



## Spinoza's Definition of Attribute

Francis S. Haserot

*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4. (Oct., 1953), pp. 499-513.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8108%28195310%2962%3A4%3C499%3ASDOA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L>

*The Philosophical Review* is currently published by Cornell University.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/sageschool.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## SPINOZA'S DEFINITION OF ATTRIBUTE

THE SCHISM that cuts deepest into the interpretation of Spinoza is that concerned with the status of the attributes. Are the attributes subjective and hence essentially forms of cognition, or are they objective and inherent characters of substance? No exposition is needed to show that these views are opposite and give fundamentally different conceptions of Spinoza's meaning. The preponderance of opinion among commentators, I believe, is on the side of the objective interpretation. But whatever the truth with regard to this may be, it is evident that the question itself is primary. I here propose to treat this question by a direct examination of the definition of attribute.

Spinoza defines attribute as follows: "Per attributum intelligo id, quod intellectus de substantia percipit, tanquam ejusdem essentia constituens" (*E*, I, Def. 4).<sup>1</sup>

In this definition lie three ambiguities, ambiguities that have aroused essential difficulties for the interpretation of Spinoza. They have, together, thrown discord into the whole interpretation of *natura naturata*, or things that follow from God, and they have raised the dispute as to whether Spinoza is a mystic on the order of Maimonides or a rationalist after the general manner of Descartes. By an analysis of these ambiguities we may discover the possible versions that can be assigned to the definition.

The first ambiguity attaches to the word *intellectus*. Spinoza employs this term with two references. First, he refers to the "infinite intellect of God" (*intellectus infinitus Dei*); second, to the finite intellect, the intellect of such finite beings as men. The infinite intellect of God is the infinite range of adequate ideas compresent within the attribute of thought. Every idea in God's intellect, moreover, is rationally co-ordinated with the whole system of adequate ideas. In contrast to the infinite intellect, the finite intellect is limited in scope. Like the infinite intellect it is constituted of adequate ideas,

---

<sup>1</sup>References to the *Ethics* will be made as in the following example: *E*, II, 7, refers to *Ethics*, Pt. II, Prop. 7. Latin quotations are from the text of Carl Gebhardt; English quotations are from the translation of W. H. White.

but it does not contain the entire nexus of these ideas, and hence is not cognizant of the total range of attributes and their respective modes. Its extent is restricted, whereas that of the infinite intellect is unlimited; its cognition is partial, that of the infinite intellect complete.

The second indeterminacy of reference pertains to the relation between the phrase *tanquam ejusdem essentiam constituens* and the three elements: *intellectus*, *id quod*, and the term *percipit* in the clause *quod intellectus de substantia percipit*. Grammatically the phrase may modify any one of them. But, though this is true grammatically, evidence from the text indicates that the phrase containing *constituens* cannot intelligibly be taken to modify *intellectus*. For if it did, the intellect would then be identified with the essence of substance, as may be seen by the substitution of this relation in the definition. The definition would then read: "By attribute I understand that which the intellect, as constituting the essence of substance, perceives of substance." But the intellect, whether finite or infinite, is a mode (*E*, I, 31, Dem.), and it is clear that a mode cannot constitute the essence of substance. This follows from the definition of mode: "By mode, I understand the affections of substance, or that which is in another thing through which it is conceived." No version therefore that identifies the intellect with the essence of substance is acceptable, and this circumstance reduces the ambiguity in the present case to that which joins the phrase *tanquam ejusdem essentiam constituens* either with *id quod* or with *percipit*. In the one case the definition tells what the intellect perceives as the attribute; in the other, the way in which the attribute is perceived. The readings for these different assignments will be given below.

Last, there remains the ambiguity attaching to the adverb *tanquam*. *Tanquam* may mean either "as if," suggesting apparency as compared with fact, or "as," suggesting a real state.<sup>2</sup> *Tanquam* has

<sup>2</sup> It is to be noted that "as if" is itself ambiguous. It may mean (1) "as if, and maybe in fact," or (2) "as if, though not in fact." If I say, "I perceive this line as if constituting the diameter of a circle," the "as if" can mean "as if, and maybe in fact" or "as if, and also in fact." If I say, "I perceive this polygon as if constituting a circle," the "as if" means "as if, though not in fact." According to the context, the "if" in the term "as if" implies either uncertainty as to the factual character of the predication or certainty as to its

SPINOZA'S DEFINITION OF ATTRIBUTE

this dual use in Latin, and some writers contend that the proper translation, with corresponding meaning, is "as if."<sup>3</sup> But if "as if" means "as if and also in fact," then this translation would be misleading as compared with the simple "as," and would obviously imply not the subjective, but the objective interpretation.

