

Research Article

The Determinacy of the Substance in Spinoza

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Abstract

In Spinoza scholarship, particularly in interpretations that explicitly or implicitly draw on the Hegelian reading of Spinoza, it has often been argued that substance is something indeterminate, since neither the attributes nor the modes are capable of determining its nature. On the one hand, it is maintained that, in order to serve as the substratum of a multiplicity of different attributes, substance cannot coincide with any one of them and therefore cannot be determined by any of them. On the other hand, it is argued that, since modes are nothing other than affections of substance, they cannot contribute to determining it. The thesis of the indeterminacy of substance consequently leads to a reduction of the attributes to intellectual forms and of the modes to evanescent entities. Spinoza's philosophy would thus amount to an "acosmism," insofar as it would deny the multiplicity of essences and entities that populate the world. For the same reason, it would amount to an empty monism. In this contribution, I will first address the problem of the determinacy or indeterminacy of substance by reformulating what I take to be the most compelling solution to the longstanding dispute over the attributes. I will then turn to the alleged evanescence of modes, arguing that it does not entail a denial of the multiplicity of things as such, but only the rejection of a particular way of conceiving them. Adopting a methodology that combines close textual reading with theoretical analysis, I argue that Spinoza's monism is not an empty monism, but rather a dense monism: the substance is by no means indeterminate, but is instead defined by its attributes, understood as essence of the substance, and expressed through its modes, understood as properties of the substance.

Keywords

Acosmism, Monism, Attributes, Individuals, Singular Essence

1. Attributes as Essential Determinations of the Substance

Spinoza has often been accused of acosmism, that is to say of denying the multiplicity of things that populate the world. The first to use this term in relation to Spinoza seems to have been Salomon Maimon. Intending to defend Spinoza from the charge of atheism, Maimon explains that "atheism denies the existence of God, Spinozism denies the existence of the world. Rather, Spinozism should be called 'acosmism'" [1-3]. This charge has been made at least in two different ways: the first

one aims to emphasize the indeterminacy of substance, the other rather stigmatizes the ontological evanescence of modes. Hegel especially believes that "what constitutes the grandeur of Spinoza's manner of thought is that he is able to renounce all that is determinate and particular, and restrict himself to the One, giving heed to this alone" [4]. We would be therefore faced with a double renunciation, of the determined and the particular (in favor of the One). As a result, Spinoza's thought

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Received: 11 September 2026; **Accepted:** 22 September 2026; **Published:** 20 October 2026



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would be an extreme form of monism, an empty monism (I mean the doctrine according to which what exists is one single entity without any determination, as a kind of bare particular).

In this contribution, I would first like to address the problem of the determinacy or indeterminacy of substance, by reformulating what I think is the best solution to the old dispute over the attributes. I would then address the second hypothetical renunciation, that of the particular, showing that the thesis of the ontological evanescence of modes does not imply the denial of the multiplicity of things as such, but only the denial of a certain way of understanding them. Finally, I would like to specify what is the true nature of Spinoza's monism.

The argument of the indeterminacy of substance was supported by two different strategies. The first is based on epistemological observations, the second on ontological-metaphysical considerations. According to the first strategy, which dates back to Hegel and his followers [5], attributes are nothing but what the intellect perceives as constitutive of the essence of substance, i. e. "a subjective mode of thinking" [6]. The intellect would not be able to grasp the very essence of the substance, but only something about it, and therefore the substance would exceed what the intellect could comprehend. Such an excess, being by definition impossible to grasp by the intellect, would be inherently unintelligible. Beyond the explicit requests of the individual interpreters, it is a Kantian way, which considers attributes as forms that organize the phenomenon, leaving the thing itself untouched and untouchable. This first strategy has historically been given in two variants: according to the first, the inability of the intellect to grasp the substance itself, regardless of its attributes, makes the substance unknowable. For example, Huan explicitly states that "the essence of the substance is not definable through any of its attributes and therefore it is unknowable and undeterminable" [7], since the intellect is unable to grasp the in se of the substance. According to the second variant, the limits of the intellect, that grasps the substance only through its attributes, can be overtaken by a sort of extra-intellectual intuition that would conceive the being of the substance in an immediate manner. L. Brunschvicg considers that the process which leads the intellect to know the substance through its attributes makes these ones incommensurable with the determinations that the absolute substance would "produce" by virtue of its power alone. Nevertheless, the intuition of reason would have the possibility to grasp the substance beyond the analogies of intellect [8].

