

Spinoza's Monism: A Critique of the Guérout-Loeb Interpretation

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I. Introduction

Spinoza founded his controversial metaphysics on his demonstration of monism, and because of its centrality to his philosophical enterprise, it has become a subject of intense scrutiny. Some have pointed out that a contradiction arises from the first few propositions of his *Ethics*, making Spinoza's demonstration invalid. Mark Kulstad, however, in his article "Spinoza's Demonstration of Monism: A New Line of Defense," attempts to show that Spinoza can be rescued from the purported invalidity by adopting a certain conception of Spinoza's God and the relationship between substance and attribute.

In this paper, I will demonstrate that Kulstad unsuccessfully resolves the contradiction since his interpretation of Spinoza's God and the nature of attributes leads to a host of contradictions with other crucial propositions in the first part of the *Ethics*. In the first part, I will trace out the purported invalidity in Spinoza's argument. In the second and third parts, I will reconstruct Kulstad's argument and show how it attempts to resolve the contradiction. And in the fourth part, I will argue against Kulstad's solution by drawing out inconsistencies that arise from his interpretation of Spinoza's God.

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II. Invalidity in Spinoza's Demonstration of Monism

In the course of his demonstration of substance monism, Spinoza commits himself to a contradiction that arises from a conceptual confusion. First I will present Spinoza's argument, and then I will point out how Spinoza's conflation of "infinite" and "all" gives rise to the problem. In the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines *God* as a substance possessing all attributes (Proposition 14P). Since God necessarily exists (Proposition 11) and because there cannot be two or more substances that possess the same attribute (Proposition 5), it follows that God is the only substance that can be conceived. So, suppose that another substance was thought to exist in addition to God; call it *S*. If this were true, then God and *S* would have to share some attribute (e.g., extension or thought). This, however, is impossible on account of Proposition 5. We must then decide whether *S* or God exists, but since God necessarily exists, *S* cannot. God, therefore, is the only substance that exists.

It will be of interest to note that the two official premises Spinoza appeals to in order to justify Proposition 11 are perfectly general (Kulstad 302):

1. If a thing can be conceived as not existing, its essence does not involve existence. (Axiom 7)
2. Existence belongs to the nature of substance. (Proposition 7)

This is significant because all that is required for Proposition 11 to demonstrate an entity's necessary existence is for that entity to be both a substance and conceived as existing. So, it appears that if a substance meets these criteria but is not God, it must also necessarily exist. Now, presumably, Spinoza thinks that the condition set out in Proposition 11 can be met only by God, and Proposition 14 seems to preclude the possibility of any other substance being conceived besides God. In his proof for Proposition 14, Spinoza states, "God is an absolutely infinite being of whom no attribute expressing the essence of substance can be denied." Since God has *all* attributes and necessarily exists, if there were any substance other than God, then it would have to be explained through some attribute of God. But two substances can't share the same attribute, so we can rule out any other substances besides God. The problem, however, is in the justification Spinoza gives for his claim that God has *all* attributes.

Definition 6 is supposed to provide this justification, but it is insufficient. It reads, "By God I mean an absolutely infinite being, that is,

substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence." Since this is the only appeal Spinoza makes to justify his claim that God possesses all attributes, we must conclude that Spinoza understood God's possessing infinite attributes to mean, or at least entail, that God possesses all attributes (Bennett 75-76). But infinite does not mean all, nor does it entail it. For example, we may say that the set of odd integers contains infinitely many numbers, but it would be incorrect to say that the set of odd integers contains all numbers. Similarly, stipulating that God possesses infinitely many attributes does not entail that God possesses all attributes.¹ Given this, it is not inconsistent with what Spinoza has said to posit some substance besides God that possesses an attribute that God does not. Now we need not form a specific conception of what this attribute might be. On Spinoza's theory of attributes, the only two attributes to which the human mind has access are thought and extension, yet he maintained that there are infinitely many in addition to these (Phemister 114-15). So, just the possibility that there is an attribute expressed by a substance other than God is sufficient. The argument would then stand as follows:

1. Besides God no substance can be or be conceived.
(Proposition 14)
2. A substance necessarily exists if it both is a substance and can be conceived of as existing.
(Proposition 11)
3. God and Substance S are substances and can be conceived as existing.
4. God and Substance S necessarily exist.
5. Substance S both necessarily exists and cannot exist.