Aside from his use of *tanquam* in the definition, Spinoza employs the word twenty-nine times in the *Ethics*. In twenty-six of these the word clearly means "as." With respect to three—namely, *E*, I, 33, Schol. 2; *E*, II, 49, Schol. (Sec. 1 of last paragraph); and *E*, V, 31, Schol., the contention might be raised (though with some question) that Spinoza employs the term with counterfactual reference. Hence, though the weight of usage favors "as," the argument will not here be invoked that, on purely grammatical grounds, the counterfactual usage is excluded. In any case however it is evident that the translation of *tanquam* as "as if" conforms to the subjective interpretation of the attributes; the translation of it as "as" to the realistic interpretation.

Spinoza's meaning, it appears, attained ample clarity in his own mind, and he saw no reasonable probability that readers would discover an equivocality in the definition. That he left these ambiguities intentionally is scarcely to be supposed.

We come now to the possible versions which, through translation, can be given to the definition. I shall indicate these first in symbols, to show their relations, and thereafter give them in verbal translations, and in that form discuss them.

Let the letters from a to f represent the indicated meanings: a, *intellectus finitus*; b, *intellectus infinitus*; c, *tanquam ejusdem essentiam constituens* as referring to *id quod*; d, *tanquam ejusdem essentiam constituens* as referring to the verb *percipit* in the clause *quod intellectus de substantia percipit*; e, *tanquam* translated "as if"; f, *tanquam* translated "as." Now the following combinations—all

---

counterfactual character. But the term "as if," in the manner here used, must mean the latter, i.e., "as if, though not in fact." Otherwise the conditional "if" would have no determinant bearing on the interpretations of the definition, and the expression "as if" would be indistinguishable in meaning from "as."

<sup>3</sup> Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1934), I, 146, 153.

possible with these meanings—may be noted: ace, acf, ade, adf, bce, bcf, bde, bdf. This gives eight versions of the definition. I shall now state these in words and for convenience of discussion examine them in the following order: 1, acf; 2, adf; 3, ace; 4, ade; 5, bce; 6, bde; 7, bdf; 8, bcf.

1. By attribute I understand that which, as in fact constituting the essence of substance, the finite intellect perceives of substance.

This version is at once recognized as invalid, i.e., as incompatible with the text, since it means: that, and *that only*, which a finite intellect perceives of the essence of substance, is to be identified with the attribute. The *definiens* is too narrow. If the infinite intellect perceived something of the essence of substance that a finite intellect did not perceive, then, according to this version, that character could not be an attribute. But the attributes are infinite in number, and no finite intellect can perceive an infinite number of attributes. If, by supposition, an intellect were conceived to do so, it would by necessity be conceived as infinite (*E*, II, 1, Schol.). Hence this version cannot be sustained.

Were the following proposition asserted: "That which, as in fact constituting the essence of substance, the finite intellect perceives of substance, is an attribute," the proposition would be true, but it would not constitute a definition of attribute.

2. By attribute I understand that which the finite intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence.

This version is excluded for the same reasons that apply to Version 1. The finite intellect cannot apprehend an infinity of attributes. If it cannot, there are attributes which it does not perceive. But this contradicts the sense of the present version.

3. By attribute I understand that which, as if (though not in fact) constituting the essence of substance, the finite intellect perceives of substance.

This version is plain nonsense. It states that there is something that is not the essence of substance but which exists as if it were that essence, and that this item is what "the finite intellect perceives of substance." Now it is clear that the attributes, in this case, cannot constitute the essence of substance. This, however, is incompatible with the text (*E*, I, Def. 6).

SPINOZA'S DEFINITION OF ATTRIBUTE

4. By attribute I understand that which the finite intellect perceives of substance as if (though not in fact) constituting its essence.

This version interprets the attributes as constructions of the finite mind. It is a form of the subjectivist view. That it is not valid, however, is evidenced by a number of reasons.

