

# Spinoza's Mode-identity Thesis

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From: *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981), pp. 573–584

If Spinoza's doctrine that my mind and my body are one and the same thing is construed very literally indeed and the consequences of that interpretation are followed through, things start falling into place. The scholium to proposition 7 in Part 2 of the *Ethics* can be fully explained, a respectable Spinozistic argument for substance monism can at last be mounted, the relationship of substance monism to attribute dualism in Spinoza can be set out explicitly, and—for good measure—his puzzling definition of 'attribute' turns out to be exactly what he ought to have said. In this paper I shall argue for these claims. They are purely exegetical: the doctrines I shall attribute to Spinoza are not offered as true or even as philosophically instructive, but it matters whether my interpretation is right. If it is, it frees us to learn from other aspects of the *Ethics* without an inhibiting sense that our learning may be coincidental because there is so much mystery, so much we radically don't understand, at the heart of the work.

## 1. Three doctrines

The thesis of Spinoza's which I shall take as central is one of a trio, of which the first is this:

**A:** There is a one-one relation between physical items and mental items, mapping similarities within one

realm onto similarities in the other and mapping causal chains within one realm onto causal chains in the other.

Paired with any physical item *x* is the mental item Spinoza calls 'the idea of *x*.' Thesis A says that if *x* resembles *y* then the idea of *x* resembles the idea of *y* and that if *x* causes *y* then the idea of *x* causes the idea of *y*. In Spinoza's words: 'The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things' (2p7), and: 'Whether we conceive nature under the attribute of extension or under the attribute of thought. . . , we shall find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes, i.e. that the same things follow one another in the same way' (2p7s).

The second member of the trio is my principal topic. It is this:

**B:** Each particular physical thing or event is a mental thing or event, and vice versa.

That is, there is not just a parallelism but an identity—Popper has called it 'parallelism with intervening distance = zero'. As Spinoza says: 'A mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing' (2p7s). He calls particulars 'modes' because he thinks that they are adjectival on an underlying substance; I'll return to that in a moment.

The third doctrine to be highlighted is Spinoza's substance monism:

**C:** The physical world is the mental world; i.e. there is just one ultimate substance and it is both extended and thinking.

As Spinoza says: 'The thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, which is comprehended now under this attribute, now under that' (2p7s).

## 2. How they are inter-related

In the order of justification, I think Spinoza starts with A. His official argument for C (1p14d) is so weak that one couldn't care about this part of Spinoza's work if it had to rely on that. His official argument for A (2p7d) is also worthless, but we can replace it by something better. The following had a place in Spinoza's mind, I believe, but not in his explicit demonstrations because it couldn't be given even a vague appearance of deductive rigor.

Confronted by evidence of regular associations between much of the mental realm and some of the physical, and inheriting Descartes's confidence that there is no logical flow in either direction, which Spinoza took to entail that there is no causal flow either, he conjectured a systematic parallelism, with an appearance of inter-action because the causal chains in one realm are matched by causal chains in the other. Furthermore, his hatred of complexity and special cases and unanswered Why-questions led him to suppose the parallelism to be perfectly general, with every physical item having a counterpart in the realm of thought. For help in seeing how hypothesis could be other than crazy, read Thomas Nagel's 'Panpsychism' in his *Mortal Questions* (1979).

So much for A the parallelism doctrine. How do B and C relate to it? Well, first, how do they relate to each other?

There is no entailment either way, and Spinoza doesn't say there is. He writes: '[C] The thinking substance and the extended substance are one and same substance etc. So also [B] a mode of extension and the idea that mode are one and the same thing etc.' He could be using 'so' (Latin: *sic*) inferentially, as in 'He cried, so she cried too', but it is more likely to be merely comparative, as in 'He cried and so did she'. I conjecture that Spinoza is *comparing* C with B, each of which is an identity proposition with extension on one side and thought on the other.

He is also laying them side by side in preparation for inferring A from their conjunction. After saying '[C] so also [B]', he continues: 'Therefore, [A] whether we conceive nature under the attribute of extension or under the attribute of thought. . . we shall find one and the same order etc.' (2p7s). He could be inferring A from B alone, but I hope not; for it certainly doesn't follow from B without the aid of C.

In this passage Spinoza cannot be trying to convince us of A by deriving it from B and C, since he has made no attempt to show that B is true. I submit that he is arguing for B on the grounds that it is needed to explain the truth of A, which he takes to be independently credible. As for C: he may think that he has established that already; it is hard to be sure how Spinoza viewed his most ramshackle demonstrations. But if we can provide for (C) substance monism an undisgraceful argument whose premises were available to Spinoza, it is worthwhile to do so, and reasonable to conjecture that the argument had some place in Spinoza's own thought. Now we have such an argument: C is recommendable on the grounds that it, like B, is an essential ingredient in the best explanation for the truth of A the parallelism thesis.