To show the inconsistency of this strategy it is sufficient to recall that for Spinoza the intellect does not possess the status that it will have in Kant or Hegel at all. From the TIE onward, the intellect is the organ of adequate knowledge, which must be carefully separated from the imagination as the source of every error. This thesis is explicitly stated in Letter 2 to Oldenburg, where, criticizing Francis Bacon, Spinoza explains that the latter wrongly assumes "that in addition to the deceptiveness of the senses, the human intellect is deceived simply by its own nature, and feigns everything from the analogy of

its own nature, not from the analogy of the universe, so that in relation to the rays of things it is like an uneven mirror, which mixes its own nature with the nature of things" [9]. Still addressing to Oldenburg, moreover, Spinoza reiterates what is established in the Ethics [10], IIP11cor.: that since the mind is part of the universe and it is given in nature "an infinite power of thinking, which, insofar as it is infinite, contains in itself objectively the whole of Nature", therefore "the human Mind is a part of a certain infinite intellect" [10]. More generally, it is necessary to consider that Spinozism does not allow any region of being to be *de jure* unintelligible [11, 12] and therefore firmly establishes that what makes the substance intelligible, i. e. the attributes, is an integral part of the substance itself.

The second strategy, which is sometimes implemented as a consequence of the first, relies on the presumed incompatibility between the uniqueness and simplicity of the substance and the multiplicity of its attributes. The idea is that the attributes, being many, can inhere to a single substance if and only if the substance is conceived as relatively independent of them, that is, as indifferent to their multiple determinations. The main weapon of this strategy is the idea that attributes are determinations of the substance, and that, according to the principle *omnis determinatio negatio est*, determinations limit substance. The consequence of this strategy [14-16] is to conceive Spinozism "as a negative theology in which the substance [...] is assimilated to the empty Being of the Eleats" [11].

To show how unacceptable this second strategy is, we can observe that the formula *omnis determinatio negatio est* (that can be found in letter 50, dated 2 June 1674, to Jelles) applies only at the modes level, when modes are conceived "in relation to a certain time and place" (EVP37sc.). In that case, in effect, each mode-determination implies the negation of another mode-determination. Attributes, on the other hand, are pure affirmations: "Since being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature, it follows from P7 alone that every substance must be infinite [Cum finitum esse revera sit ex parte negatio, & infinitum absoluta affirmatio existentiae alicujus naturae, sequitur ergo ex sola 7. Prop. omnem substantiam debere esse infinitam]" (EIP8sc. 1). Although Spinoza states that "if something is only infinite in its own kind, we can deny infinite attributes of it [NS: (i. e., we can conceive infinite attributes which do not pertain to its nature)]" (EID6Exp), it is clear, from the following text, that a substance which possesses only one attribute (so denying all the others) does not exist at all. The EID6Exp hypothesis is therefore fictitious [13].

Let us dwell for a moment on the most decisive and controversial of Spinoza's texts: EIP10sc.

We schematically summarize the first part of the text:

- 1) each being must be conceived under some attribute;
- 2) each attribute is conceived for itself;
- 3) the absolutely infinite entity possesses the infinity of attributes.

