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Nicholas E. Okrent

University of Pennsylvania, okrent@pobox.upenn.edu

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NOTE: At the time of publication, author Nicholas Okrent was affiliated with the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill. Currently (March 2006), he is a librarian at the University of Pennsylvania Library.

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Abstract

In *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Bennett provides an analysis of what he calls Spinoza's 'official argument' of substance monism. The official argument is Bennett's interpretation of the demonstration of 1P14, and his criticisms of it are powerful ones. This paper addresses one aspect of Bennett's criticisms. A premise of the official argument is the conclusion of 1P5, that there cannot be two substances with an attribute in common. Bennett argues that 1P5 is insufficient to support 1P14. This paper argues that a correct understanding of Spinoza's version of the identity of indiscernibles reveals that 1P5 is sufficient to support 1P14 and Spinoza's argument for substance monism.

Keywords

Spinoza, Substance, Monism, Identity of Indiscernibles, Bennett, Jonathan

Comments

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The Identity of Indiscernibles and Spinoza's Argument for Substance Monism

Nicholas Oakrent
*University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill*

In *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Bennett provides an analysis of what he calls Spinoza's 'official argument' for substance monism. The official argument is Bennett's interpretation of the demonstration of IP14, and his criticisms of it are powerful ones. This paper addresses one aspect of Bennett's criticisms. A premise of the official argument is the conclusion of IP5, that there cannot be two substances with an attribute in common. Bennett argues, however, that IP5 is valid only if it is constrained to substances of one attribute, whereas IP14 requires an unconstrained conclusion to go through. This paper argues two things. First, that IP5 need not be constrained to substances of one attribute to be valid. A consideration of IP10 and the language of IP4 suggests that IP5 is valid if it is constrained to substances of one attribute and a substance of all possible attributes, excluding only substances of multiple but less than all attributes. Second, that my interpretation of IP5 is sufficient for IP14 to reach its conclusion of substance monism. The official argument is valid when my interpretation of IP5 is substituted for Bennett's.¹

The Official Argument

The following presentation of the official argument closely follows Bennett's.

1. An absolutely infinite substance (i.e., God) that consists of all possible attributes exists (1D6, 1P11).²
2. There cannot be two substances with an attribute in common (IP5)

3. Every substance consists of at least one attribute (implied in several places, e.g., 1D4, 1P14).

Therefore, God is the only substance: there cannot be more than one substance.

The basics of the argument are simple. By (1) there is a substance with all attributes. By (3) every substance consists of at least one attribute. But by (2) no two substances can have any attribute in common. Since God exists and has all attributes, there could be no other substances with attributes. There could be no substances besides God. The argument is valid and the third premise is fairly innocuous. It will be impossible here to consider the validity of the ontological argument or the tenability of Spinoza's conception of God, which are the basis of the first premise. The second premise is 1P5, to which we now turn.

1P5 presupposes 1P4, that "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"(1P4). In 1P4 Spinoza glosses 1D3 and 1D5 as "outside the intellect there is nothing except substances and their affections"(1P4), and concludes that two distinct things must be distinguished either by a difference in the attributes or a difference in the affections of the things. Because there is nothing but substances and their affections outside the intellect, only they can serve as *differentiae* of distinct things. Two comments should be made about 1P4. First, Spinoza moves from the statement that only substances and their affections are outside the intellect to the claim that only attributes or affections distinguish distinct things. Presumably, this is a valid move because substances simply are the attributes of which they consist. In other words, a substance is in some sense identified with the attributes that express its essence (heavily implied in 1D6, 1P4). Second, 1P4 is Spinoza's version of the identity of indiscernibles: there are

two distinct things only if they can be distinguished from each other.

The argument in IP5D uses the results of IP4, that distinct things are distinguished by a difference in attributes or a difference in affections. For the purposes of IP14, only the distinguishing of things by attributes is relevant.³ Spinoza writes, "[if two or more distinct substances are distinguished] only by a difference in their attributes, then it will be conceded that there is only one of the same attribute" (IP5). IP5 asserts that if there are two distinct substances they must have different attributes by which they can be distinguished. Spinoza concludes that there cannot be two substances of the same attribute. For example, there cannot be more than one substance consisting of the attribute extension.

