



# Christopher Martin, "Spinoza's Argument for Substance Monism: Why There Is Only One Thing"

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**Christopher Martin.** *Spinoza's Argument for Substance Monism: Why There Is Only One Thing.* Lexington Press 2023. 134 pp. \$90.00 USD (Hardcover 978166692714-6).

Spinoza's argument for substance monism is elegant and compelling: Since substances cannot share attributes, and there necessarily exists a substance that has all the attributes, it follows that there is one and only one substance (cf. 14, 65). As Christopher Martin notes (76), the conclusion of this argument, Proposition 14 ('Except God, no substance can be or be conceived'), is probably the most important proposition of the *Ethics*. Since many of the distinctive doctrines of the *Ethics* flow from this proposition, Martin's book thus explains and defends the core of Spinoza's philosophy.

The Introduction and the first two chapters cover some of the background, methods, concepts, and principles necessary for understanding Spinoza's argument. Martin uses the term *speculative metaphysics* for Spinoza's method of starting with definitions and axioms and logically deducing substantive metaphysical conclusions regarding the nature and structure of reality. One of Spinoza's key principles in carrying this out is the *principle of sufficient reason* or the PSR, the unrestricted version of which says that there must be a cause, reason, or explanation for the existence or non-existence of anything or any fact. Next up are what might be thought of as the building blocks of Spinoza's metaphysics. One way that Spinoza differs from his philosophical predecessors regarding *substance* is the degree to which he emphasizes the absolute causal and *conceptual independence* of substance. Substances have *modes*—temporary modifications of substances. A vexed question in Spinoza scholarship concerns the status of *attributes*: 'what the understanding perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence' (E1def4). The wording of the definition has led to the objectivist/subjectivist controversy over the status of attributes: Do they exist outside the intellect as real and distinct things, or do they exist only in the intellect? Martin holds the dispute does not have to be resolved to understand the argument for substance monism. (See pp. 34-36.)

Martin begins Chapter 3 'Why God Must Exist' with a brief review of Anselm's and Descartes' ontological arguments. Anselm's argument is that since the idea of God is the idea of the greatest possible being, it is contradictory to suppose that God does not exist because then it would be possible to conceive of a being greater than God—one that does exist. Descartes criticizes Anselm for not establishing first that the idea of a perfect being is not a creation of the mind, but rather represents a 'true and immutable nature which cannot help but exist' (46). Martin sees Spinoza's



ontological arguments as improvements over Descartes' because Descartes seems to just stipulate the mind-independence of God's nature while Spinoza provides arguments (E1p7 and E1p8) that God's nature exists outside our thinking (51-55). Only in E1p11 is the transition made from the immutable nature of substance to the necessary and actual existence of God. Martin identifies three formulations of the ontological argument in Spinoza. The first is the most traditional. It begins by assuming that God does not exist, but this implies that God's essence does not include existence, which by E1p7 is absurd. The second uses the PSR to conclude that since there cannot be a sufficient reason for God not existing, it follows God exists. The third uses Spinoza's concept of *power*: 'since being able to exist is power, it follows that the more reality belongs to the nature of a thing, the more power it has, of itself, to exist' (58). This chapter provides an interesting comparison of these philosophical giants of the ontological argument.

In the next chapter Martin considers some challenges to the argument for substance monism and addresses them in Chapter 5. Perhaps the most serious objection concerns the argument for E1p5 that two substances cannot share an attribute. As presented, this argument is notoriously weak and unconvincing. Spinoza accepts the *identity of indiscernibles* (E1p4) and thus two substances would have to be distinguished by a difference in attributes or modes. In the part of the demonstration of Proposition 5 dealing with attributes, Spinoza simply says: 'If only by a difference in their attributes, then it will be conceded that there is only one [substance] of the same attribute' (E1p5dem). What is now known as the Leibniz objection points out that this works only if you assume a substance can have only one attribute. But if, as Spinoza insists just a few propositions later, substances can have multiple (indeed infinite) attributes, then apparently two substances could be distinguished by attributes and yet share an attribute. Just suppose the first substance has attributes X and Y while the second has X and Z, thus sharing an attribute while being distinguished (cf. 75).