The above contradiction, according to Mark Kulstad, never arises when a certain non-traditional interpretation of Spinoza's God is adopted, and this, in addition to support found in some of Spinoza's other writings, justifies the interpretation. It is to Kulstad's solution that we now turn.

¹ It may be argued that Spinoza's attributes are not similar to number in this way; that we cannot divide attributes up such that if we were to conceive God as not having some particular attribute, it would still possess infinite attributes. This, however, misunderstands the concept of infinity. Since no finite number plus one equals infinity, infinity minus one could not be a finite number.

III. The Guérout-Loeb Interpretation

Kulstad's first and pivotal move in resolving the problem is his adoption of what he refers to as the Guérout-Loeb interpretation of substance and attribute. On this view, God is a compound substance, a substance consisting of multiple simple substances, each having exactly one attribute (Kulstad 303). He then explains that simple substances are identical to their attributes. The attribute of extension is the simple substance of extension (304). God, therefore, is the substance that is composed of all simple substances. This is important in justifying the move from "God has infinite attributes" to "God has all attributes." By understanding God as a compound substance, if there is any substance whose existence is proved by Spinoza's ontological argument, we must understand that substance as a constituent part of God, not as some substance independent of God. Thus, any attribute that any substance has is an attribute that God has in virtue of God being the compound of all simple substances. Kulstad, however, does not take up any direct defense of this view in his paper. He maintains that the interpretation's utility in resolving the problem with Spinoza's argument provides sufficient indirect evidence for the interpretation. But, seeing as this view of Spinoza's substance is quite a departure from how it is traditionally understood, I will present Loeb's argument in order to demonstrate the textual plausibility of the interpretation.²

Loeb begins by pointing out that throughout the first part of the *Ethics*, there are multiple formulations of the definition of *attribute*, ranging from that which "expresses the reality or being of the substance" (Proposition 10S) to that which "pertains to substance" (Proposition 19D). He then gives a master formulation that combines all the different formulations found in part one: "By attribute I meant that which the intellect perceives as constituting/expressing/pertaining to the essence/being/reality of substance" (Loeb 161). This is meant to shift the interpretive weight away from the technical meanings of terms such as "essence," "constitutes," and "being" and allows the interpretive focus to be directed at the relationship between substance and attribute. Loeb maintains that this relationship is such that on Spinoza's account (i) a collection of attributes constitutes a substance and (ii) any attribute is itself a substance.

² It may seem odd to introduce Loeb here independent of Guérout, but while the name of this particular interpretation includes both Guérout and Loeb, I will deal only with Loeb's argument in favor of the view. I will, however, refer to the view throughout the paper as the Guérout-Loeb interpretation for the sake of continuity with Kulstad's article.

In support of (i), Loeb cites two passages from part one: "God is eternal, that is, all the attributes of God are eternal" (Proposition 19) and "God is immutable; that is, all the attributes of God are immutable" (Proposition 20C2). God is immutable insofar as he has immutable attributes, and God is eternal insofar as his attributes are eternal. These suggest that God consists of and is understood in terms of the totality of his attributes. Each of the infinitely many attributes that God possesses individually contributes to God's total nature. So, because the set of attributes God possesses are of some nature, God is of some nature.