This conclusion, which entails that any two substances must have no attributes in common, is problematic. Bennett follows Leibniz in arguing that Spinoza's argument "cannot yield more than the conclusion that two substances could not have all their attributes in common [while in fact being two substances]. But Spinoza concludes that they could not have any attribute in common" (Bennett, 1984, 69). It is conceivable, Leibniz and Bennett assert, that there are an infinite number of substances that all have a different selection of attributes and only one that has all. For example, Substance A could be of attribute *a* while substance B is of attribute *b*, and substance G has all possible attributes. According to Bennett's view, the substances are distinguishable by the differing attributes. The first and second substances are distinguished by being of different attributes (*a* and *b*, respectively), and the third substance would be distinguished from both by having *a*, *b*, and all other possible attributes. It seems, therefore, that there could be substances that share an attribute (i.e., are of the same attribute) which are distinguishable because they do not share all attributes (cf. Bennett, 1984, 64).

Bennett points out that if IP5 is restricted to substances

of one attribute, then the conclusion would follow. As Curley argues, there is some initial reason to think that the substances referred to in IP5 are of one attribute each. The possibility of a substance having multiple attributes isn't discussed until IP9, and IP8 glosses IP5 as "a substance of one attribute does not exist unless it is unique (IP5)"(IP8D). This rephrasing at least raises the possibility that IP5 does not address substances of more than one attribute. Furthermore, IP5 asserts that "there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or [sive] attribute," but the terms 'nature' and 'attribute' would not be interchangeable unless the attribute in question expressed the entire nature of the substance, i.e., was the only attribute of the substance. Finally, it must be remembered that Spinoza is broadly grounded in the Cartesian tradition, and Descartes firmly believes that all substances besides God have one principal attribute (*Principles* I, 53). This argument has been discussed elsewhere at length (Curley, 1988, 10-30), and it strongly suggests that Spinoza did not believe that substances of multiple but less than all attributes were a serious possibility.

However, these considerations do not prove that Spinoza intended IP5 to be restricted to substances of one attribute. It is likely Spinoza believed that if there were finite substances, then they would be of one attribute. Furthermore, Spinoza may have been postulating finite substances when he wrote IP5, this explaining the interchangeability of 'nature' and 'attribute' and the gloss of IP8. But these points do not entail that IP5 is restricted to substances of only one attribute. If IP5 were constrained to substances of only one attribute, the official argument would fail. For the official argument to go through, the second premise (that no two substances share an attribute) must be used with the first premise (that there is a substance with all attributes) to conclude that it is impossible for there to be any substance besides God. Consequently, IP5 must extend to substances of more than

one attribute if it is to serve its purpose in IP14.

A Reconstruction of the 'No Shared Attribute Argument' of IP5

In this section I argue that Bennett's criticism is incorrect because IP5 is valid for substances of one attribute and a substance of all possible attributes. My interpretation is in part motivated by the implied use of the identity of indiscernibles in IP10, and in part motivated by the ambiguous language of IP4. It will be impossible to defend my interpretation against likely criticisms at this time. Consequently, I will consider my interpretation to be well founded if it successfully responds to Bennett's criticisms, it allows IP5 to be used appropriately in IP14, it forces no unnatural readings of the text, and it does not contradict later usage of the propositions in question.

IP10 concludes that "each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself" because "an attribute is what the intellect perceives concerning a substance, as constituting its essence (by D4); so (D3) it must be conceived through itself"(IP10). According to Spinoza, it is the nature of substance for none of its attributes to be caused by any of the others, for the attributes to have always existed as they do, and for each of them to express the reality of substance. Consequently, two attributes which are conceived as being distinct cannot be assumed to be two substances rather than two attributes of God.

As Spinoza notes, this raises an immediate question: by what sign shall "we be able to distinguish the diversity of substances"(IP10)? If attributes are conceived through themselves in the same manner as substances (ID3), how are we to determine which of the things conceived through themselves are a substance of one attribute and which an attribute of God? I believe that there is in fact no way to distinguish

substances of one attribute from attributes of God. Spinoza's initial definition of substance is "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"(1D3). 1P10 explicitly states that an attribute of a substance is *conceived through itself*, but this also implies that it *exists in itself*. As Curley points out (1988, 29), if an attribute existed in something else it would need it in order to exist and would have to be conceived through it (1A4). But an attribute of a substance is not conceived through anything else, so it must not exist in anything else, i.e., it must exist in itself. Moreover, in 1P29 Spinoza explicitly states that attributes of substance are both conceived through themselves and exist in themselves (cf. KV I, vii, 10). Consequently, "the attributes of substance satisfy the definition of substance"(Curley, 1988, 29). Since this is the case, there is no way to distinguish the diversity of substances (cf. Bennett, 1996, 85-88; Flage, 1989, 133). This should not confuse us into believing that the attributes of God are substances. Attributes and substances are of different logical types. Unfortunately, this issue cannot be clarified further here (cf. Ep. 9, IV/46; also, Curley, 1988, 28).