First, the term "finite intellect" cannot, in this version, refer to the human intellect, since the human intellect perceives two attributes only. But any other finite intellect, as we have seen (Version 1), would likewise be limited as to the number of attributes it could perceive. The attributes, however, are infinite in number. It follows that the term "finite" in the present version is unsustainable.

Second, the attributes are comprehended, whether by the infinite or the finite intellect, only by adequate, therefore true, ideas. But the *ideatum* of a true idea necessarily is (*E*, I, 30, Dem.; *E*, II, 34). Hence in this case the attribute, as actually pertaining to substance, necessarily is. But then an attribute is not subjective to the finite intellect. It would be impossible, i.e., contradictory, for the finite intellect to conceive an attribute adequately, "as if, though not in fact, constituting the essence of substance," since an attribute, to be adequately conceived, must be conceived as it is. It cannot be conceived, in the rational sense of the term "conceived" here used, as if it were something that is not. To suppose that, in the definition of attribute, Spinoza disregarded this point would be to put forward a very dubious assumption. Spinoza is too explicit about the ontological reference of a true idea to leave any plausibility to such a view.

If, however, in spite of this the present version were to be maintained, the thesis would have to be adopted that the attributes are not simply inadequately perceived but that they are, in their true natures, nothing but inadequate ideas of the finite mind. But such a construction is too incongruous with the text to require serious consideration.

Spinoza repeatedly says that the finite intellect has an adequate idea of God. By this he means that it perceives God adequately through those attributes that it comprehends. But the attributes are known by the intellect alone, not by external perception or imagination, i.e., inadequately.<sup>4</sup> And it is to emphasize this that

<sup>4</sup>The imagination yields inadequate ideas only (*E*, II, 28; *E*, II, 41).

Spinoza associates knowledge of the attributes with conceptions of the intellect and frequently refers to the one in relation to the other. His whole critique of the representations of God through images or imaginative analogies is that such representations, rather than revealing God through His attributes, that is, as in reality infinite, inevitably characterize Him through predicates that involve finitude, and hence in fact misrepresent Him.<sup>5</sup> From Spinoza's point of view, to believe that we can know God, or what is the same, His attributes, through the imagination, is basically mistaken. It is mistaken because, if we so believe, we cannot attain the attitude toward God described in Part V of the *Ethics*. If we do not conceive Him rightly, we cannot have the right attitude toward Him, or at least we cannot understand what this attitude is. Hence the importance for Spinoza of the thesis that the attributes are perceived by the intellect alone. But if the attributes are perceived by the intellect (in contradistinction to the imagination), they are perceived adequately, and hence they are; that is, they are objectively.

It is evident that no version of the definition that interprets the term "intellect" to mean the finite intellect is reconcilable with the text. And this excludes a fortiori any view that identifies the attributes with constructions of the human intellect.

5. By attribute I understand that which, as if (though not in fact) constituting the essence of substance, the infinite intellect perceives of substance.

As in Version 3, the phrase, "as if (though not in fact) constituting the essence of substance," gives little other than nonsense. In any case it is manifest (1) that in this version what the infinite intellect perceives of substance does not constitute the essence of substance, and (2) that this item which does not constitute the essence of substance is identified with attribute. As regards both points the version is invalid.

6. By attribute I understand that which the infinite intellect perceives of substance as if (though not in fact) constituting its essence.

This is a form of the subjective interpretation. It conceives the attributes as distinctions originating in the infinite intellect, and not referable as such to substance in its real nature. The invalidity of the version, however, is evidenced in its statement. The infinite intellect

<sup>5</sup> *E*, I, 15, Schol.; *E*, I, 17, Schol.; *E*, II, 3, Schol.; *E*, IV, Preface.

can perceive things only as they are. It could perceive nothing "as if (though not in fact) constituting the essence of substance." Otherwise it would be passive and subject to inadequate ideas. This, however, is not compatible with the nature of the infinite intellect, which can be subject to no inadequate ideas, and least of all to make-believe. According to this version, moreover, only that portion of what the infinite intellect perceives of substance that is *not* constitutive of the essence of substance is to be identified with the attributes. This is absurd.<sup>6</sup>

No force, moreover, attaches to the present version unless it is taken as rendered, i.e., "By attribute I understand that which the infinite intellect perceives of substance as if (though not in fact) constituting the essence of substance." For if the term "as if" in the version were taken to mean "as if, and also in fact," then the preposition "if" would have no force; "as if" would then mean "as," and this version would not be distinguishable from the one that follows. The emphasis here lies, therefore, on the phrase, "though not in fact." That this construction jars with Spinoza's meaning is at once evident. Thought is an attribute. The infinite intellect is a modification of the attribute of thought (*E*, I, 31). The attribute then, according to this view, is nothing but a thought of one of its own modifications. But this, again, is absurd.

