

# Spinoza, the No Shared Attribute thesis, and the Principle of Sufficient Reason\*

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## 1 Introduction

According to Spinoza, ‘In Nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute’ (IP5).<sup>1</sup> Call this the ‘No Shared Attribute’ thesis,<sup>2</sup> hereafter NSA. It is widely recognised (indeed, virtually undeniable) that NSA plays a crucial role in Spinoza’s argument in *The Ethics* for his version of substance monism—for the view that there exists only one substance, God or Nature—although there is some dispute concerning just what role that thesis plays and just how the relevant argument should be understood. Unfortunately, however, the case that Spinoza offers in support of NSA faces a notorious objection, dating back at least to Leibniz.<sup>3</sup>

The Leibnizian objection, which I shall explain shortly, is often presented as decisive. Faced with it, Steven Nadler, for example, concludes unequivocally, ‘Leibniz is right’.<sup>4</sup> In this short paper, having offered a brief reconstruction of Spinoza’s argument for substance monism emphasising the important part that NSA plays in it, I shall suggest what I think is a novel response to that objection, one that is faithful both to the spirit of Spinoza’s work and to the letter.

Of course, other commentators have offered various Spinozistic responses to the Leibnizian objection with varying degrees of confidence and conviction,<sup>5</sup> but it is not my aim here to survey and assess them. Rather than show its merits by contrasting it critically with competing suggestions, I hope to motivate the defence of NSA that I offer on Spinoza's behalf by showing it to be consonant with both Spinoza's overall metaphysics and his general philosophical orientation, in particular his commitment to the guiding Principle of Sufficient Reason, hereafter PSR.<sup>6</sup>

Put simply, PSR holds that there are no brute facts; according to it, if it is fact that *p*, there must be some explanation for this fact. Spinoza treats PSR as axiomatic: 'What cannot be conceived through another, must be conceived through itself' (IA2). He draws out the implication of this, in a more explicit endorsement of PSR, when he writes, 'For each thing there must be assigned a cause, *or* reason, both for its existence and for its nonexistence' (IP11d). As I hope to show, it is PSR that ultimately lies behind NSA.

## **2 The Leibnizian objection**

In short, Spinoza's argument for substance monism runs as follows:<sup>7</sup>

- (1) There cannot be two or more substances with the same attribute.
- (2) There necessarily is a substance with infinite attributes.
- (3) Therefore, there necessarily is only one substance.

(1) is, of course, just NSA. It is worth noting that NSA also props up (2), which Spinoza reaches in IP11: 'God, *or* a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists'. Very roughly, the argument for (2) proceeds as follows. A substance with infinite attributes, i.e. God, *necessarily exists* since, as IP7 tells us, 'it pertains to the nature of a substance to

exist'. The reason a substance must 'be the cause of itself', according to Spinoza, is that no other substance could be its cause (IP6). No other substance could be its cause because one thing can cause another only if they have something in common (IP3) and, given NSA, different substances have nothing in common.

If God or the substance with infinite attributes did not exist, Spinoza adds, then, given PSR, there would have to be a 'reason *or* cause' for this (IP11d). There is nothing contradictory in the nature of a substance with infinite attributes, so the reason or cause for God's non-existence would have to be another substance. That other substance cannot differ in nature from God, since things that have nothing in common, Spinoza insists, cannot causally influence one another (IP3). But it cannot be a substance of the same nature, since, given NSA, no two substances share in their natures. Moreover, one might add with Spinoza, 'that very supposition would concede that God exists' (IP11d).

It is evident from this brief overview that NSA plays an indispensable and wide-ranging part in Spinoza's argument for substance monism, and no doubt if one were to dig deeper, one would find that it plays a still more multifaceted role.

In light of its importance, one would hope that Spinoza has to hand a compelling argument in support of NSA. The 'demonstration' he offers runs as follows:

If there were two or more distinct substances, they would have to be distinguished from one another either by a difference in their attributes, or by a difference in their modes (by IP4). If only by a difference in their attributes, then it will be conceded that there is only one of the same attribute. But if by a difference in their affections, then since a substance is prior in nature to its affections (by IP1), if the affections are put to one side and [the substance] is considered in itself [...] one cannot be

conceived to be distinguished from another, that is (by IP14), there cannot be many, but only one, q.e.d. (IP5d)

Grant that Spinoza is entitled to ‘put to one side’ the affections or modes as means of differentiating substances that share an attribute. Still, the Leibnizian objects to Spinoza’s ‘demonstration’ on the grounds that the argument only works on the assumption that each substance has a single attribute. To appreciate this, consider how one might unpack Spinoza’s rather tersely expressed point on the issue of distinguishing substances of the same nature ‘by a difference in their attributes’.