At this point at least two mutually exclusive conclusions could be drawn from 1P4 and the claim that substances of one attribute are indistinguishable from God's attributes. It is possible that all attributes of God are in fact substances of one attribute, and it is also possible that all apparent substances of one attribute are in fact attributes of God. Fortunately, Spinoza tells us what conclusion he intends. He writes, "if someone now asks by what sign we shall be able to distinguish the diversity of substances, let him read the following propositions, which show that in nature there exists only one substance, and that it is absolutely infinite. So that sign would be in vain"(1P10). I suggest that the argument goes as follows. By the definition of God we know that if he exists he

consists of all possible attributes. By Spinoza's account of attributes in 1P10 we know that they are indistinguishable from substances of one attribute (cf. Flage, 152-153). If the attributes of God and substances of one attribute are indistinguishable, it cannot be that both exist; either God's attributes or the substances of one attribute must not exist. The question of whether the substances of one attribute or the attributes of God exist is settled in favor of the latter alternative through a proof of the existence of God as he is described in 1D6.

This analysis of 1P10 must be further considered in terms of 1P4 and 1P5, for it clearly requires the identity of indiscernibles to be successful. I have suggested that the following sort of argument is implied or at least logically entailed by 1P10. Consider, for example, *res extensa*⁴, a substance of one attribute. Assuming that God exists and has all possible attributes, it follows that extension is an attribute of God. *Res extensa* and God's attribute of extension have the same definitions: they are indistinguishable. If God is proven to exist, then *res extensa* cannot. This appeals to 1P5, but its force is drawn from 1P4.

Given Bennett's interpretation, 1P5 must be understood as proving only that substances cannot share *all* attributes. If Bennett is correct, the principle espoused in 1P5 cannot be validly used in 1P10 to show that substances of one attribute cannot be distinguished as distinct substances. If it is true that 1P5 is valid only when constrained to substances that share all attributes, then 1P5 cannot be used to rule out the possibility of the co-existence of a substance of one attribute and God. To determine if Bennett's interpretation of 1P5 is correct, we must provide an interpretation for 1P4.

Bennett's interpretation of Spinoza's version of the identity of indiscernibles stays close to the text of 1P4. He writes, "[1P4] says that two things must be made distinct from one another—must be made two—by a difference either in

their attributes or in their states, i.e., either in what kinds they belong to or in some non-basic qualitative way" (Bennett, 1984, 66). This is correct, but, as we will see, it leaves IP4 ambiguous between two importantly different interpretations. Bennett argues that one substance with all possible attributes (i.e., God) is distinguishable from, e.g., *res extensa* because of the difference in the attributes of the substances. God has the attribute of extension *and* has all other possible attributes. In making this claim Bennett seems to believe that two substances which differed in any of their attributes would be distinguishable: *any* difference in attributes allows two substances to be distinguished. His interpretation of the aspect of IP4 in which we are interested can be put as follows:

(1) It is sufficient for two substances to be distinguished from one another that the two substances do not have all their attributes in common.

Bennett must presuppose this interpretation of IP4 to support his claim that IP5 proves only that there cannot be two substances that share all attributes.

Fortunately, there is an alternative interpretation of IP4 that is natural and allows for a different interpretation of IP5. First, however, it will be helpful to clarify Spinoza's notion of the relation between substances and their attributes. Spinoza's conception of substance differs from that of Aristotle, the Scholastics and Leibniz. He breaks with the Aristotelian tradition in that he does not think of substance as a subject that underlies the attributes it 'has.' Rather, Spinoza identifies substance with the attributes which express its essence. If there were a substance of one attribute its entire essence would be expressed by that attribute. Thus, there is no difference between extended substance and that which is extended, or just extension. Likewise, God is identified with all His attributes. Spinoza understands by God "a substance

consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence"(1D6).