Further, in terms of this version, God or substance, in His real nature, is unknowable and ineffable. His nature transcends ideas. The whole world of *natura naturata* then is, in its relation to God, inexplicable; in fact it is entirely phenomenal, and whatever reality

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *E*, I, 19, Dem.: "Again, by attributes of God is to be understood that which (Def. 4) expresses the essence of the divine substance, that is to say, that which pertains to substance." Also, *E*, I, 20, Dem.: "The same attributes of God, therefore, which (Def. 4) manifest the eternal essence of God, at the same time manifest His eternal existence, that is to say, the very same thing which constitutes the essence of God [i.e., the attributes] constitutes His existence. . . ."

It is to be noted that both of these passages point back to Def. 4, the definition of attribute, and are explanatory of that definition. It may also be noted that Spinoza here says that the attributes constitute the existence of God. This assertion should be considered in respect to any form of the subjective interpretation. If the attributes are subjective, i.e., phenomenal, or perceptions of the mind, then God's very existence is constituted of perceptions of the mind. This however is obviously impossible, and would clash directly with the conception of God as *causa sui*.



exists lies beyond the horizon of thought. But if this is the status of *natura naturata*, what becomes of the primal thesis (*E*, II, 7) that the order and connection of ideas is one with the order and connection of things? What are the things to which the ideas pertain and which have the same order and connection as the ideas? On this interpretation these questions remain unanswered.

Again, if the things thus referred to are phenomena and phenomena only, then they are dependent on thought. Spinoza, however, tells us that they are modes of another attribute, that each attribute is absolute, is infinite in its kind, and is therefore independent of the other attributes. The things then are not dependent on thought. This, however, is incompatible with the present version.

7. By attribute I understand that which the infinite intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence.

The meaning of this version is identical with that of the version which follows.

The infinite intellect is a mode of thought. And what the infinite intellect perceives, i.e., has adequate ideas of, is given in nature (*E*, I, 30 Dem.). Therefore, since the attributes are among the things perceived by the infinite intellect, the attributes are, i.e., are objectively. Nor can the attributes be merely perceptions of the infinite intellect, for then they would be nothing more than modes of a mode of thought. But the attributes are independent, one of another; hence they cannot be modes of a mode of thought. Or, in other words, they cannot be perceptions of the infinite intellect in contradistinction to the things of which those perceptions are perceptions. They are, in short, not perceptions of the infinite intellect but "that which the infinite intellect perceives [i.e., has adequate ideas of]." Then, however, the meaning of the present version is identical with that of the next version.

8. By attribute I understand that which, as in fact constituting the essence of substance, the infinite intellect perceives of substance.

We have already seen why the versions previous to Version 7 are invalid. The meaning of Version 7 and that of the present version coincide. It remains to indicate why this last version is valid.

The primary but not the sole reason for this lies in the term "infinite intellect." What the infinite intellect perceives must include anything that the finite intellect perceives. Also what the infinite

intellect perceives, i.e., comprehends through adequate ideas, must be in nature. No finite intellect, as we have seen, could perceive all of the attributes. Nevertheless all the attributes are attributes of substance. Hence the term "intellect" in the definition as given in the *Ethics* cannot refer to the finite intellect. To adjust the definition to the specification of infinite attributes, we must assume that the term "intellect" refers to the infinite intellect. The infinite intellect alone can perceive an infinite number of infinite attributes. And since, according to the text, the infinity of attributes is what the intellect perceives, the intellect that perceives it must be the infinite intellect. That Spinoza, moreover, in composing the definition of attribute, had in mind the infinite intellect is indicated explicitly in *E*, II, 7, Schol., in which he says: "Everything [i.e., the attributes] which can be perceived by the infinite intellect as constituting the essence of substance pertains entirely to the one sole substance only. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Now in the light of this it is scarcely necessary to raise the question: Are the attributes nevertheless merely perceptions or constructions of the infinite intellect and not real aspects of substance? The answer to this has already been given in the discussion of Version 7, where it was pointed out that the attributes would then be modes of a mode of thought, which is *prima facie* impossible.