In support of (ii), Loeb turns to Spinoza's written correspondences. In a letter Spinoza wrote to Henry Oldenburg he states, "by *attribute* I mean everything that is conceived in itself and through itself, so that its conception does not involve any other thing" ("Oldenburg" 253). And in a letter to Simon de Vries he writes:

"By *substance* I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, whose conception does not involve the conception of some other thing. I understand the same by *attribute*, except that it is called *attribute* in respect to the intellect, which attributes to substance a certain specific kind of nature. This definition, I repeat, explains clearly what I mean by *substance* or *attribute*." ("De Vries" 262)

It is clear from the above passage that Spinoza gives the same definition for both attribute and substance, and this same definition of substance makes its way into the *Ethics* (Definition 3).³ So, if attributes are given the same definition as substances, then attributes *are* substances. If each attribute is distinct from another attribute and there are infinitely many of them, then there are infinitely many distinct substances. Extension is just as much an independent substance as thought, and since God consists of infinitely many attributes, God consists of infinitely many substances. God, therefore, must be a compound substance made up of infinitely many constituent substances. With this understanding, we can appreciate Kulstad's use of the interpretation in his argument.⁴

³ Although it is worth mentioning that the same definition of attribute does not.

⁴ It is also worth pausing to note that Loeb gives no justification for his appeal to Spinoza's written correspondence over the definitions in part one of the *Ethics*, nor does he give us reason to suspect that these letters carry more authoritative weight than the definitions given in the *Ethics*. This is important because the definition of attribute that Spinoza gives in his written correspondence does not appear in the *Ethics*, and this would indicate, *prima facie*, a shift in Spinoza's thinking on the matter.

IV. Kulstad's Solution

Recall that in order to succeed in salvaging Spinoza's argument, Kulstad must bridge the gap between God's having *infinite* and God's having *all* attributes, and adopting the Guérout-Loeb interpretation is the first move. In light of this interpretation, things take on a new look. Kulstad invites us to consider the following two cases constructed according to the Guérout-Loeb interpretation:

(1) There is just the compound substance, God, consisting of infinitely many attributes, each of which is itself a (simple) substance, and one of which is the simple substance consisting of (identical with) an attribute of extension.

(2) There is the compound substance, God, described just as above, and outside of God, a simple substance consisting of the attribute of extension. Note that in case (2) there are *two* simple substances consisting of an attribute of extension (one that is a part of God and another that is not); in case (1) there is only one. (304)

Next, recall the prohibition mentioned in Proposition 5: "there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute." Presumably, Spinoza intended Proposition 5 to apply to something like case (2) as opposed to case (1) where only God with his infinitely many attributes exists (Kulstad 304). Since there is nothing that shows that case (2) obtains over case (1), and because case (1) is consistent with the double ontological proof—the proof of God and substance S mentioned in section one—then we shouldn't understand Spinoza's argument as proving the existence of some substance with an attribute outside those God already possesses. We should understand it as proving the existence of the simple substance twice over: once via the ontological proof for God and once via the ontological proof for S (305).

Kulstad's second move involves distinguishing between numerical and constitutive distinctness. Two substances are *numerically distinct* if one has more countable parts than another. For example, God and substance S would be numerically distinct on the account that God is composed of multiple simple substances (306). Two substances are *constitutively distinct* if they are numerically distinct and one substance does not function as a constitutive part of the other substance (306).

The numerical distinctness of God and S is non-problematic.⁵ Thus, in order for the original problem to hold, it must be demonstrated that a simple substance is constitutively distinct from God, thereby bringing it into contradiction with Spinoza's claim that "there can be no substance external to God" (Proposition 14).

Kulstad's strategy is the same: reinterpret Proposition 5 in terms of constitutive distinctness and show that no contradiction is forced (Kulstad 311). Given the Guérout-Loeb interpretation, we can interpret Spinoza as trying to preclude the possibility of proving a substance's existence over and above God. Proposition 5 can then be re-formulated thus: *there cannot exist two constitutively distinct substances of the same attribute*. Recall then the two cases mentioned earlier. Case (1) is internally consistent. Case (2), if it obtained, would lead to a contradiction. There is nothing that shows that case (2) obtains over case (1). Therefore, there is nothing that forces us to acknowledge a contradiction in Spinoza's metaphysics (Kulstad 311).