Imagine a world containing nothing but God and *res extensa*. This world would consist of two things: (1) God, i.e., a substance of all possible attributes, each of which would be identical to a substance of one attribute; (2) *res extensa*, a substance of one attribute. According to Spinoza, the world contains nothing but God's attributes (insofar as they express the essence of absolutely infinite substance) and a substance (*res extensa*) that is identical to one of the attributes of God. There is no 'stuff' underlying God's attributes, and *res extensa* does not inhere in some underlying thing.

I have provided this discussion of Spinoza's understanding of substances and attributes to motivate an alternative interpretation of 1P4. In the reality I described there are two substances that do not share all attributes. However, there is still a question regarding how it is possible to distinguish them. It is not clear that it is possible to identify *res extensa* as a thing distinct from God's attribute of extension. It would be impossible to determine where God's attribute of extension stopped and *res extensa* began, or whether they were two distinct things at all.

This suggests that Bennett's interpretation of 1P4 might not be the most accurate one. Instead of being interpreted as the claim 'if two substances have *any* different attributes, then they are distinguishable,' 1P4 might be interpreted as the claim 'two substances are distinguishable only if they have different attributes by which they can be determined to be distinct.' The second interpretation leaves open the possibility that only some differences in attributes would be sufficient to distinguish two distinct things. I suggest the following interpretation:

(2) It is sufficient for two substances to be distinguished from one another that each of the substances has at least one attribute that is

distinguishable from every attribute of the other substance (i.e., has an attribute that the other does not).

As best I can tell, the sense of IP4 is captured as well by my interpretation as by Bennett's. Given my interpretation, the relevant question is whether the difference in attributes between God and *res extensa* is sufficient to distinguish them as distinct substances.

This question must be made more precise. Spinoza believes that God can be distinguished from each of His attributes and (were it possible for such a thing to exist) from a substance of one attribute. It is easy to be misled by this fact into thinking that a substance of one attribute could be conceived as being a distinct thing. But we are not merely interested in knowing how it is possible to distinguish one substance (i.e., God) as a distinct thing. We are also interested in knowing if there are two substances that can be distinguished from one another. IP4 asserts that two substances are distinguishable if they have different attributes. However, the fact that God is distinguishable as a substance which is distinct from an imagined substance of one attribute (because He has an attribute the supposed substance of one attribute could not have) does not entail that any substances of one attribute are in fact distinguishable as substances distinct from God. The fact that He is known to exist because He is distinguishable from any imagined substance of one attribute does not entail that any substances of one attribute exist. Given IP4, e.g., *res extensa* exists only if it is distinguishable as a distinct substance. I suggest the following principle which, I believe, follows closely from IP4(2):

(2.1) A substance exists only if it has an attribute that distinguishes it as a distinct thing (i.e., has an attribute that no other substance has).

This principle is simple, even trivial, but it has important implications for Bennett's argument.

Our consideration of IP10 suggests that a substance of one attribute would be indistinguishable from an attribute of God. And, as Spinoza implies in P10, there is no reason to believe that there are any substances of one attribute unless we can determine a sign by which substances of one attribute can be distinguished as distinct things. Plugging into (2.1) and using *res extensa* as an example we get: *res extensa* is a substance only if it has an attribute that no other substance has. If there is a Spinozan God, then *res extensa* would be identical with an attribute of God, and so *res extensa* could not be distinguished as a distinct thing. If there is a God, therefore, there cannot be *res extensa*. Likewise with all other supposed substances of one attribute; they do not exist.

With this interpretation of IP4 and, thereby, IP5, the official argument is valid. Given my interpretation of IP4 and the assumption that there can be no substances of multiple but less than all attributes, it is true that in nature "there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute" (IP5). It is obviously true for substances of one attribute. It is true for an absolutely infinite substance and substances of one attribute because a substance of one attribute and the absolutely infinite substance cannot share any attribute without the substance of one attribute being indistinguishable from it.

Substance Monism

Given this analysis, it is fairly easy to reconstruct the basic argument for substance monism from propositions 11 through 14. In IP11 Spinoza argues that God exists as he is defined in ID6. This is essential to the argument for substance monism because it demonstrates that a God who has

every possible attribute exists. Consequently, if there is no sign to distinguish the supposed 'diversity of substances' from God's attributes, then there are in fact no substances besides God. This conclusion follows because it has not been proven that there are substances of one attribute, but it has now been proven that God exists and is absolutely infinite.