But to neglect nothing that Spinoza considered relevant, I shall refer to a group of statements that bear directly on the point. First comes the definition of God: "By God, I understand Being absolutely infinite, that is to say, *substance consisting of infinite attributes*, each one of which expresses eternal and infinite essence."<sup>8</sup> Here Spinoza says as simply and straightforwardly as possible that God is substance consisting of infinite attributes. Are we to suppose that he did not mean this as here stated, or that he was not fully aware of what he was saying, particularly in the most central definition of the *Ethics*? Or are we to suppose that this was, as it were, a manner of speaking, and that by the expression "consisting of" he did not mean that the attributes are inherent in the essence, or that by the term "infinite" he did not mean a plurality of attributes

---

<sup>7</sup> For the relation of this passage to the definition of attribute, see Lewis Robinson, *Kommentar zu Spinozas Ethik* (Leipzig, Felix Meiner, 1928), p. 274. <sup>8</sup> Italics supplied.

but a single ineffable and uncharacterizable attribute? If we argue that Spinoza like Maimonides admitted no distinctions of any kind in the essence of God<sup>9</sup> and if this is what he in fact meant, then he could have selected no language more perfectly calculated to suggest a meaning directly opposed to his real meaning, especially when he could have given the latter plainly in words adjusted to it. But such a dubious use of language does not appear to be customary with Spinoza, and he repeats the assertion made in the definition of God in different words but no less specifically in *E*, I, 29, Schol.: "For, from what has gone before, I think it is plain that by *natura naturans* we are to understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself, or those attributes of substance which express eternal and infinite essence, that is to say . . . God in so far as He is considered as a free cause." But these reflections notwithstanding, we are urged, in drawing conclusions from Spinoza's reconstructed medieval background, to consider the definition of God as meaning that there is not *extra intellectum* a plurality of attributes, and that the attributes as a plurality are not in fact constitutive of the essence of substance.<sup>10</sup> In view of the explicit character of Spinoza's statements, this interpretation must appear doubtful.

Further, in *E*, I, 16, Dem., Spinoza makes the following assertion, in no way construable in a figurative or nonliteral sense: "But the divine nature possesses absolutely infinite attributes. . . ." And in *E*, I, 19, Dem., he says: "Again, by the attributes of God is to be understood that which (Def. 4) expresses the essence of divine substance, that is to say, *that which pertains to substance*. It is this very thing, I say, which the attributes themselves must involve."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Wolfson, *op. cit.*, pp. 115 ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118 ff. Note also a statement of the medieval view attributed to Spinoza: "First, all the attributes of God are in reality one attribute, and, whatever difference there may appear to exist between them, they do not affect the nature of God . . ." (p. 120). In this account the supposition that Spinoza might have exercised any independence of judgment seems to be taken as unthinkable. *Ethics* I is considered a restatement, scarcely more than a summary, of the conceptions of his medieval predecessors.

<sup>11</sup> Italics supplied. It must be borne in mind that on the subjective interpretation the attributes do not pertain essentially to substance, and are not characters of substance, but are ways in which the perceiving mind envisages substance. Take away the perceiving mind, on this view, and you take away the attributes also, although you leave substance intact—intact, that is, as an undifferentiated and attributeless substratum.

Moreover, in *E*, I, 4, Dem., he says: "There is nothing therefore outside the intellect by which a number of things can be distinguished one from another, but substances (or which is the same thing by Def. 4) their attributes and their affections." Here he asserts not simply that the attributes exist outside the intellect, but that they, with their modifications, are the sole things that do exist outside the intellect. Now pointed as this is, if nevertheless it is yet not sufficiently explicit, we may turn to *E*, I, 10, Schol.:

For this is the nature of substance, that each of its attributes is conceived through itself, *since all the attributes which substance possesses were always in it together*, nor could one be produced by another; [extension, for example, or extended things could not be produced by thought] but each expresses the reality or being of substance. It is far from being absurd, therefore, to ascribe to one substance a number of attributes, since nothing in nature is clearer than that each thing must be conceived under some attribute, and the more reality or being it has the more attributes it possesses expressing necessity or eternity or infinity.<sup>12</sup>

In Spinoza's view, to be conceived is to be conceived adequately, i.e., rationally, and to be conceived adequately is to be in nature.

