

## ***Deus sive Natura*: Asserting the Spinozist View of Substance over that of the Cartesian**

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### **Abstract**

As understood by the philosopher Spinoza there is only one substance, *Deus sive Natura*, God, or Nature. Antithetically appears the philosopher Descartes, who we may claim ascribed to the view that there were at least three substances, God, mind, and the body. First, this brief essay will reflect on both the Spinozist and Cartesian view of substance, as found in Spinoza's *Ethics* and Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Finally, this concise article will close by asserting Spinoza's view of substance over that of Descartes; for, Spinoza's understanding of substance avoids unnecessary problems arising from the Cartesian system's assertions regarding the same.

**Keywords:** Metaphysics; Epistemology; Substance; Spinoza; Descartes

### *Deus sive Natura*, Spinoza's God, or Nature, the One Substance

On the initial page of the first Book of Spinoza's *Ethics*, we readers encounter three definitions applying to Spinoza's concept of substance. These definitions are as follows:

“D1: By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, *or* that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing” (Spinoza, 1996)

“D3: By substance I understand what is in itself and conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed” (Spinoza, 1996)

“D6: By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence” (Spinoza, 1996)

Now, we may first assert that that which causes itself, to Spinoza must be unique (Spinoza, 1996). That is because we can conceive and even imagine ourselves as not existing; however, we cannot successfully conceive of things such as a four-sided circle, or a six-sided triangle, implying that there is indeed permanency in the natural order (Spinoza, 1996). As such, we may claim that Spinoza’s cause of itself must be distinct for it is that which survives our ability to question, or doubt, and thus, a cause of itself, to Spinoza is that whose essence cannot be other than existing (Spinoza, 1996). In other words, much like a square cannot be more than three-hundred-sixty degrees, while still being a square, Spinoza’s cause of itself must display existence since if it were not to exist it would cease to be itself. For, a cause of itself cannot be both self-causal and caused at one and the same time (Spinoza, 1996).

Moreover, extending this last sentence we may claim that Spinoza’s idea of substance also involves notions of reliance, or that a substance is that concept which does not depend on another concept for its reality (Spinoza, 1996). In other words, just as a cause of itself, a substance too is unique for it is that which alone does not require a more umbrellaing or encompassing concept for it to be accessible to reason (Spinoza, 1996). Also, Spinoza defines God as an absolutely, or innately required being that is a substance. Thus, allowing us to claim that God too is distinct, especially if we consider that God, to Spinoza, is eternal and infinite as well and expresses itself eternally and infinitely (Spinoza, 1996). Lastly, focused readers may see it to be the case that a cause of itself, a substance, and God may imply that Spinoza

sees substance as a plurality. However, let us be aware that this is not the case and instead because a cause of itself, a substance, and God all share in distinctness and uniqueness, these three are, in fact, one and the same through the lens of Spinoza (Spinoza, 1996).

So, why is it that Spinoza believes that these three ways of understanding the concept of God, or Nature are not three separate entities, and rather a monistic One? Well, if we turn to the second premise of Book I of Spinoza's *Ethics*, we find the following:

“P2: Two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another” (Spinoza, 1996)

In other words, attributes, or that which we can perceive as pertaining to how we understand the essence of a cause of itself, or substance, or God, or Nature, as being unique and distinct, cannot possess different attributes while still sharing in the one same term that defines as substance (Spinoza, 1996). That is, Spinoza reveals to we readers that what we take to be the factuality of a substance cannot remain a substance, conceptually, if it exists alongside another substance of which it shares no shared traits (Spinoza, 1996). Finally, if we follow along with the third premise of Book I of Spinoza's *Ethics*, or that things without any commonalities cannot cause one another, we come to find that one substance cannot engender another substance (Spinoza, 1996). In fact, let us consider the following quote:

“P3: If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other” (Spinoza, 1996)

Hence, this serves to at least imply another move of Spinoza's; namely, that there can only be one substance in reality and existence, which is, again, God, or Nature. In other words, and as Spinoza claims:

“P6: One substance cannot be produced by another substance” (Spinoza, 1996)

One reason as to why Spinoza believes that only one substance can verily exist, God, or Nature, is that if two substances are distinct, then they must display different attributes, and

thus we would perceive them as being different and therefore uncategorizable by the singular term of substance (Spinoza, 1996). At the same time, even if two substances possessed the same attributes, then we would be unable to distinguish them as unique or distinct, defying the definition of substance itself (Spinoza, 1996). Lastly, because we can neither reason our way to find that multiple substances exists without running into logically troubled waters, so to speak, nor can we genuinely assert that we can experience two of the same substances as being different, to Spinoza, shows that only one cause of itself, or substance, or *Deus sive Natura* can truly display reality and existence (Spinoza, 1996).