The big task is to show what B means, and how it can collaborate with C in implying A.

### 3. What Spinoza means by 'mode'

These physical and mental particulars referred to in B are *modes*, that is, ways that the universe is, or states of it. What could a philosopher mean who said that a pain or a pebble is a state of the universe, or is adjectival on the one thinking or extended substance? The answer is not obvious, and some commentators, having failed to find it, have concluded that Spinoza did not mean what he said, had deprived the term 'mode' of half of its usual meaning, and was not saying that finite particulars are states of the universe.<sup>1</sup> But he *was*, and I have shown elsewhere what he meant so far as extended particulars are concerned.<sup>2</sup> The central idea is that the basic extended item is space, the so-called occupants of which get their reality from facts about qualitative variety among the regions space. The existence now of a spherical pebble surrounded by vacuum is space's now having a spherical thick region surrounded by a thin region. (Of course 'thick' and 'thin' are place-holders for more complex predicates.) In general, the existence of what we call 'things in space' is space's manifesting certain patterns of qualitative variety, and the movement of things through space is the altering of these patterns through time. In the movement of a thaw across a countryside, there need be no object that moves: there is just a qualitative alteration, a varying of which bits of the countryside are frozen and which melted. Analogously, according to Spinoza's metaphysic of extension, what we call the movement of a body is really, deep down, an alteration in which bits of space are thick and which are thin.

This doesn't quite imply that a pebble is a 'mode' or state of space: you can't throw or crush or swallow a state

of something. Really, since Spinoza lacked the resource of Ramsey sentences,<sup>3</sup> he ought not to have implied any answer to the question: What basically *is* a pebble? But he is entitled to say that all the facts about the pebble are facts about how space is, expressible in propositions that don't refer to the pebble but merely attribute various states and alterations to space. Thus, from Spinoza's doctrine that *physical things are modes of a single extended substance*, I rescue the largest fraction that might be true, namely the thesis that *facts about physical things are predications on a single extended substance*. That's enough for present purposes.

So much for extended particulars. What about mental ones? Here, as almost always, Spinoza thought things out in terms of the physical world and then in effect said, hopefully, '... and similarly *mutatis mutandis* for the mental realm'. I don't think he worked separately on his doctrine that my mind and yours are 'modes' of a single thinking substance.

### 4. What the mode-identity thesis (B) means

If we are to take as literally as we can Spinoza's assertion that my body is a mode of the one extended substance, and my mind a mode of the one thinking substance, mustn't we take his thesis B to say that they are one and the same mode? Well, there is another possible reading. Some writers credit Spinoza with holding Geach's view that x may be the same F as y but not the same G, even though (Gx & Gy); and that would allow thesis B to mean that x is the same *thing* but not the same *mode* as the idea of x. But it would only permit that reading, and wouldn't enforce it; so even if Spinoza were a Geachian about identity (and I'm sure he wasn't), I would

<sup>1</sup> Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1968), p. 63; and, more clearly and capably, E. M. Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1969), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> 'Spinoza's Vacuum Argument', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5 (1980), pp. 391-399.

<sup>3</sup> F. P. Ramsey, 'Theories', in his *Foundations*, D. H. Mellor, ed. (Humanities Press, 1977).

still want to read B as asserting that a physical thing and the idea of it are a single mode: that interpretation brings too many benefits to be lightly given up.

The facts about the existence of my body, I think Spinoza is saying, are most fundamentally expressed in a proposition of the form

The extended world [space] is F  
and the facts about the existence of my mind in one of the form

The thinking world is G  
and the mode-identity thesis is the proposition that  $F = G$ . That is, what it takes for an extended world to contain my body is the very same property that is needed for a thinking realm to contain my mind; just as what it takes for a female to be a sister is the very same property that is needed for a male to be a brother. More generally, any fact about a physical item  $x$  is expressible in a proposition of the form

The extended world is F  
for a value of F such that

The thinking world is F  
is a fact about the idea of  $x$  if there is any such item as the idea of  $x$ . In every instance of the parallelism a single property or mode F is instantiated by both the thinking and the extended worlds.

So B says that propositions of the form 'The extended world is F' map onto propositions of the form 'The thinking world is F': all the Fs that are combinable with extension are also combinable with thought; for any proposition about either realm there is a corresponding proposition about the other; and so if there is a parallelism such as A says there is, this gives us a way of handling it, an account of what is going on in each instance of it.

