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# Spinoza on the Essence, Mutability and Power of God

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This paper argues that Spinoza makes a distinction between the constitutive essence of God (the totality of His attributes) and the essence of God per se (His power and causal efficacy). Using this distinction, I explain how Spinoza can conceive of God as being both an immutable simple unity and a subject for constantly changing modes. Spinoza believes that God qua Natura Naturans is immutable while God qua Natura Naturata is not. With this point established, Curley's claim that Spinozistic modes are causally dependent on but not properties of God loses much of its attraction. In conclusion, I suggest how God's essence is related to His attributes and His modes.

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# SPINOZA ON THE ESSENCE, MUTABILITY AND POWER OF GOD

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## *Abstract*

This paper argues that Spinoza makes a distinction between the constitutive essence of God (the totality of His attributes) and the essence of God per se (His power and causal efficacy). Using this distinction, I explain how Spinoza can conceive of God as being both an immutable simple unity and a subject for constantly changing modes. Spinoza believes that God *qua Natura Naturans* is immutable while God *qua Natura Naturata* is not. With this point established, Curley's claim that Spinozistic modes are causally dependent on but not properties of God loses much of its attraction. In conclusion, I suggest how God's essence is related to His attributes and His modes.

Beginning with Bayle and his article on Spinoza in the *Dictionary*, commentators have often assumed that Spinoza believed that substance is a subject or substratum in which modes inhere as properties or qualities. Since Spinoza held that there is only one substance, God, this traditional view assumes that all modes are properties of or qualities inhering in God. Curley criticizes this traditional interpretation and offers an alternative (Curley 1969, 12-19). Spinoza conceives of substance as that which is dependent on nothing else. Modes are dependent on substance for their existence so cannot themselves be substances. This much is widely accepted. Curley also makes the further claim that for Spinoza modes do not inhere in the substance on which they depend. Rather, Curley argues, Spinoza believes that modes are *only* causally dependent on substance. In other words, God causes modes but modes are not qualities of God. The question, therefore, is whether modes merely causally depend on substance (as Curley argues) or depend on substance *because* they are inhering properties of substance (as is traditionally argued). This paper argues that Curley's criticism of the traditional interpretation fails and that his own interpretation is therefore not attractive. In doing so, however, it suggests that modes are properties of substance in a very particular way. Specifically, modes are expressions of the essence of substance. I believe that this intuition is central to Spinoza's thought, but this paper can do no more than flesh out some issues directly relevant to it.

## **The Problem**

Curley's position is supported by a seeming ambiguity in how early modern philosophers

defined substance. Descartes provides an obvious example. He sometimes defined substance as a subject or substratum in which properties inhere (CSMI, 214). At other times, he defined substance as "a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence" (CSMI, 210). According to the first definition, the difference between substance and mode is the difference between a subject and its qualities. Substance is the subject of all predication and everything which is not substance is an inhering quality of substance. According to the second definition, the difference between substance and mode is the difference between a causally self-sufficient thing and a causally dependent thing. Substance is what is self-caused and everything which is not substance is caused by substance.

Although a traditional Aristotelian would not think of taking one definition without the other, it is *possible* that a Seventeenth century reformer would see these definitions as sufficiently distinct that one could coherently be accepted without the other (Curley 1969, 4-11), although Descartes himself never did so. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines substance as "what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing" (E1D3). On the face of it, this definition is in accordance with Descartes' second definition and does not necessarily imply the first (cf. Curley 1991, 48-49). Consequently, the idea that Spinoza thinks of substance solely in terms of causal self-sufficiency is not completely implausible. In other words, it is not absurd to argue that Spinoza conceived the substance-mode relationship as a purely causal one. Even if Curley's interpretation is possible, however, it is not very convincing. Spinoza was well aware of the meaning of 'substance,' and we cannot assume that he would use it in the misleading way that Curley suggests (cf. Bennett 1991, 53). Curley's account is feasible only if he explains why Spinoza would deny that modes are also inhering qualities of substance.

Curley defends his position by arguing that Spinoza could not claim that modes are qualities of God without holding obviously absurd beliefs about God. Since Spinoza would not want to hold absurd beliefs about God, Curley argues, he must not have claimed that modes are qualities of God. The argument is based on the notion--which is entailed by the traditional interpretation--that properties of modes are properties of God. If a mode is merely a quality of a substance, then

anything predicated of that quality is also predicated of the substance. This notion leads to three 'absurdities':

that we would have to predicate properties of God which are unworthy of him (we would have to ascribe directly to God every odious action that man performs); that we would have to predicate contradictory properties of God (since...one man may want what another man does not want); and that we would have to think of God as changeable (since every time a man changes his mind, it would be God who was changing his mind). (Curley 1991, 37)