Now it is clear how the original contradiction in Spinoza's argument can be reconciled. God is conceived as the compound of infinitely many simple substances, and Proposition 5 is understood as eliminating the possibility of constitutively distinct substances. So, any substance whose existence is proved is done so only as a constituent of God. Since no substance with an attribute can be proven to exist outside of God, we can conclude that God indeed has *all* attributes. And with that the rest of the proof goes through.

This certainly does make a strong indirect case for the Guérout-Loeb interpretation. By understanding God in mereological terms, we welcome the possibility of providing a solution to a vexing problem that arises from the beginning propositions of the *Ethics*. The problem, however, is that the Guérout-Loeb interpretation is false. While it may have a high degree of utility in resolving this particular problem in Spinoza's ontological proof, it simply cannot deliver on its purported textual consistency. In the following section, I will trace out some of the many points of conflict this view has with other key propositions in the *Ethics*.

⁵ On the Guérout-Loeb interpretation, to say that God has attribute A is not the same as saying that substance S has attribute A. God as a compound substance has attribute A simply because God has S as a constituent part, whereas S in turn has A simply because it is numerically identical with it (Kulstad 307). This simply describes case (1).

V. Problems with the Guérout-Loeb Interpretation

The most striking issue with the Guérout-Loeb interpretation is that it stands in direct opposition Proposition 14: “there can be, or be conceived, no substance besides God.” Spinoza after all, is a monist, and monism typically involves the notion that there is a fundamental single substance, not a plurality of simple substances. If God were a compound of simple substances, it would appear that, since each constituent part is a simple substance, substances would exist “besides God.” To this, Loeb responds that we need only construe proposition 14 as asserting that there is no substance that is not a part of God (Loeb 170–71). Proposition 14 would then read: *there can be, or be conceived, no substance which is not a constituent of God*. So, because every self-existing simple substance is also a member of God, the existence of infinitely many simple substances is compatible with Spinoza’s monism.

But this is problematic on multiple accounts. First, it is a very odd reading of Proposition 14. If it is true that Spinoza meant to communicate that God is a compound substance, why not expect him to make the point a bit more clear? Given that it is such a crucial premise, why wouldn’t he just come out and say it, rather than mislead his audience with statements such as “in the universe there is only one substance” as is contained in the first corollary to Proposition 14? It would only have required the addition of “compound” after “one” to eliminate such confusion.

Second, Loeb even admits that Spinoza would have been well acquainted with the simple/compound distinction. He states:

A single attribute is a simple [substance], and a set or collection of attributes is a compound [substance]. This sort of distinction is to be found in both Leibniz, who distinguishes between simple monads and compound substances and Descartes, who requires a distinction between simple secondary-substances such as mind, and compound secondary-substances such as human being. (Loeb 165)

Given Spinoza’s correspondence with Leibniz as well as his intimate knowledge of Descartes’ metaphysics, he would have been very familiar not only with the simple/compound distinction, but also with the value and importance of an explicit textual indication that such a distinction was being employed. For example, in Part 1, Proposition 17 of his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Spinoza states that “God is a completely simple being,” and the proof demonstrates “if God were composed of parts, the parts (as all will readily grant) would have to be at least prior

in nature to God, which is absurd. Therefore he is a completely simple being.” Given that Spinoza had such a firm grasp on the distinction and employed it in some of his writings, if he had intended his foundational metaphysical concept to include this distinction, then it is reasonable to expect him to use the same explicit language that he utilized elsewhere in his writings.