But we don't yet have anything implying that there is a parallelism. For that we need to be able to say that *facts*

of the form 'The extended world is F' map onto *facts* of the form 'The thinking world is F,' i.e. that the B-mapping preserves truth values. Well, Spinoza could bluntly assert that this is the case, offering it as a conjecture to explain the truth of A the parallelism thesis; but that conjecture looks arbitrary—it cries out for explanation at least as urgently as did A itself. To satisfy his own demands on himself, Spinoza needs something that implies A without itself looking like a brute fact.

This is provided by conjoining B the mode-identity thesis with C the thesis that there is only one world, only one ultimate subject of predication. B lets us put all propositions into pairs:

The extended world is F; The thinking world is F  
and C transforms each such pair into one of the form  
The world is extended and F; The world is thinking  
and F

and that, so long as the world is both extended and thinking, yields the desired mapping not just of propositions onto propositions but of facts onto facts. Something that is both extended and thinking must be (extended and F) if and only if it is (thinking and F).

That is the picture I said I would draw. Substance monism is to be accepted as an essential ingredient in the best possible explanation for the parallelism, which in turn Spinoza thinks must obtain if good rationalistic sense is to be made of the observed facts without supposing causal flow between the mental and physical realms.

## 5. Unabstractable differentiae

The whole weight of this construction rests on the notion of a differentia that cuts across both of the categories or 'attributes', thought and extension. Spinoza sometimes seems to say that there can be no qualitative overlap between

the extended and thinking realms, but according to me he really holds that there is an infinitely rich overlap. Indeed, all the qualitative detail is the same—it's exactly the same story except for one systematic difference, namely that in one case every predicate has the form 'extended and. . .' while in the other every predicate has the form 'thinking and. . .'.

Spinoza produces no examples of these differentiae. He must hold that none could be given, i.e. that nobody could abstract from (thinking and F) the thought of F on its own, as we can abstract from the thought of sister the sexless thought of sibling. If the differentiae could be thought about in isolation from the attributes, we could perform inferences such as:

The world is (thinking and F)

The world is extended

*therefore*

The world is (extended and F)

which is to infer, by sheer logic, all the facts about my body from all the facts about my mind in conjunction with the bare premise that there is a physical world. Spinoza is committed to there being a strong enough quarantine between the 'attributes' to make such an inference impossible.

If F is unabstractable, however, then no one can lift it out of one composite and build it into another, which is what has to be done for the above inference to go through. So the unabstractability of the Fs serves to insulate thought from extension: that flow between them which Spinoza indifferently thinks of as logical and as causal requires a kind of reasoning that cannot be performed.

It is natural to protest that even if no one can perform the inference, the logical-causal connection it expresses still exists. But that was not Spinoza's view. He ties '*x causes y*' to '*y can be explained through x*', apparently meaning that

the explanation could be given by someone. Immediately after presenting C and B, and then deducing A from them, he links this up with the insulation between thought and extension (I here streamline the passage a little, but without distorting it, I think):

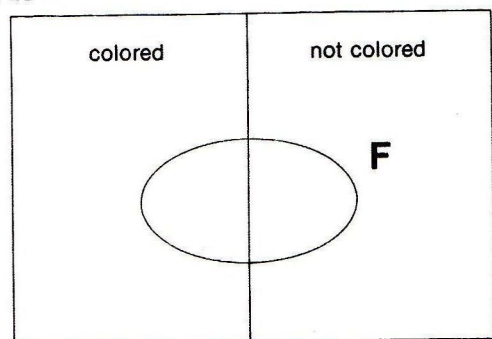
When I said before that it is only the universe *qua* thinking thing that causes an idea, and only the universe *qua* extended thing that causes an extended item, this was only because the inherent being of an idea *can be perceived* only through another mode of thinking, as its immediate cause, and that mode again through another, and so on to infinity. Hence, so long as things are *considered* as modes of thinking, *we must explain* the order of the whole of nature or the connection of causes through the attribute of thought alone. And insofar as they are *considered* as modes of extension, the order of the whole of nature *must be explained* through the attribute of extension alone (2p7s; emphases added).

This fits my interpretation perfectly. Having implied that there is a rich system of trans-attribute differentiae, Spinoza sees that he must reconcile this with his earlier denial of logico-causal flow between the attributes. He does so by explaining that he was speaking only of a flow that 'can be perceived,' a flow in terms of which 'we' could 'explain' things. The barrier between the attributes, he says, prevents anyone's actually reasoning from one to the other. This allows there to be differentiae that are manifested under both attributes, so long as nobody can filter them out from their attributes and make them carry an explanatory flow from one attribute across to the other.