That each being must be conceived under some attribute

means, as E1P4 states, that everything is perfectly determined and in itself distinct, or that there is no undetermined being. Being is conceived only in so far as it presents an attribute that allows us to distinguish and to understand it. But every attribute (and we are at point 2) is conceived for itself, being infinitely perfect in its kind, that is, not having any other thing of its own nature which can limit and negate it; and this means that an attribute exhausts the whole field of being, as regards its kind (two attributes of extension or two attributes of thought are not given). Finally, if the attributes – being conceived for themselves and infinite in their kind, each of which exhausting the whole field of what is – are distinguished from one another, it cannot be that they constitute a plurality of different beings, because in this case the being as such, that is the whole of reality, would be more than one, which is clearly absurd. If there were more beings, none of them would be the being, but the being in its own sense would be only the whole of those same beings. If each of the attributes expresses being as such, then each of them can only express the same being (outside of which nothing is given). Attributes do not add up among them, for the simple reason that each of them expresses being as such, that is, the same being as the whole of reality. It is then precisely the distinction of attributes (the fact that they are conceived for themselves, they are infinite in their kind and they exhaust the whole reality) that makes each of them not be a separate being.

These arguments suggest two general conclusions. The first one affirms that attributes are not mere intellectual perspectives, nor determinations which limit substance, but elements which constitute the essence of substance. In short, the attributes, as they constitute the essence of the substance, are the substance itself. The second conclusion is that there is, using the Scotist term, a “formal distinction” between attributes. It is true that in E1P10sc. Spinoza himself speaks, in this regard, of real distinction, but by this expression he certainly does not mean that the distinction between attributes corresponds to a distinction between substances (as would happen if we meant the real distinction in the Cartesian sense). Since the attributes are indeed distinct from each other, but constitute a single substantial reality, their difference (which is neither a Cartesian real distinction nor a mere distinction of reason) can only be a formal distinction based on the thing itself. This solution, adopted by various interpreters [17-20], seems the most appropriate to explain the complexity of Spinoza’s position.

It should be noted, however, that the use of Scotus’ formal distinction to account for the status of attributes is possible only on one condition, namely that it is not assumed that the substance, in its unity, precedes the multiplicity of its attributes. It is useful to note, in this sense, that in the *Ethics* we arrive at the conclusion that the essence of the substance consists of infinite attributes, only after having ascertained that each single attribute exhausts the entire field of being, and that the essence of every attribute implies existence. Things were different in the *Korte Verhandelng* and in the *Cogitata meta-*

physica, where Spinoza still believes that the essence of attributes implies existence only as they are attributes of God. For the mature Spinoza, an attribute constitutes the essence of God precisely because it is something that implies existence by itself, and not because it depends on a substance that precedes it. This does not mean, for the reasons given above, that each attribute constitutes a separate substance and that God is configured as a paradoxical “substance of substances” [21].

2. Modes as Singular Essences

We come now to the problem of the evanescence of modes. We shall try to show that modes, even though they do not exist in themselves but in alio, are nevertheless definite and determined expressions of what really exists, i. e. the substance itself. The problem is to understand what is the true status of modes. More precisely, the problem is – as I will try to show – to understand that modes are not changeable (TIE, in [9], §101) and contingent individuals (EIVD3), but singular (and virtually common) properties [22]. The *scolium* of proposition 45, in the second part of the *Ethics*, in which Spinoza distinguishes two senses of the term “existence” (the existence understood in an abstract sense, as duration, and the existence of singular things insofar as they are in God), implies a decisive reference to E1P16 and, in particular, to the thesis according to which “from the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i. e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect) [ex necessitate divinae naturae, infinita infinitis modis (hoc est, omnia, quae sub intellectum infinitum cadere possunt) sequi debent]” (E1P16).

The *infinita* in the expression *infinita infinitis modis* in no case can be referred to the attributes, which, as established in E1def4, constitute the essence of the substance, and certainly not “follow” from it [23]. What follows from the necessity of the divine nature, as it is said in E1p29sc, is if anything the *natura naturata*, i. e. “all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God [omnes Dei attributorum modos, quatenus considerantur, ut res, quae in Deo sunt, et quae sine Deo nec esse, nec concipi possunt]” (E1p29sc.). *Res singulares*, if they are not perceived abstractly as changeable and contingent individuals, should be conceived as arising from the necessity of divine nature, that is as immanent to it [17]. But what does it mean that singular things are properly conceived only insofar as they are considered to be in God (cf. E1p15)? It means that singular things are nothing but properties expressing the nature of the substance [23, 24]. This is, in fact, what is established with extreme clarity in the demonstration of proposition 16 of the first part of *Ethics*: “the intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it (i. e., from the very essence of the thing); and that it infers more properties the more the definition of the thing involves (ex data

cujuscunque rei definitione plures proprietates intellectus concludit, quae revera ex eadem [hoc est, ipsa rei essentia] necessario sequuntur, et eo plures, quo plus realitatis rei definitio exprimit, hoc est, quo plus realitatis rei definitae essentia involvit)" (EIP16dem.).