Suppose that there are two substances, A and B. If A and B both possess attribute X, *and assuming that neither A nor B have any additional attributes*, then there is nothing that distinguishes them. In that case, A *is* B and there are not two substances of the same attribute. If A and B are to be genuinely distinguishable in virtue of their attributes, then A and B must have distinct attributes. Accordingly, suppose that A has X while B has a different attribute, Y. In that case, *and assuming that neither A nor B have any additional attributes*, there are not two substances of the same attribute. Either way, Spinoza concludes, there cannot be distinct substances that share an attribute.

By way of response, the Leibnizian points out that one might reject the operative assumption and allow instead that each substance might have more than one attribute. In that case, two substances, A and B, could share an attribute, X, but be distinguishable in virtue of the fact that B has a further attribute, Y, which A lacks. This would be an instance of distinct substances with the same attribute, contrary to NSA.

Moreover, the objection continues, Spinoza himself allows that a substance might have more than one attribute. It ‘is far from absurd’, he says, ‘to attribute many

attributes to one substance' (IP10). Indeed, in arriving at (2) above, Spinoza does precisely this, attributing to a substance *infinite* attributes (see IP11)! Hence, he has no resources to deny the possibility of the scenario just sketched.

Spinoza has, the Leibnizian concludes, not given us a reason to accept NSA and cannot do so, unless he relinquishes other claims that one can safely assume he will not be prepared to give up.

If the Leibnizian objection cannot be answered, then Spinoza's commitment to substance monism, and with it his entire philosophical edifice, would appear to stand on shaky foundations, or to stand on no foundations at all.

### **3      A Spinozistic reply**

In this section, I shall offer a response to the Leibnizian objection, drawing only on Spinozistic resources, indeed, drawing only upon considerations to be found in the remarks in *The Ethics* that precede Spinoza's introduction of NSA (IP5).

To start with, assume that the kind of situation sketched in the Leibnizian objection obtains. There are two substances, A and B. A has attribute X and B has attributes X and Y. PSR, to which Spinoza is resolutely committed, demands an explanation as to why A lacks Y. There can be only two possible explanations: (i) A's own nature prevents it from possessing Y; (ii) the nature of another substance prevents A from having Y. I shall consider each in turn.

(i) For Spinoza, A's own nature could *not* prevent it from possessing Y for the following reasons. First, A's nature is constituted by its having X (cf. ID4). But, *ex hypothesi*, B also has X, and since B's having X does not prevent it from having Y too, then A's having X could not prevent it from having Y too.

Second, suppose (as was just ruled out) that A's having X *could* prevent its having Y. In that case, Y could not be an attribute. Attributes, for Spinoza, are conceptually (and so causally) independent of one another (D3 and D4, cf. IP10d). If one could only explain what it is for a substance to have, or lack, an alleged 'attribute', Y, by reference to that substance's possession of another attribute, X, then Y would be 'conceived through' X, in which case (by ID5) Y would in fact be a mode, not an attribute at all. If, however, Y is not an attribute but a mode, the Leibnizian situation does not obtain.

In effect, with respect to (i), the Leibnizian faces a dilemma. On the one hand, if X and Y are genuinely explanatorily independent of one another, as is required in order that they qualify as attributes, then A's having X could not prevent A from having Y or explain why A lacks Y (cf. IP3). On the other hand, if X and Y are not explanatorily independent of one another, then at least one of X and Y is not an attribute, in which case the Leibnizian situation does not obtain.

In response to the first point, the Leibnizian might be tempted to respond that A's nature might prevent its having Y if A were to have another attribute, Z, which B lacks, and which precludes the possession of Y. But it is straightforward to see that this suggestion falls foul of a version of the dilemma just sketched. On the one hand, if Y and Z really are attributes, and so explanatorily independent, then A's possessing Z cannot be responsible for A's not having Y. On the other hand, if A's possessing Z is responsible for A's not having Y, then Y is not an attribute. Hence, no part of A's nature not shared by B could explain why A lacks an attribute B has.

(ii) For Spinoza, the nature of another substance, C, could *not* prevent A from having Y. In order to do so, C would need a further attribute, Z, not shared by A, which would prevent A from having Y.