## 6. Examples?

Spinoza aside, we know that there are unabstractable differentiae. Taking colors in terms of their sensed appearances rather than their physical bases, we have no good answer to the question: What do you have to add to a thing's being colored to make it red? We cannot lay our tongues to an *F* such that being red is being colored and *F*, as being a brother is being male and a sibling. And there are other examples: what, for example, do you have to add to a thing's being extended to make it circular?

To be fully analogous to Spinoza's trans-attribute differentiae, the *F* that picks out the red things would have also to pick out some subclass of the noncolored things, thus:



with the left half of the oval marking off the red things, and the right half marking off the whatnots—the noncolored things that differ from other noncolored things in just the way that red things differ from other colored things.

Is there a value of *F* which answers to these specifications? We can concoct values that fit without involving real unity among the items falling under *F*—for example by letting *F* be ‘...is red if colored and otherwise is divisible by 2’,

which picks out just the red things and the even numbers. But that is not interesting, because there is no *property* corresponding to the *class* of red-things-and-even-numbers; and, if there were, that would presumably be because there is a property for every class, which would render thesis B—and possibly also A—trivially true. Some philosophers take that view of properties; I don't; but what matters just now is that Spinoza didn't. Indeed, he thought that even classes that don't look arbitrary often have no properties corresponding to them—e.g. classes marked off by our biological terminology. I am not optimistic about the chances of rendering B the mode-identity thesis true but not trivial. But then I am not under pressure to accept it because I am not much inclined to accept A the parallelism thesis.

Still, I would like to increase your tolerance of B by showing you instances of the sort of conceptual structure it postulates. Unfortunately, there is no chance of my being able to do that. I can offer colored/red as the locus of an unabstractable differentia, and I could define a sense of ‘whatnot’ such that uncolored/whatnot was also the locus of one; but how could I possibly show it to be the same differentia in each case? For that I would have to name or otherwise isolate the differentia, so that we could lift it out from colored and watch it move across to uncolored.

The situation may be even worse than that: what prevents me from making you tolerant of thesis B may doom its chances of being true. For it may be that, with such pairs as colored/red and extended/circular, the differentia cannot be abstracted precisely because it operates only on that genus and does not cut into its complement. If that is, so, then B cannot be true, since it requires unabstractable differentiae that do operate across the boundaries of genera.

Well, I said at the outset that I aimed to explain part of Spinoza's thought, not to defend it. The explanation is worth

having, I think. It removes all the mystery from 2p7s; it enables Spinoza's substance monism to interlock intelligibly with A his parallelism thesis; and it dissolves two other stubborn impediments to understanding him, as I now show by way of conclusion.

## 7. A problem about attributes

Spinoza says that thought and extension are 'attributes' of a single substance; and there is a problem about how that is possible, by his lights. He seems to equate a thing's 'attribute' with its 'essence' (Id4), and he inherited Descartes's view of a thing's 'essence' as its basic nature, the property of it of which all its other properties are special cases. For instance, any fact about an extended thing is a fact about *how* it is extended.

The account assumes that each substance has only one such basic property, but we might broaden it to make room for more than one: we could say that T and E are two attributes or essences of a single substance x if all the facts about x can be cleanly split into two groups, those involving T and those involving E. This looks all right on the surface, but there is a real problem about it. If attributes are basic as Spinoza seems to say they are—if they represent rock bottom in the description of the substance's nature—then what content can there be to the proposition that one substance has two of them? Given that each is instantiated, what difference can it make whether they are instantiated by one substance rather than by one substance each?

This might be answered with the help of a notion of sheer identity, unaccompanied by anything of a qualitative sort. That is what Leibniz thought he had. In response to Locke's charge that 'the idea of pure substance in general'

is useless because empty, Leibniz replied that although it had been set up so as to have no descriptive content it still has a use, namely in supporting 'the conception of "the same thing"—e.g. it is the same thing which understands and wills, which imagines and reasons'.<sup>1</sup> But few of us would agree with this; I am sure that Spinoza wouldn't; and in any case even Leibniz admits that his concept of 'the same thing' appears to be thin (*mince*)—it could not meet Spinoza's need for something supporting the infinitely rich qualitative and causal parallelism between the mental and physical realms. In a nutshell: Spinoza needs something very contentful holding the two attributes together in the single substance; but his definition of 'attribute' in terms of 'essence'—and his understanding of essence in terms of what is basic, what encloses all the rest—seems to prohibit their being held together by anything at all. This problem has been well known since before the *Ethics* was published. I think I can solve it.