### A Summary of Descartes' View of a Plurality of Substances

As understood by Descartes, a substance defines as that which exists due to God's power of creation, and that substances are immortal unless God negates their essence from existing (Descartes, 1998). In other words, all things created, to Descartes are substances, and in our world these substances appear as classifications of mind and body (Descartes, 1998). Now, by the former, the mind, Descartes understands a unified substance, one which operates as a one and is a pure simplicity (Descartes, 1998). Also, to Descartes the mind as immaterial is incorruptible and thus its life after that of the body, to Descartes, we may know clearly, distinctly, and assuredly (Descartes, 1998).

Likewise, Descartes recognizes the body to be a conglomeration of parts, that are not a simple unity, and thus we may infer that the body to Descartes may not participate in the same degree of the perfection of substance as does the mind (Descartes, 1998). However, we find that Descartes asserts that because God creates the human body, it too shares in the fact that it never perishes, although Descartes does acknowledge that it must undergo unrecognizable change (Descartes, 1998).

Also, for Descartes, the body is a substance which comes to be through that which serves as the essence behind and of all bodies, space, or extended nature itself (Descartes, 1998). Also, Descartes believes that there are certain characteristics of bodies that are entirely their own (Descartes, 1998). One of these distinguishing characteristics of the body is that since it is an amalgamation of parts it can be subject to division, and, in fact, Descartes asserts that bodies are always divisible into smaller and smaller members, or parts (Descartes, 1998).

Moreover, Descartes also points to the fact that what makes the body distinct from other substances, like the mind, is that the division of the body, such as with the loss of a limb, has no bearing on the reality and functioning of the mind (Descartes, 1998). Accordingly, we readers see that there is further divorcement between the mind and body, as understood by Descartes, and that through making these demarcations between mind and body, Descartes now, in Meditation VI of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, further reveals how the body too is its own substance (Descartes, 1998).

That is, we find that Descartes also bares to light the idea that the body is indeed a substance, for he believes that the body is that which receives pain and pleasure for the mind to then consider that reception as whether that perception is pleasant to the mind or not (Descartes, 1998). Accordingly, we may claim that Descartes believes that the body, to a degree, helps, or assists the mind to know that it knows what is not beneficial to it, as well as what we may regard as being deleterious to the mind as well (Descartes, 1998).

In other words, Descartes adheres to the view that our bodies passively intake raw sensory data, which then excites the mind in a way that is in synchronization with the effects that that sensory data from the world outside ourselves places upon us (Descartes, 1998). Consequently, this power of the body, to convey its experiences to the mind in such a way that its sensations go recognized by the mind in a way that is fitting for that sensory impression, unveils to we readers that the body's existence is not identical to the reality of the mind (Descartes, 1998). As such,

we may again assert that to Descartes the body is a substance, separate from the mind (Descartes, 1998). Lastly, let us now consider Descartes's understanding of yet another substance; specifically, God.

Now, to Descartes, the supremely perfect of all substances is God, and within the fifth meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, we discover a claim that is akin to what we find in Spinoza; namely, that God and existence are inseparable (Descartes 1998; Spinoza, 1996). In other words, God, as a perfect substance cannot be other than existing because it is more of the nature of a perfect and all-powerful substance, or God, to establish its existence as something rather than nothing (Descartes, 1998).

Also, we find Descartes declaring that just as a triangle is to two right angles is God to existence (Descartes, 1998). In other words, and to use an example of Descartes's own, we may claim that just as we can never find a mountain without a valley or a valley without a mountain, God and existence form a bond that is unbreakable (Descartes, 1998). Consequently, if God's essence is to exist, to Descartes and as also found in Spinoza, then God must display some form of physicality, or corporeality, or at least a form of representation that we people can recognize as being godly (Descartes, 1998).

However, unlike Spinoza, Descartes, in Meditation IV of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, declares that God can only be an innate idea, stamped, imprinted, or embedded into the mind by God (Descartes, 1998). As such, how can that which is purely an idea also display existence, if existence links to the physical whereas that which is an idea refers to the essential? In other words, one problem of the Cartesian idea of God and existence forming a marriage, so to speak, is how can it be that that which is strictly an idea bare any relation, or likeness to that which is corporeal? Hence, we may also assert that this leads to a type of dualism that damages the surety of the Cartesian view of substance. For, how can it be that there is a supreme substance, God, and also lesser substances like the mind and body when God can only be realizable via

the psychological and never via the physical? Finally, let us now assent to the Spinozist view of substance and why it is that such an outlook resolves and is more certain than Descartes's vantage of substance.

## Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*, or the One Substance as Outdoing the Cartesian Understanding of Substance

So far, this essay brought to light some main features of Spinoza's and Descartes's outlooks regarding the nature of substance. Now, let us declare how it is that Spinoza's understanding of substance outweighs Descartes's take on the same. That is, let us now use Spinoza's philosophy of substance to at least challenge Descartes's view of substance, and to do so, let us begin with a Spinozist critique of Descartes's view of God, followed by Spinoza's challenges to the substantiality of the mind and body.

As understood by Spinoza, there can only be one substance, *Deus sive Natura*, God, or Nature whereas to Descartes, God too defines as a substance; however, God is chief amongst substances and not the only substance in reality and existence (Descartes, 1998; Spinoza, 1996). First, one problem with the Cartesian view of God as being one of many substances is that both Spinoza and Descartes recognize that God is unique for only God is supremely powerful and perfect (Descartes, 1998; Spinoza, 1996). However, we find that Descartes defies the distinct nature of God by claiming that God gives way to multiple substances through God's creative power (Descartes, 1998). In other words, Descartes violates the idea that God is unique by claiming that one substance can be the cause of another.

However, as we saw previously, one substance cannot cause another substance, for two substance cannot be both unique while at the same time compatible, and thus akin to one another (Spinoza, 1996). Hence, we find that Descartes's view of God as creating each substance in a way that is unique to each is absurd, especially if we consider that Descartes's

God is supremely infinite and eternal whereas we, at least in this worldly life, are finite and durational (Descartes, 1998). Finally, this too is a problem for Descartes that Spinoza averts; namely, how is it that God creates in a way that is not in God's image and likeness, or that an infinite and eternal God, as a cause, can lead to finite and temporary effects, like ourselves, that are of a different nature than God (Descartes, 1998; Spinoza, 1996).

Furthermore, a major problem for Descartes that we can critique through the lens of Spinoza is that how can it be that God as inseparable from existence can be completely ideational while unbreakably tied to physical reality. In other words, Spinoza, who equates God to Nature and Nature to God escapes the problem of how God and existence can be in a state of oneness, for to Spinoza, Nature is simply the understanding of God as a materiality whereas God is simply the understanding of Nature as an immateriality (Spinoza, 1996).

Surprisingly, no such solution is present in Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, because Descartes, by implying that God co-exists with creation, still leaves us with the problem of where the unity point between the two rests, and by failing to do so Descartes leaves us with an irresolvable dualism. Lastly, let us now consider how it is that both mind and body fail to be substances in the Spinozist system, whereas to Descartes each amount to be a substance.

As for the mind and body, we find that to Spinoza they too cannot be substances, while to Descartes, they can (Descartes, 1998; Spinoza, 1996). One reason as to why the mind or body cannot be substances, to Spinoza, is that neither display an essence that involves existence, or that we can indeed conceive it to be that minds and bodies are not requisite for existence in the way in which is God (Spinoza, 1996).

Accordingly, to Spinoza, minds, and bodies as reliant on something other than themselves for their reality and existence, paves the way for Spinoza to claim that they are affections, or modifications of God's attributes of thought and extension (Spinoza, 1996). That



is, a mind expresses God in the natural order by thinking in the reality that God's attribute of thought establishes, while at the same time, the body expresses Nature in the natural order by inhabiting existence of which Nature's attribute of extension provides (Spinoza, 1996).

Also, Descartes's flaw, as Spinoza would claim, in the analysis of substance, is that Descartes illogically raises the mind and the body to the level of *Natura naturans* and does not leave them at only the level of *Natura naturata* (Spinoza, 1996). In other words, we cannot generate all things in Nature, for we ourselves undergo generation, in this life, and thus we are not substances to Spinoza, instead we are the products of God's, or Nature's sole power to immanently spread within and throughout all of reality and existence, eternally and infinitely (Spinoza, 1996). However, Descartes, by elevating the mind and body to the rank of substance does so incorrectly, since no mind or body can truly be products only of themselves, and thus, as not being self-causal they cannot serve to determine reality and existence in any way near how God, or Nature, *Deus sive Natura*, is able to do (Descartes, 1998; Spinoza, 1996).

## Conclusion

The intention of this short article was to draw to the surface both Spinoza's and Descartes's respective views regarding substance. First, this brief essay focused readers on some of Spinoza's assertions, claims, and arguments regarding how it is that only one substance *Deus sive Natura*, God, or Nature displays reality and existence by drawing from Book I of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Afterward, this succinct piece revealed to readers the Cartesian view of substance as found in Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Finally, by attempting to debase the Cartesian view of a plurality of substances, God, mind, and the body, it was the hope of this essayist to deliver readers to consider not only the flaws in the Cartesian system's doctrine of substance, it also intended to unveil the strengths of Spinoza's treatment of the same.

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