Spinoza’s Platonic Deity

1. What I mean by ‘platonism’
   
   By ‘platonism’ I mean, roughly, a commitment to mind-independent forms or essences that explain and possibly cause entities that instantiate or otherwise exemplify them. There are important passages where Spinoza seems to reject such a label, e.g., 2p40s1. Elsewhere, however, he appears to commit himself to something like platonic entities; see, for example, his discussion of common notions (2p38-39) and essences of finite particulars (1p17s, 1p8s2, 4p31d & 4p35d).

   • Thin Platonism: Eternal and unchanging natures/essences
   • Thick Platonism: Eternal and unchanging essences that are causally responsible for their instantiations

Current Project and long-term project: Platonic components in Spinoza’s argument for substance monism and platonic components in Spinoza’s understanding of infinite and finite particulars and their causal efficacy.

Current Project: We can better understand Spinoza’s argument for God being a necessarily existing substance and the only possible substance by recognizing his commitment to a thin and thick platonic conception of substantial essences. Here are some of the supportive conclusions I hope to support along the way:
   
   • 1p7 secures the necessity only of the essence of substance
   • 1p11 offers three a priori arguments for the necessary instantiation of one such substantial essence—God’s
   • Platonic essences help us understand Spinoza’s argument for God being the only possible substance. (loosely)
   • God’s platonic essence helps us understand infinite modes as a kind of platonic heaven. (quickly)

2. Earlier ontological Arguments
   
   • St. Anselm’s argument and Aquinas’ critique

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1 “Yet Platonism never really caught on, not in anything like the way Aristotelianism had. This is particularly clear when one comes to the seventeenth century: none of the principal philosophers from that century can plausibly be regarded as Platonists.”

  -- B. Pasnau, Metaphysical Themes, 77
• **Descartes’ Argument**, on one reading, endorses a form of thin Platonism, see esp. his reply to Caterus

3. **Spinoza’s Ontological Argument**: Spinoza divides his ontological argument into two distinct stages: He first establishes the necessity only of substantial essences (1p7) and later (1p11) provides three a priori arguments for why one such substantial essence—God’s—is necessarily instantiated. His position on the necessity of God’s essence commits him to thin Platonism; his position on the necessary instantiation of God’s essence commits him to thick Platonism.

3a. **Spinoza’s aim in 1p7 is to secure the necessity only of substantial essences**:

Two readings of 1p7 (“It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist”):

(a) Stepping Stone: 1p7 secures the existence only of substantial essences & (b) Standalone: 1p7 secures the existence of any possible substance.

- The proposition itself supports the stepping stone reading
  - Existence is predicated specifically of the essence (*involvit; ipsius*)
  - Spinoza differentiates between essences and their instances in 2p8 and elsewhere
- The demonstration supports the stepping stone reading but not the standalone reading
  - Why, for 1def1, does an object being its own cause require that its essence exists? Spinoza’s clarification of 1p7d in 1p8s2 explains 1def1 and its contribution in 1p7d
  - 1p8s2: Given the conceptual independence of substance (1def3), “the truth of substances is not outside the intellect unless it is in them [the substances] themselves, because they are conceived through themselves.” With its causal and conceptual independence, the truth about the cause of any substance (that is will be its own cause) can reside only in its essence.
  - E1ax6: “A true idea must agree with its object”
- Finally, why would Spinoza employ three a priori (and one a posteriori) arguments in 1p11 if all he needs to establish is that God is a substance (1def6) and so, by 1p7, necessarily exists?

3b. **Objection**: Spinoza understands God’s essence and God’s existence to be one and the same thing, indicating that 1p7, in securing the necessity of the essence of substance, thereby also secures the necessity of substance itself; cf. 1p20: “God’s existence and his essence are one and the same”.
• **Reply**: God’s essence is not identical with God, cf. 2p10 where Spinoza notes that the essence of man (which by 1p15 is contained within God) cannot be a part of God’s essence. Secondly, Spinoza’s argument in 1p1-7 is a logical disentanglement of facts that are existentially indistinguishable. God’s essence and God’s existence are therefore logically but not ontologically distinct; their ontic overlap is why Spinoza, being careless, runs the two together.