In the first instance, and quite apart from PSR-inspired calls for an explanation as to why A should lack Z, this proposal faces the familiar dilemma. Either A's lacking Y is to be explained by reference to C's having Z, in which case Y cannot be an attribute, or Y is an attribute, in which case A's lacking Y cannot be explained by reference to C's having Z.

In addition, (ii) faces a more serious problem that did not arise with respect to (i). Suppose that C's possessing Z prevents A's possessing Y. In that case, one could not grasp the nature of A—that is, understand why A is as it is—without reference to the nature of C. But that would disqualify A from being a substance since, for Spinoza, a substance 'is in itself and is conceived through itself' (ID4). So, if A should turn out not really to be a substance, it evidently could not be a substance that shares an attribute with another substance.

(i) and (ii) appear to exhaust the possible explanations for why A has only attribute X while B has both attributes X and Y. In the absence of such explanations, the Leibnizian would have to accept A's lacking Y as a brute fact, one that does not admit of explanation. However, according to PSR, to which Spinoza subscribes, there are no brute facts.

It seems, then, that there are Spinozistic reasons to think that the Leibnizian situation could not obtain. There cannot be two or more substances that share one or more attribute but are distinguishable by virtue of one substance's possession of at least one attribute that the other lacks. And, granting that modes can be 'put to one side' when distinguishing substances, one can therefore conclude that there could not be two or more substances that share an attribute. That is, one has reason to accept NSA.

So, one can defend on Spinoza's behalf NSA by providing considerations in its favour that supplement his attempted 'demonstration' of IP5 but that do not depend on the controversial, and by Spinoza's own lights, unavailable assumption that each substance has a single attribute.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Having outlined the notorious Leibnizian objection to NSA, I developed a reply to that objection, one which has the following advantages. First, it draws exclusively on ideas that Spinoza advances prior to the introduction of NSA in IP5; that is, it exploits no claims that Spinoza develops later in *The Ethics* (which in many cases would depend on, and so could not be invoked to support, NSA). Second, it makes no use of extraneous assumptions that would be foreign to Spinoza's philosophy or that are not available to him, given his theoretical commitments. Third, relatedly, and perhaps most importantly, the reply accords very much with the spirit of Spinoza's rationalist philosophy, at the heart of which lies an unwavering commitment to PSR.

The claim is not, of course, that the proffered reply corresponds to anything in the argument that Spinoza actually offers in support of NSA (it evidently does not). Rather, the claim is that it is in no way forced upon or alien to Spinoza's extant remarks and builds upon no materials not already present. Of course, it might be the case that Spinoza had such a line of thought in mind all along. If that were true, it would be nice, but there is need to engage in such speculation.

Given how central NSA is to Spinoza's argument for substance monism, and given how Spinoza's version of substance monism constitutes the foundation for all that follows in *The Ethics*, identifying a response to the Leibnizian objection that might bolster Spinoza's commitment to NSA is a pressing task for anyone who wants



to evaluate critically (and sympathetically) Spinoza's philosophical contribution. Happily, the reply that I outlined above also points us to what the crucial issue is for anyone engaged in such a task: Spinoza's commitment to PSR. Perhaps, as Spinoza maintains, everything calls for and admits of explanation. Or, perhaps, as Wittgenstein remarks, 'Explanations come to an end somewhere'.<sup>8</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> All abbreviations refer to the corresponding passages in *The Ethics* in B. Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, ed. trans. E. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Following J. Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 66.

<sup>3</sup> See G. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. L. Loemker (Dordrecht: The Netherlands, 1969), 198-9. Referred to in M. Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (London: Routledge, 2008), 319n7.

<sup>4</sup> S. Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 62.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 69-70; Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 48; A. Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 70. In 'Ethics IP5: Shared Attributes and the Basis of Spinoza's Monism', in *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. J. A. Cover and M. Kulstad (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990), §§2-4, D. Garrett offers incisive criticisms of versions of all of the

above responses to the Leibnizian objection, as well as advancing his own Spinozistic reply.

<sup>6</sup> Della Rocca, in *Spinoza*, emphatically stresses the importance of PSR for Spinoza's philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> See Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 60. Needless to say, other commentators might wish to offer a different outline of the argument. I shall not enter into exegetical disputes concerning this issue here. The present aim is only to highlight that NSA plays a crucial role in Spinoza's attempt to establish substance monism and it is safe to assume that it will do so on any faithful reconstruction of his argument.

<sup>8</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §1.