The assimilation of things to properties gives reason, among other things, to the way in which Spinoza uses the traditional expression of *entia realia* [25]. Already in the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*, inviting us to deduce all our ideas always from real entities, thus avoiding passing for abstract or universal entities, Spinoza pointed out: "by series of causes and of real beings I do not here understand the series of singular, changeable things, but only the series of fixed and eternal things [per seriem causarum et realium entium non intelligere seriem rerum singularium mutabilium; sed tantummodo seriem rerum fixarum aeternarumque]" (TIE 100).

Among the reasons for this clarification, Spinoza explained that "the essence of singular, changeable things are not to be drawn from their series, or order of existing, since it offers us nothing but extrinsic denominations, relations, or at most, circumstances, all of which are far from the inmost essence of things [rerum singularium mutabilium essentiae non sunt depromendae ab earum serie, sive ordine existendi; cum hic nihil aliud nobis praebeat praeter denominationes extrinsecas, relationes aut ad summum circumstantia; quae omnia longe absunt ab intima essentia rerum]" (TIE 101). The existential order of the individual things, which is not distinguished from the common order of nature with which memory and imagination link together the affections of the body (cf. EIIp18sc and EIIp29sc), prevents access to the nature of *res singulares* as real entities, that is as the fixed and eternal properties that follow from the nature of the substance. As EVp29sc explains (duplicating for actuality what EIIp45sc had argued about existence), "we conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, or real, we conceive under a species of eternity [res duobus modis a nobis ut actuales concipiuntur, vel quatenus easdem cum relatione ad certum tempus, et locum existere, vel quatenus ipsas in Deo contineri, et ex naturae divinae necessitate consequi concipimus. Quae autem hoc secundo modo ut verae, seu reales concipiuntur, eas sub aeternitatis specie concipimus]" (EVp29sc).

The demonstration of EVp30 further states, with regard to things understood as *entia realia*, that they are thus conceived "insofar as through God's essence they involve existence (quatenus per Dei essentiam involvunt existentiam)". This means that in Spinozism, unlike what happens in the system of Leibniz for example, the reality of a thing does not consist in its "complete determination", that is in the set of predicates that are attributed to it with truth (including those relating to circumstantial and contingent events), but it is nothing but the

essence itself. Every single thing is an affection of the substance, in the sense that every single thing constitutes a property which, following from the nature of the substance, expresses it in a certain and determined way (cf. EIp25cor). The existence of *entia realia* is not even a kind of supplement reality that comes to be added to their essence, but coincides without residues with their essence [26]. This also means that what exists does not have the nature of the substrate of an essence, that is, it is not a subject to which the essence would inhere, and that therefore it would be different with respect to its own essence. In Spinoza we really have to understand literally that the only conceivable existence (beyond an abstract understanding, based on time and place) is the very essence. Not only, therefore, does existence add nothing to the essence, but what really exists is nothing else than the essence itself: "in the universe of existing things, there are only essences" [27].

Therefore, we have to take literally Spinoza when he identifies, first, the power of God (that is, we could say, his "productivity") with its essence (EIp35) - and not vice versa; secondly, when it states (in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, chapter VI), that being the will and intellect of God one and the same thing, "we affirm the same thing when we say that God wills something as when we say that he understands it" [10]; thirdly, when he establishes that the *conatus* by which each thing affirms itself and perseveres in its own being is none other than the actual essence of the thing itself (cf. EIIp7). It is clear that to emphasize these consequences means to lean towards the idea that the ontology of Spinoza is not a dynamic ontology (based on the centrality of power over essence) but a static ontology (in a similar sense to that asserted by Hegel, but inverse in the evaluation): if there is productivity in Spinozism (and there is no doubt, as EIp16 shows), it is a productivity of the essence itself, an immanent productivity which adds nothing to the static complexity of the essence (against this perspective: [28, 29]).