Third, the Guérout-Loeb interpretation also introduces tension between Proposition 14 and some earlier propositions in the *Ethics*: Propositions 13 and 6. In light of Loeb’s reinterpretation of proposition 14, the first corollary should be restated: *in the universe there is only one compound substance, and this is absolutely infinite*. Therefore, God is an absolutely infinite compound substance. However, the notion of compound involves the notion of distribution of properties. Compounds are understood through the combination of their constituent parts, or at least God ought to be so conceived on the Guérout-Loeb interpretation. This requires each part to possess a more fundamental identity than its identity as a part in relation to other parts composing a whole. For example, the cells in my body have an independent identity apart from their identity as parts of my body. Contrariwise, Proposition 13 states that “absolutely infinite substance is *indivisible*,” and the proof reads, “if it were divisible, the parts into which it would be divided will either retain the nature of absolute infinite substance or not.” The first alternative leads to an absurdity and the second to a destruction of the absolute infinite substance.

At this point, Loeb would likely respond by saying that absolutely infinite substance is not divisible—that there is no part that is not contained within the compound of the absolute infinite substance. No part, after all can be removed from the compound (Loeb 166). But the mere idea of substance having parts is not compatible with the scholium to Proposition 13: “The indivisibility of substance can be more easily understood merely from the fact that the nature of substance can be conceived only as infinite, and that part of a substance can mean only finite substance, which involves an obvious contradiction.” Given this explicit clarification, even conceptually an infinite substance cannot have parts because that would, on Spinoza’s view, lead to a contradiction.

Forth, on the Guérout-Loeb view, we can determine which properties of the fundamental constituent parts distribute to the compound; or in other words, the effects produced by the combination of the simple substances. I understand the simple substance extension through its attribute extension. I understand the simple substance thought through its attribute of thought. Therefore, since there is a compound substance, God, with these attributes, I can readily discern

that both attributes distribute to God from these simple substances. The presence of these simple substances then gives rise to the presence of these attributes in God. On the Guérault-Loeb model, attributes and substances are equivalent. So, if God's attributes are produced by the attributes of its constituent substances, God as a substance is produced by other substances. This, however, directly contradicts Proposition 6 which states that "one substance cannot be produced by another substance." So, if this relationship cannot obtain between substances, God cannot be a compound, for "if God were composed of parts, the parts . . . would have to be at least prior in nature to God, which is absurd." Therefore, God must be a completely simple being.

Lastly, if attributes are substances and substances are parts of God, attributes are only parts of God. They can only reflect a part of God's essence. This requires a reading of Spinoza that suggests he maintained that an attribute does not fully reflect God's essence. This reveals the error in Loeb's reading. When Loeb points out that Spinoza assigns the same definition to both substance and attribute in his letter to de Vries, he prematurely concludes that all attributes are substances. Attributes are not a simple substance; rather they are *the* simple substance. The Scholium to Proposition 10 reads:

For it is in the nature of substance that each of its attributes be conceived through itself, since all the attributes it possesses have always been in it simultaneously, and one could not have been produced by another; but each expresses the reality or being of substance. So it is by no means absurd to ascribe more than one attribute to one substance.

Here Spinoza remarks that one substance may possess multiple attributes. So, if attributes are themselves simple substances and a simple substance could have multiple attributes, it would follow that a simple substance could have multiple simple substances ascribed to it; but this is absurd. We ought instead to understand attributes as comprising the complete essence of God, rather than just a small portion of it. God then is not a union of attributes insufficient in themselves; rather, God is a single, indivisible substance which we could in theory come to understand through any one of its attributes (Phemister 84).

VI. Conclusion

In the course of his proof for God's existence, Spinoza commits himself to a contradiction. He ignores an important difference between

God's having *infinite* attributes and God's having *all* attributes. Mark Kulstad, in an attempt to resolve this problem, appeals to a problematic re-interpretation of Spinoza's conception of God. But while Kulstad recognized the value of the Guérault-Loeb interpretation in its ability to alleviate the problem, he did not adequately anticipate the incompatibility of that interpretation with other key propositions in the first part of the *Ethics*. Because of these striking incompatibilities, it ought to be rejected as a viable interpretation of Spinoza's concept of God and, therefore, cannot serve as an adequate means to resolve the contradiction that arises from Spinoza's demonstration of monism.

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