It would bring us too far afield to consider 1P12 and 1P13 extensively. 1P12 attempts to demonstrate that no substance, even one of only one attribute, is divisible. 1P13 attempts to demonstrate that absolutely infinite substances are indivisible. In both propositions 1P5 is referred to. In 1P12 Spinoza appeals to it to argue that if a substance is divided into many substances, then each one would have to consist of a different attribute (1P12). In 1P13 Spinoza refers to 1P5 to argue that it is absurd to suppose that an infinite substance could be divided into many infinite substances, for they would all have the same attributes and would be indistinguishable. From 1P12 and 1P13 Spinoza concludes that substance is indivisible. Furthermore, "we cannot have different substances of different attributes produced from one substance, and we cannot have different substances of the same attribute...produced from one substance"(Hart, 38). Spinoza concludes that no part of an absolutely infinite substance can itself be a substance (1P13S).

1P14 goes as follows: "since God is an absolutely infinite being, of whom no attribute which expresses an essence of substance can be denied (by 1D6), and he necessarily exists (by 1P11), if there were any substance 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 1P5) is absurd"(1P14). The part of the passage up to the reference to 1P11 argues that any attribute which expresses an essence of substance pertains to God. Because any substance besides God would be of one attribute, its complete essence would be expressed by that one attribute. Since any-

thing that expresses essence pertains to God (1D6), and substances are identical to their attributes, every substance of one attribute would pertain to God. Furthermore, if there were a substance besides God it could not be a part of God and could not be one of God's attributes (1P12, 1P13).

Substances of one attribute (if there were such things) could not be constitutive of God, but they would have to pertain to God. As far as I can see, substances of one attribute would have to be in God in the same manner as the modes (Bennett, 1996, 67). This conclusion might seem odd, for the natural conclusion would be that substances of one attribute were different than God. Many of Spinoza's contemporaries would argue that substances of one attribute are different sorts of things (are made of a different kind of 'stuff') than God, even if they are dependent on Him. Such a claim, however, is directly contrary to Spinoza's belief that each of God's attributes is infinite in its own kind (1P15, heavily implied in 1P11). This is to say that God's attribute of, e.g., extension is all possible extension. If there were another extended thing that was distinct from God's extension, then God's extension could not be infinite. If substances of one attribute were to be anything at all, they could only be, in some sense, made of the same 'stuff' as God's attributes.

On this interpretation, the force of my reconstructed version of 1P5 in 1P14 is obvious. Whatever else a substance of one attribute may be, it is also 'co-extensive' with some part of God. Furthermore, since substances must be infinite (1P8), substances of one attribute must be infinite within their kinds. So, for example, *res extensa* and God's attribute of extension, which are both infinite in their kinds, would be *completely* co-extensive. Every instance of *res extensa* would also be an instance of God's attribute of extension. Consequently, they would be indistinguishable. But we know that God exists and has an attribute of extension, so it is impossible for *res extensa* to exist.

The difference in attributes between *res extensa* and God is not sufficient to distinguish two distinct things. This does not imply, of course, that God is indistinguishable from a substance of one attribute, were one to exist. Rather a substance of one attribute and God cannot both exist because, e.g., *res extensa* has no attribute that is different from every attribute of God. It is impossible to distinguish *res extensa* from some aspect of God. Consequently, the claim that there could be 'no two substances of the same attribute' (IP5) holds true and for the appropriate reason. There are not two or more things that can be distinguished from one another by having different attributes, for one of the supposed things has no attribute that can serve to distinguish it as distinct. This conclusion holds true for all substances of one attribute, so there can be no more than one substance, i.e., God. This is the conclusion of IP14.

notes

¹ Except for my interpretation of IP4, the core of my position is influenced by Curley's *Beyond the Geometrical Method*, although our conclusions are significantly different.

² I follow Bennett (1996, 65) and others in interpreting Spinoza's 'infinite' as something like 'all possible.'

³ In order to avoid clumsy sentences I will not always mention that affections *may* also distinguish substances.

⁴ In this paper 'res extensa' always refers to a substance of one attribute rather than to an attribute of God.

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