Consider the example found in EIIp8's *scolium*. The circle – explains Spinoza – is of such a nature that the rectangles formed by the segments of the lines intersecting in it are equal; therefore, infinite rectangles equal to each other are contained in the circle (mathematicians call this property "intersecting chords theorem"). To explain this property in more detail, we proceed as follows. In a circle we take two chords, D and E, which intersect at a point P. The intersection point divides respectively the chord D into two segments, d and d', and the chord E into two other segments e and e'. The theorem states that the equation $dd'=ee'$ applies [8]. Of course, the theorem applies to all intersecting chords, so that it can be said that in the circle are virtually contained infinite equal rectangles (although, by hypothesis, the only rectangles currently existing are those related to the chords D and E).

This example illustrates, albeit imperfectly, the fact that "the ideas of singular things, or of modes, that do not exist must be comprehended in God's infinite idea in the same way as the formal essence of the singular things, or modes, are con-

tained in God's attributes [*ideae rerum singularium, sive modorum non existentium ita debent comprehendi in Dei infinita idea, ac rerum singularium, sive modorum essentiae formales in Dei attributis continentur*]" (EIIp8). As the ideas of the infinite rectangles built on the circle's chords are included in the idea of the circle, so all the ideas of the modes, even not currently existing, are included in the idea of God, and all the formal essences of singular things or finite modes, even if they do not exist at present, are included in God's attributes.

In this sense, what is included in the idea of God is not the idea of this or that proportion between rectangles, for example the proportion that you have once the chords D and E are drawn, but the idea of the property according to which all rectangles formed by the segments of all the chords intersecting in it are equal. It should be noted that we can understand this property in different ways. Whereas the first kind of knowledge presents us the segments D and E, showing at best that the rectangles formed by these segments are equal, the second kind of knowledge enables us to grasp a property in general, a rule that applies to all rectangles formed by segments, for example, as mathematicians do, through the demonstration relating to equal angles; but the third kind of knowledge gives us knowledge of this same property understood as a singularity, expressed by the equation $dd'=ee'$. Note that this singularity, which is sensed in the third kind of knowledge, can be perfectly conceived without reference to the multiplicity of rectangles sharing that property.

What characterizes the third kind of knowledge is exactly to see the particular case as.

an example, that is, to see through the individual its being a singular property. According to the definition found in *scolium 2* of EIIp40 and repeated in the demonstration of EVp25, this kind of knowing "proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things [*procedit ab adaequata idea quorundam Dei attributorum ad adaequatam cognitionem essentiae rerum*]". The latter, explicitly understood by EVp24 as *res singulares*, are deduced from the essence of the attributes. This means that *res singulares* are understood in their essence precisely when the property or formal essence expressed therein is grasped in the particular case.

This way of understanding singular things allows us to answer in a new way a decisive question, posed by Martial Gueroult: is the knowledge of the third kind a knowledge of the general essence of singular things, or is it the knowledge of the singular essence of singular things? Gueroult's answer is that, although intuitive science allows us to know nothing but general essences, however "it is within its own singular essence that the mind captures its specific essence, which has no reality outside of singular minds. [...] Thus the essence of man [...], which expresses only a specific or universal nature [...], has no reality outside the individual" [30]. Thus, however much a specific essence is conceived in each individual who embodies it, it remains a general or common essence. But the

third kind of knowledge is distinguished from the second precisely because it is not a universal knowledge, but a knowledge of singular things (EIIp40sc. 2 and EVP36sc).

The real problem is that the essence of singular things is neither a common essence, nor an individual essence. The singular essence of Peter, for example, will be neither the common nature of human beings as such (as it is made up of certain modifications of the attributes of God: cf. EIIp10cor), nor an individual essence, which belongs only to the individual who bears that name. The third kind is distinguished precisely by virtue of being able to grasp what has a singular nature. But singular is not individual. An individual thing is a thing individuated by its spatio-temporal coordinates or by the infinite series of circumstances and extrinsic designations that accompany its singular essence. Those denominations, as that type of individuation, fall out of our horizon, because they are quite extrinsic to the "intimate essence" of things. Knowledge of the third kind has as its object an essence that is irreducible to both the common and the individual.

