

Substance, attribute (essence), and mode

Infinite substance: God or Nature

Has infinite attributes, “each of which expresses an eternal and infinite essence.”

Two basic attributes (that we know of)

Thought
Extension

The basic picture....

Only one substance (God) exists.

A particular thing is a mode in one of God's attributes.

e.g. the human mind and the human body.

Causation

- Everything must have a cause.
- Causes logically entail their effects. They necessitate them in the strictest sense possible.
- Two possibilities: cause of itself, and caused by another.
- Infinite chains of *transitive* (and finite) causes and effects.
- God as the ultimate *immanent* cause of everything.

Necessity

Everything is absolutely (logically) necessary, because

God's existence is necessary.

The existence of God logically entails (necessitates) the existence of everything else.

Some important contrasts

SUBSTANCE	MODE
in-itself	in something else
conceived through itself	conceived through another
cause of itself	caused by another
its essence involves existence	its essence does not involve existence

Another related contrast

Finite, limited	Infinite, unlimited (But note that there are some infinite modes.)
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Things that have nothing in common cannot be understood through one another.
(axiom 5)

So neither can be conceived through the other.

In which case neither can be the cause of the other.

How Spinoza establishes that God is the *only* substance.

1. First, establish that no two substances can have a common attribute. (prop. 5)
2. Then, establish that God exists and has *all possible* attributes (“infinite attributes”).
3. From these premises, it follows easily enough that God is the only substance.

How?

Whatever substance exists would have to have at least one of God's attributes.

But (by prop. 5) above, that substance could only be identical to God.

So, whatever substance exists is identical to God.

i.e. God is the only substance.

Now everything that exists is either a substance or a mode of a substance. So everything that exists other than God must be a mode in one or another of God's attributes.

How do we establish the premises of the main argument?

Proposition 5

1. If there could be two substances, they would have to differ either with regard to attribute or with regard to some mode.
2. Differing *only* with regard to modes is not possible, because modes are only affections of substance.

A substance is “prior in nature” to its affections. (p1)

Modes are conceived through substance, not substance through modes.
(def. 5)

So we ought to be able to set aside the modes and look at the substance as it is in itself, apart from its modes. To do that would be to consider “truly.”

Having set aside the modes, we ought still to be able to distinguish them.

3. So ... If there were two distinct substances they would have differ with regard to their attributes.

4. But then they don't have the same attribute.

The flaw in this argument: Suppose substance x has attributes A,B and substance y has attributes B,C. Then x differs from y with regard to its attributes, since it has a different combination of attributes. Nevertheless, x and y share an attribute, viz., B.

I see no way to repair this argument.

But let that pass.

How does the argument for the existence of God go?

Spinoza actually offers several, all of them interesting.

Spinoza's version of the Ontological Argument

1. It belongs to the nature of substance to exist. (p7)
2. The essence of whatever can be conceived as not existing does *not* involve existence. (a7)
3. So it's impossible to conceive any substance as not existing.
4. But God is a substance (one having infinite attributes). (d6)
5. So we cannot conceive that God does not exist – in other words, God necessarily exists.

Before we go on...

What kind of definition is d6? Merely stipulative? Then all we have is a hypothetical, viz., "(x) (if x is God, then x is a substance having infinite attributes)." But that will only yield a hypothetical conclusion.

So it must be a "real definition" of one of those "true and immutable essences" that Descartes talks about.

Otherwise, you could just make up any old thing, call it a substance, and Spinoza's "proof" would "prove" that it exists.

How do we prove proposition 7 (it belongs to the nature of substance to exist)?

First, prove that no substance can be produced by anything else.

Then, since everything has a cause, it will follow that substance must be cause of itself.

But if a substance is cause of itself, def. #1 tells us that its essence involves existence. (i.e. It belongs to its nature to exist.)

So how do we prove that no substance can be produced by anything else?

First, prove that no substance can be produced by a substance. Then it's an immediate corollary that a substance could be caused only by a substance. That's because substance and modes are all there is, and substance is cause of modes.

So how do we prove that no substance can be produced by a substance?

1. We've already proved that no two substances could have the same attribute. (p5)
2. p2: Two substances which have different attributes have nothing in common with one another.
3. It follows that two substances have nothing in common (by p2).
4. p3: Of things which have nothing in common with one another, one cannot be the cause of another.
5. So if there *were* more than one substance, one could not be the cause of the other.

That leaves propositions 2 and 3

p2 (nothing in common if they have different attributes) follows from d3 (substance is conceived through itself – you don't need the concept of another thing to form a concept of *it*)

p3 (if nothing in common then no causal relation) follows from a5 (if they have nothing in common, then they can't be conceived through each other) and a4 (knowledge of an effect depends on knowledge of the cause).

Putting it all together:

1. An effect is conceived through its cause. (axiom #4)
2. A substance is conceived through itself (and *not* through another). (def #3)
3. *So a substance cannot be caused by anything other than itself.*
4. *Any substance must therefore be cause of itself.*
5. That is to say, its essence must involve existence. (by def. 1)
6. Now God – i.e. Infinite substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence – is a substance.
7. *So God's essence involves existence.*
8. But (axiom 7) the essence of whatever can be conceived as not existing does not involve existence.
9. *Therefore, God cannot be conceived not to exist. In other words, God necessarily exists.*