How, it may be asked, could the infinite intellect perceive, i.e., have adequate ideas of, *ideata* that were not as they are perceived? How could it have true ideas of distinctions that have no ground in the nature of things? The answer is that it could not. If the infinite intellect has adequate ideas of the infinite attributes, then, to use Spinoza's terms, the infinite attributes exist formally as well as objectively,<sup>13</sup> or generally in our terms, objectively as well as subjectively. They could in no way be characterized as existing subjectively but not objectively, for "a true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea." If a true idea is present, then it must have an *ideatum*. Further, "All ideas which are in God [that is, in the infinite intellect] always agree with those things of which they are ideas (Corol. Prop. 7, pt. 2) and therefore (Axiom 6, pt. 1) they are all true" (*E*, II, 32, Dem.). One conclusion alone follows from

<sup>12</sup> Italics supplied.

<sup>13</sup> *E*, I, 30, Dem.: "Idea vera debet convenire cum suo ideato (per Axiom. 6), hoc est (ut per se notum) id, quod in intellectu objective continetur, debet necessario in natura dari . . . ergo intellectus actu finitus, aut actu infinitus Dei attributa, Deique affectiones comprehendere debet, et nihil aliud."

this: the attributes are real, i.e., objective, for they are *ideata* of adequate ideas in the infinite intellect. And if this reasoning is valid, then the so-called subjective interpretation of the attributes must be relegated to the sphere of fiction.

A final comment with regard to that interpretation is now relevant. The gist of the subjective interpretation is that it removes any plurality of attributes from the essence of substance. The essence of substance, it avers, contains no differentiation of any kind. "Substance is thus to Spinoza, like God to the medievals, absolutely simple, free from accidental as well as essential attributes. . . ." <sup>14</sup> Then from whence arises the predication of an infinite plurality of attributes? It must arise, according to this view, from the forms of cognition native to the intellect, but not applicable to substance. The infinite plurality of attributes is thus an invention of the mind.

If this is the case, however, the question arises as to how the intellect could invent or engender from within itself a multiplicity of forms whose prior rational possibility was not already given. From whence could this possibility issue? It must come from substance itself. But this places the plurality or differentiation right back in its source, i.e., the essence of substance, from which it was supposed to be removed. The proposed solution not only does not solve the problem but generates further problems quite as formidable as the one it purports to resolve.

Now the intellect that invents the infinite plurality of attributes cannot be the finite intellect; it must be the infinite intellect of God. The infinite attributes thus invented are not in God as God is in reality; they are forms of cognition of the infinite intellect. If God were perceived or apprehended as He is in reality, all distinctions between attribute and attribute would vanish, and His essence would be revealed as a unique attributeless or characterless nature. No character such as an attribute could be distinguished in it, for the essence is posited as free from distinctions of any kind. On this interpretation, the plurality of attributes is unreal; only the one undifferentiated essence is present, with no attribute and no plurality of attributes. The plurality of attributes is a contribution of the intellect.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfson, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

### SPINOZA'S DEFINITION OF ATTRIBUTE

The term "subjective" is used to indicate this status of the attributes. It means that any distinction between attribute and attribute is the outcome of the mind's envisagement and is, in fact, inapplicable as such to reality. Thought, in its real nature, is literally extension, and extension is literally thought, and so on for the other attributes. There is no difference or distinction of any kind between them as they are in themselves. But this hypothesis encounters important difficulties. If the attributes are identical in this absolute sense, then to know one as it is in fact, i.e., to have an adequate idea of one, is to know all, for there is no distinction between them. But the human intellect, as exemplifying the finite intellect, knows only two. Now if the finite intellect in knowing one or a limited number does in fact know all, then there is no distinction between it and the infinite intellect. The hypothesis of the real indistinguishability or absolute identity of the attributes removes any ground for the distinction of finite from infinite intellect, for the scope of the one, in that case, becomes identical with the scope of the other, namely, the total range of the attributes. Nor could the one have a more comprehensive knowledge of the essence of God than the other.