The first two 'absurdities' clearly pose no problem for Spinoza. Spinoza would find the first absurdity to be based on a confused way of thinking. It is only by a "mode of imagining" (EI Appendix, iii) that we find things 'odious,' and so God is not really odious in Himself. The second absurdity is not a worry because modes, being finite and durational, are indexed to a place and a time. There is no absurdity in saying that God is blue at one mode (say, a jacket) and not-blue at another spatio-temporally distinct mode (say, a pen). Consequently, only the third 'absurdity' is addressed here. Because Curley believes that God would be changeable if the traditional interpretation were correct, he believes that Spinoza must deny that modes are properties of God. On the other hand, if modes are merely causally dependent on God, then properties of modes are not properties of God; modes could change without God changing. According to Curley, either God is changeable or God is immutable and is not a subject of predication. Since Curley believes that Spinoza would not accept the first option, he thinks that Spinoza developed the second.

However, a more plausible interpretation is available. Understood in one way, Spinoza's God does not change; understood in another way, He does. More specifically, Spinoza believes that God *qua Natura Naturans* is immutable, but God *qua Natura Naturata* undergoes change. *Natura Naturans* is "what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or [sive] such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, i.e...God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause" (EIP29S, cf. E2P9). *Natura Naturans* is God considered insofar as he is infinite, eternal and unmodified by modes. *Natura Naturata* is God considered insofar as he is modified by finite modes (E1P29S). God considered as the infinite cause of all things, or as the attributes that express God's essence, is immutable. God considered as modified undergoes change. EIP20, the proposition in which Spinoza asserts that God is immutable, refers only to God *qua Natura*

*Naturans*--to God considered independently of His modes--and consequently there is insufficient reason to accept Curley's interpretation. Since Spinoza claims only that God *qua Natura Naturans* is immutable, there is no reason for him to deny that God *qua Natura Naturata* has modal properties. The next four sections defend this claim.

### **The Immutability of god**

First, however, Curley's challenge should be clarified. According to Aristotle's famous account of substance in the *Categories*, substances can remain one and the same thing (i.e., retain the same essence) while accepting different modifications. Thus, Socrates remains Socrates regardless of whether his skin is tan or pale. If this is the case for God, then He could accept different modifications while remaining the same thing. Spinoza argues that God is immutable in EIP20. He writes,

God (by P19) and all of his attributes are eternal, i.e. by (D8), each of his attributes expresses existence. Therefore, the same attributes of God which (by D4) explain God's eternal essence at the same time explain his eternal essence, i.e., that itself which constitutes God's essence at the same time constitutes his existence. So his existence and his essence are one and the same... (EIP20).

And,

It follows...that God, *or [sive]* all of God's attributes, are immutable. For if they changed as to their existence, they would also (by P20) change as to their essence...which is absurd (EIP20C2).

To determine whether Spinoza's God can accept different modes in the same way as Aristotle's substances, we need a better understanding of what Spinoza means by 'change' and 'immutable.'

Spinoza provides definitions of these concepts in Chapter IV of part 2 of *Metaphysical Thoughts*. Spinoza defines 'change' as "whatever [modal] variation there can be in a subject while the very essence of the subject remains intact" (MT, part 2, chpt. IV). If God can change in this sense, then He can take on different modes while His essence remains intact. Unfortunately, EIP20 strongly suggests that God cannot change in this sense. In EIP20C2 Spinoza explains that 'God, *or [sive]* all of God's attributes, are immutable.' Spinoza argues that because God's existence and essence are the same, any change in His existence would also be a change in His essence. But God's essence is an eternal truth (EIP19), so if it were to change in any way it would change from being true to being false, which is absurd. In the *Metaphysical Thoughts* (part 2, chpt. 4) Spinoza explains that something immutable *undergoes no change*, modal or otherwise. If God

is immutable (EIP20C2), then He cannot be the subject of modal variation.

Aside from the above interpretations of 'change' and 'immutable,' there is an independent reason to think that Spinoza is committed to the notion that God does not undergo modal change. Spinoza is concerned to explicate a notion of God that "will have nothing in common with man, but will have enough in common with the God of the philosophers to justifiably be called God" (Curley 1991, 40). Curley is right about this, and he is also right to point out that an essential part of this project is to maintain that God does not change, even modally. If Spinoza means for his God to 'justifiably be called God,' then he must avoid an account in which God undergoes modal change. As Bayle puts it, if Spinoza's God undergoes modal change, then He is "not at all the supremely perfect being, *with whom there is neither a shadow of alteration, nor any variation* (James 1:17)" (Bayle 1991, 307-308). But the traditional account of Spinoza's conception of substance implies that properties of modes are properties of God, so it seems that any time a mode changes, God changes.