Martin finds the case for Proposition 5 so 'deeply flawed' that he asks: 'Can we reconstruct the argument [for substance monism] in a way that does not rely on E1p5?' (91). For Martin, such a reconstruction involves emphasizing two elements of Spinoza's metaphysics. First, we have the conceptual independence of both substances and the *natures* of substances. It is reasonable to treat 'nature' (*essentia*) as more or less interchangeable with 'essence,' that which is expressed by a substance's attributes. As Martin puts it, '... the nature or essence of a substance is its most basic or fundamental way of being' (32-33). The crucial point here is that the essence or nature of a

substance exists independently of the actual substance itself. (See again the discussion on pp. 50-55 and see pp. 93-97.) The second element is *emanant causation*: ‘a cause whose effect follows continuously from and without any loss of being to its cause’ (89). Martin thinks of the attributes of a substance as emanating from the nature of the substance, like a scent emanating from a flower (81). An extremely compressed rendition of the reconstruction would go something like this. Conceptual independence requires that the nature of any substance is infinite: if it were finite then it would have to be limited by something of the same nature (cf. E1Def 2); but then it would have something in common with that nature, and so the nature would not be conceptually independent. If infinite natures are thought of as emanating their attributes, then any such nature will emanate every possible attribute. Thus, if there were two natures, they would be indistinguishable as both would emanate every attribute, which is to say they would emanate the same attributes. But this runs afoul of the identity of indiscernibles and is thus impossible; and so there can be at most one infinite nature, and therefore at most one substance. (For the full argument see 93-95.)

Martin’s reconstruction is ingenious but an interpretation of the opening argument of the *Ethics* more faithful to the text would be preferable. What is needed to support Proposition 5 is an argument that two substances cannot be distinguished by a difference in attributes while sharing an attribute. One attempt begins with lightly paraphrased versions of three of Spinoza’s definitions. E1def3: *substance* is what can be conceived without conceiving anything else. E1def4: *attribute* is what the intellect conceives as constituting the essence of substance. E2def2: the *essence* of a thing includes that which if it is conceived, the thing is conceived; and if the thing is conceived, it is conceived. Now assume for *reductio* that S1 and S2 are substances that share an attribute X but are distinguished because S1 has attribute Y and S2 has Z. To conceive of S1, X must be conceived (E1def4 and E2def2). If X is conceived, S2 is thereby conceived (E1def4 and E2def2). Thus, if S1 is conceived, then S2 must be conceived, which contradicts E1def3. It might be objected that this argument uses a definition from Part 2 of the *Ethics*, but of course Spinoza could have listed all his definitions and axioms at the beginning of the book without logically changing anything. The situation used in the argument just unpacks why Spinoza holds that substances cannot be distinguished by attributes while sharing attributes. At the same time, it shows that the Leibniz counterexample is not a coherent possibility. While Martin is right that Proposition 5 is problematic, it is arguable that the argument for substance monism can be saved without amputating it.

The final Chapter rounds out the discussion by highlighting some of the implications of monism for modes and the rest of the universe. Here Martin addresses the status of individual things (cats or sugar cubes), and whether they are best conceived as objects ('quasi-substances') or as properties of God-Nature. He concludes, though it seems counterintuitive, that the best interpretation is that they are properties. There are ethical implications too. Since human beings are not special or unique items, Spinoza's non-anthropocentric system makes room for a robust environmental ethics. His ontological holism also provides the foundation for enlightened egoism: one's own well-being is generally enhanced by attending to the interests of others.

Martin's book is a model for philosophical scholarship. It is a superb introduction to Spinoza and to metaphysics itself, and even seasoned Spinoza scholars will find much to admire. Everyone interested in Spinoza will want this attractive volume on their bookshelf.

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