## 8. What the definition of 'attribute' means

I have suppressed a fact about the definition of 'attribute'. Spinoza does not say that an attribute is the essence of a substance, but just that it is '*what the intellect perceives* of a substance, *as if* constituting its essence.' Or it could be '*... as constituting its essence*', but 'as if' is the better reading: Spinoza is here distinguishing metaphysical reality from a sort of intellectual illusion.

Wolfson saw that much, but misunderstood what the illusion was supposed to be.<sup>2</sup> He took Spinoza to be saying that really there is only one attribute, and that our intellect mistakenly perceive thought and extension as distinct from each other. Many critics have pointed out that that is

<sup>1</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (New York: Cambridge, 1981), p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1934), pp. 142–157.

indefensible,<sup>1</sup> but in rejecting his view of what the illusion is supposed to be, they have calamitously denied that Spinoza is explaining 'attribute' in terms of any kind of illusion at all. There is a reading of the definition which makes them right, defining an attribute as *what an infallible intellect would perceive as* the essence of a substance: there is nothing about illusion there, since that is just a long-winded way of saying that an attribute is the essence of a substance. But, on that reading of it, the definition of attribute is pointlessly, vexatiously long-winded, dragging in 'intellect' for no good reason—or none that has ever been adduced by the friends of this interpretation.

There are our two problems: How can Spinoza give content to the assertion that the two attributes belong to a single substance? and What does he mean by the definition of 'attribute'? Both are solved by the idea of an intellectual illusion, but not the one alleged by Wolfson. Spinoza does hold that thought and extension are *really distinct*, but not that they are *really fundamental*. He regards a substance's attribute not as an absolutely basic fact about it but only as the most basic fact about it that anybody could direct his thought on. The rock-bottom facts about a substance concern those differentiae which can be combined with either attribute (that being what makes them more basic than the attributes); and they give content to C the substance-identity thesis, letting it carry that infinite system of differentiae which generates the whole truth about the physical world except for the fact that it is physical and the whole truth about the mental world except that it is mental. But since these differentiae are not available to any intellect in abstraction from one or other attribute, each attribute is *perceived as if* it were fundamental. The intellectual operation that would

show it not to be so, namely, the thinking of the differentiae on their own, is impossible. (Spinoza doesn't elsewhere link attribute with essence in terms of what 'intellect perceives,' but neither does he imply that an attribute is an essence: his usual formula (Id6, 1p19d, 1p29s) is that each attribute expresses the universe's essence, which has a clear meaning on my interpretation and not on any other that I know.)

Spinoza cannot be saying that we believe the attributes to be basic and the differentiae not to be; for he doesn't have those beliefs. His position must be that our perceiving the attributes as basic is a sort of illusion which need not actually deceive us. He discusses undeceptive illusions elsewhere in the *Ethics* (4p1s), but I am not offering to ground the definition of 'attribute' in Spinoza's official theories of ignorance, error, and (mis)perception. On the contrary, those are so inadequate that they couldn't support anything worthwhile.

One last point: the illusion or misperceiving-as is not confined to humans. The thesis is not that our intellects are stunted, and so that the abstraction might be performed by abler beings than us for whom, therefore, the dualistic barrier between the attributes wouldn't exist. On the contrary, Spinoza holds that an attribute will be perceived as basic even by an intellect that is *infinitus* (2p7s)—not 'infinite' in our sense but rather 'unlimited'. This is the 'unlimited intellect of God', i.e. the intellectual aspect of the entire universe, the totality of all the understanding there is to be had. (It's better, in English, not to call Spinoza's universe 'God,' because that name tempts us to use 'he' and thus to personalize the universe. Spinoza is sure that it isn't personal, and he doesn't have to steer clear of personal pronouns since Latin has none.) The thesis must rather be

<sup>1</sup> One of the best is Francis S. Haserot, 'Spinoza's Definition of Attribute', a 1953 paper reprinted in S. P. Kashap, ed., *Studies in Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 28–42.



that the trans-attribute differentiae are inherently incapable of being thought in isolation from the attributes. I don't think Spinoza had any opinions about what could explain this fact about them. He seems to have held this position

not because he could see in detail what could make it true but simply because he thought it was needed for that A-B-C structure which does the best possible job of making good, rationalistic, dualistic sense of the unavoidable facts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have been greatly helped by comments on an earlier version of this paper by my colleagues Larry Hardin and Ronald Messerich.