3c. **Spinoza provides three a priori arguments in 1p11 to show that God’s (thickly platonic) essence is necessarily instantiated.**

• **Spinoza’s first argument**: Relies on 1ax7 (If a thing can be conceived as not existing, its essence does not involve existence) the contrapositive of which states: if an essence necessarily exists then it is necessarily instantiated
  
  o Understanding 1p7 helps correct our understanding of this argument, but it still relies crucially on the counter-intuitive and unsupported 1ax7

Spinoza’s second and third a priori arguments replace the mechanism through which his first argument infers God’s necessary existence, 1ax7, with reason and then power.

• **Spinoza’s second argument**: With Spinoza’s commitment to a particularly strong version of what Leibniz called the PSR, the causal and conceptual independence of God entails that God’s existence follows or does not follow from its essence alone. Because God’s essence is consistent, unlike that of a square-circle, there can be no reason for God’s essence not being instantiated. God’s essence is necessarily instantiated.
  
  o Note that God’s essence alone is squarely (ha!) the reason or cause for its instantiation.

• **Spinoza’s third argument**: Spinoza replaces reason with power, arguing here that the *power* within God’s essence entails its instantiation.
  
  o Here again we find strong evidence of a thick platonic conception of essences since it is the power within God’s essence alone that compels God’s existence.

4. **Why there can only be one substance**: Leibniz’s criticism of substance monism; to which (I think) Spinoza’s conception of substantial essences as thickly platonic furnishes a handy reply.

• Each attribute is (an expression of) the essence of substance.
Though the attributes, per John’s paper, are identical, Spinoza nevertheless uses the number of attributes a substance had to mark or measure its reality or power (1p9). When Spinoza asserts that the attributes are a measure of the power or reality of a substance he must mean that the attributes are only expressions of the reality of an essence.

- Recall that Spinoza characterizes the reason and power within a substantial essence as powers that are each separately sufficient to compel its instantiation. If the reason/power within a substantial essence are prior to its attributes then just as from the mere possibility of an instantiation do they entail its actuality, so too from the mere possibility of expressing that essence through any possible attribute do they actually do so.

- The reason or power that compels the instantiation of a substantial essence likewise compels its expression through every possible attribute. With this and 1p5 (In nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute) it follows that God is the only possible substance.

- Just because of what a substantial essence is, then, there can only be, from the start, one substance possessing every possible attribute.

5. **How God’s essence entails a platonic heaven:** The reason/power entailing the instantiation of God’s essence continues to compel God to express itself in more specific ways through each of its attributes. These further specific ways are the infinite and eternal modes of substance, Spinoza’s platonic heaven.

**Long-Term Project: How the reality and causal efficacy of finite expressions are better understood through a platonic interpretation of Spinoza**

- Against the acosmist and cosmist reading of finite modes, I suspect that finite modes are finite instances of infinite and eternal essences. They are not illusory, but their existence is only an incomplete reflection of their eternal essence and attribute.

- Additionally, the causal efficacy amidst particulars follows from their natures. Finite natures, in addition to being finite instances of eternal essences, are also finite instances of the various laws that follow from their attribute. There is a deep sense, then, in which eternal essences are the ultimate and continuous causes of finite behavior (their instances in natures are the causally efficacious entities amidst finite modes).

**Some Helpful Texts**
**1def1:** By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.

**1def3:** By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.

**1def6:** By God I understand ... a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence.

**1ax3:** From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow

**1ax6:** A true idea must agree with its object.

**1p5:** In nature there n be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute

**1p7:** It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist.

From **1p8s2:** [I]f men would attend to the nature of substance, they would have no doubt at all of the truth of p7. Indeed, this proposition would be an axiom for everyone ... For by substance they would understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that the knowledge of which does not require the knowledge of any other thing ... This is how we can have true ideas of modifications which do not exist; for though they do not actually exist outside the intellect, nevertheless their essences are comprehended in another in such a way that they can be conceived through it. But the truth of substances is not outside the intellect unless it is in them themselves, because they are conceived through themselves.

**1p11:** God ... necessarily exists

**1p14:** Except God, no substance can be or be conceived

**2p8:** The ideas of singular things ... that do not exist must be comprehended in God’s infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things ... are contained in God’s attributes.

**2p10:** The being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, or substance does not constitute the form of man.