In EIIp8sc2, Spinoza shows how in the definition of a thing, which does not express except the nature or essence of the definite thing, is not involved the number of specimens that of that essence can occur in nature. If, for example, in nature we consider twenty men, it will be necessary "to show the cause why not more and not fewer than twenty exist [*causam ostendere, cur non plures, nec pauciores, quam viginti existant*]" (EIIp8sc2). We might ask ourselves whether this thesis is valid only for human nature as the object of knowledge of the second kind, or if it should also apply to individual essences. There is no doubt that, if we consider a common essence, the reason for which a certain plurality of specimens is given cannot be understood in the essence itself. But if we consider a singular essence, are things the same way? In other words, can different specimens of a singular essence be given?

To answer this question we can only refer to the place where Spinoza establishes the ways in which things are distinguished from each other. Although the Spinozian theory of distinctions is not as simple as Spinoza himself intends to present it, for our problem the situation is sufficiently clear: "Two or more distinct things are distinguished from one another, either by a difference in the attributes of the substances or by a difference in their affections [*duae, aut plures res distinctae, vel inter se distinguuntur ex diversitate attributorum substantiarum, vel ex diversitate earundem affectionum*]" (EI4). There is no room here, as we see, for any purely numerical or extrinsic distinction: two things are distinguished either because they consist of different attributes, or because they are affections, that is, different properties.

If we return to the example of the circle, we see that, of course, Spinoza does not question at all that, if there is a multiplicity of segments satisfying the property verified by the segments D and E, the existence of this multiplicity must have a cause. This cause would be nothing but an extrinsic cause, since it does not affect the singular essence that the different segments exemplify. In this case, the principle that Spinoza

asserts in the case of the twenty men applies exactly: if there are twenty men in nature, the reason for the fact that they are precisely twenty is not deductible from the property (human nature, in this case) that they exemplify, nor does it affect that property by putting it, so to speak, in variation. Similarly, that there are twenty segments that exemplify the property of the segments D and E is a factor entirely extrinsic, which must therefore be explained by reference to the order of nature in general, and that does not change anything about the singular essence.

The whole point is to understand that when Spinoza speaks of the essence of singular.

things (and their knowledge), he does not refer to the essence of individuals whose extrinsic numbers and designations are determined by the order of the whole nature, but it refers precisely to the essence of the thing as singular property, that is to the singular essence equally exemplified by each of the existing or non-existing individuals.

3. Dense Monism

Spinoza's thought is undoubtedly, in the last instance, a monism. Properly speaking, in fact, there is only one substance. Nevertheless, since the latter is not a bare substance but has a formal essence or a determined structure, it follows from it an infinity of real properties. So, according to the distinction suggested by Schaffer [31], we will be say that that of Spinoza's is not a strict monism. In fact, strict monism must imply not only that there is only one thing, but also that this single existing thing does not present, within itself, any differentiation whatsoever, since any internal articulation would imply a difference between this thing and its expressions, properties or features [32]. If this is true, that is, if a strict monism implies the affirmation of an absolutely indeterminate or bare substance, then Spinozism cannot be a strict monism [33]. In fact, from Spinoza's point of view, an absolutely indeterminate substance would be unintelligible, and this would be in contradiction with the fundamental principle of Spinozism: the perfect intelligibility of reality. Even beyond this principle, if Spinoza's was a strict monist, his repeated assertion that the more one knows res singulares the more one knows God would make no sense. This can happen precisely because the singular things, as properties of substance, are its certain and determined expressions, that is, they are what necessarily follows from its nature. Therefore, it could be suggested that Spinoza's is not an empty monism, but a dense monism, in which the only existing thing, the infinite substance, is expressed by the infinity of the essences that constitute it, i. e. the attributes, and by the infinity of the properties that follow from those same essences.

Author Contributions

Paolo Godani: Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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