinoza explains in one of the axioms that "Things that are distinguished really either have different attributes, like thought and extension, or are related to different attributes, like understanding and motion, of which one belongs to thought, the other to extension."

It should be pointed out that Descartes tries to make room for other kinds of essences (of substances), such as the essences of God and the composite human being.

44. See *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 4, A. 2. For the *Summa Theologica*, I have used the translation of Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 4 pts. in 5 vols. (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981; first published 1911); orig. lang. *Summa Theologiae*, 4 pts. in 5 vols. (Madrid: Biblioteca De Autores Cristianos, 1978).

45. By “eminent causation” I mean causation where the perfection in the effect is found in the cause not formally but only in a higher form. So Spinoza’s rejection of eminent causation is compatible, in particular, with the position that God and his effects might be “incommensurable” in certain ways. See Gueroult, *Spinoza*, I, 289ff.

46. Of course, it would not have been obvious that a supremely perfect being *could* formally possess certain perfections (e.g., those which require materiality); this is why, I take it, Spinoza attaches so much importance to substage (A) of the argument discussed in §1.

47. I am grateful to Paul Hoffman and Olli Koistinen for their helpful comments. This research was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.