But the difficulties do not end here. If the attributes are one and indistinguishable in their real nature, then they cannot be respectively ultimate and infinite in their kinds, i.e., they cannot be independent. In what way could forms or characters the same to the point of identity be independent one of another, and possess natures such that each, to be conceived at all, must be conceived through itself? The implication of this is that either the attributes are not constitutive of the essence of substance (which is posited as free from internal distinctions of any kind), or they are not independent one of another (for in that case they are distinct). However, both of these positions are rejected by Spinoza and, as we have seen, run contrary to the sense of the *Ethics*.

Nevertheless, in accordance with the subjective view, there is, aside from the invention of the intellect, no distinction between the attributes. They are not many but one, and the one thing that they are taken to be is the essence of substance. This essence is qualitatively neutral but is viewed by the intellect in an infinite number of ways, and the ways in which it is viewed are considered to be

the attributes. If the intellect were by hypothesis taken away, there would be no infinity of attributes but simply one ineffable and undifferentenced essence.

This interpretation, though it effaces all distinctions from God's nature, threatens gravely the intelligibility of Spinoza's philosophy and the rational method it professes to follow. It makes Spinoza a pure mystic, with no available explanation of the modes, for the modes, as we have seen, cannot be taken as inventions of the intellect, since if they were they would be simply modifications of thought. Such a view, moreover, does not conform with Spinoza's exposition.<sup>15</sup> The world then truly becomes such stuff as dreams are made of, but why the dream should occur is a point sunk in impenetrable mystery. How an absolutely undifferentenced substance, as thus posited, could have any modes at all, not to say be the logical origin of an infinite world of modes, lies beyond the power of rational explanation. Spinoza could not then validly deduce things from God or explain things in terms of God, nor could he intelligibly say as he does in *E*, I, 17, Schol.:

But I think I have shown with sufficient clearness (Prop. 16) that from the supreme power of God, or from His infinite nature, infinite things in infinite ways, that is to say, all things, have necessarily flowed, or continually follow by the same necessity, in the same way as it follows from the nature of a triangle, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles.

For from a blank or an Absolute Indifferent nothing can be deduced.

It is true that if Spinoza is to be considered a mystic seer, essentially irrational or overrational in character, then the subjective interpretation, in spite of its discordance with the *Ethics*, would have the greater appeal. God becomes, on this view, a fathomless depth that somehow contains all things, yet without harboring within itself the slightest trace of difference. God, moreover, since

---

<sup>15</sup> The modes are distinguished fundamentally from one another by the attributes. "Omnia, quae sunt, vel in se, vel in alio sunt . . . , hoc est . . . extra intellectum nihil datur praeter substantias, earumque affectiones. Nihil ergo extra intellectum datur, per quod plures res distingui inter se possunt praeter substantias, sive quod idem est (per Defin. 4) earum attributa, earumque affectiones" (*E*, I, 4, Dem.).

## SPINOZA'S DEFINITION OF ATTRIBUTE

He is manifested to the intellect only through the infinite attributes, is, in this view, unknowable even to Himself, i.e., to the infinite intellect; a conclusion which at least one commentator has not hesitated to draw.<sup>16</sup> But the conclusion lacks any credible support in the *Ethics*.

If, however, in contradistinction to the subjective interpretation, Spinoza is taken to be a rationalist, then the attributes can be construed only as distinct but inherent and mutually inseparable characters of substance. In this case God's nature, though indivisible, contains the ground for all possible differentiation in the world. God and the world are not separate but constitute a single ultimate, rationally coherent, and all-inclusive system. And this is, in fact, the metaphysical basis of Spinoza's determinism.

FRANCIS S. HASEROT

*Williamsburg, Virginia*

---

<sup>16</sup> Lewis Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 66 n.: "Eine solche Folgerung hat indessen einen modernen Spinoza-forscher, G. Huan (*Le dieu de Spinoza*, 1913, p. 161) nicht aufgehalten. Spinoza, versichert er, *n'accorde en aucune façon que l'entendement, même infini, puisse avoir de la substance une connaissance absolue, une connaissance de ce qu'elle est en soi*. In wirklichkeit aber schreibt Spinoza eine absolute, adäquate Kenntniss der göttlichen Substanz nicht nur der Gottheit selbst, sondern auch dem menschlichen Verstand zu (S. Eth. II Prop. 47; vgl. auch Theol.-polit. c. 13: *intellectualis Dei cognitio ejus naturam prout in se est considerat*)."