EIP20 raises a dilemma for the traditional interpretation. To make the traditional interpretation and EIP20 consistent, it seems that we either have to deny that modes change or assert that God is mutable. The first move is taken by idealist interpreters who claim that the apparent changes we see in the world are merely changes of reason. Under this interpretation, the world is a sort of Parmenidean unity, which may seem to change in the imagination but never changes in fact. The second move is taken by Bennett (Bennett 1984, §49.3), who cannot see how God could be immutable and so holds that Spinoza believed otherwise. Neither move is very appealing.

There is a third alternative. If EIP20 refers only to God *qua Natura Naturans*, then God *qua Natura Naturata* may undergo modal change. For several reasons, it is plausible to think that Spinoza limits EIP20 in this way. First, it is not safe to assume that the *Metaphysical Thoughts* is always representative of Spinoza's own beliefs. Officially written as an account of Cartesian philosophy (Meyer's Introduction, I/131), not everything written in it expresses Spinoza's own considered beliefs. Consequently, we cannot assume that the Spinoza of the *Ethics* accepts the doctrine that God cannot undergo change in any sense merely because he presents it in the

*Metaphysical Thoughts*. More importantly, if EIP20 refers only to God *qua Natura Naturans*, then God *considered in this way* is immutable in exactly the sense described in the *Metaphysical Thoughts*. Second, EIP17 describes God as a free cause, and EIP21 refers to God's nature only insofar as it is absolute (i.e., is *Natura Naturans*), so it is possible that EIP20 also refers to God only insofar as He is *Natura Naturans*. Finally, EIP20 does not refer to modes, but only to God and His attributes. Nonetheless, these are weak grounds for accepting any particular interpretation of EIP20.

### **The Constitutive and Expressed Essence of Substance**

Fortunately, there is a principled reason to believe that 'essence' and 'existence' in EIP20 refer only to the essence and existence of God *qua Natura Naturans*. Daniel Flage convincingly argues that 'essence' is used in two different ways in the *Ethics*, which correspond to two ways in which God's essence can be conceived. These two uses of 'essence' correspond to two kinds of definition distinguished in the *Port-Royal Logic*. First, a substance is defined *per genus et differentiam* when it is defined "in terms of its essential form or principal attribute, that is,...[when it is] subsumed under the genus substance and differentiated into a kind on the basis of its form or attribute" (Flage 1989, 148). Descartes defines substance in this way when he argues that the essence of every substance is its principal attribute. Corresponding to this sort of definition is a constitutive relationship between the substance and its principal attribute. For example, the constitutive essence of *res extensa* is the principal attribute of which it is constituted, i.e., extended stuff (cf. CSM1, 210). The constitutive essence of Spinoza's God, therefore, is the totality of His attributes.

Second, a substance is defined by "description" when the definition "gives some information about the nature of a thing by expressing the proper accidents of any referent of the defined word" (Arnaud, *The Art of Thinking: Port Royal Logic*, p.165, quoted in Flage 1989, 148). In a definition by description a substance is defined *per se* without being differentiated as a kind. Such a definition tells us what a substance is in itself, but does not necessarily tell us what kind of thing it is. Consequently, different kinds can be identified as the same substance because they all express the essence of substance *per se*, whatever that may be. The essence of God *per se* is whatever it is



of God that every attribute expresses, which is what explains why anything is an attribute *of God*.

In the opening propositions of the *Ethics*, hypothetical substances of one attribute are presented as being constituted by attributes. In E1D4 attributes are defined as being constitutive of the essence of substance; in E1D6 God is partially defined as "a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes"; and in E1P4 substances are identified with the attributes they have. The constitutive sense of essence is clearly the dominant one in the early propositions of the *Ethics*.

In E1P9 and E1P10, however, Spinoza shifts to definition by description. E1P9 is the first proposition in which Spinoza explicitly states that there could be substances of more than one attribute. In E1P10, Spinoza argues that an absolutely infinite being must consist of infinite attributes. If there is a God, therefore, He consists of infinite attributes. This claim has a significant impact on how Spinoza understands the relationship between substances and attributes. As Flage writes, "in contending that a substance can have more than one attribute, Spinoza implicitly rejects the genus-species conception of substance, for if a substance can have more than one form or attribute, then no attribute is guaranteed to constitute the specific difference among substances....Spinoza rejects that notion of a principal attribute, and, in so doing, he rejects the Cartesian grounds for drawing distinctions among substances" (Flage 1989, 152-153).

Given the definition of a constitutive essence of a substance constituted by one attribute, we will still be unable to distinguish it as a distinct thing (E1P10S). Because of the identity of indiscernibles, no substances of one attribute exist. Spinoza later (E1P14) concludes that all attributes are attributes of God rather than being substances of one attribute each, and there is "nothing clearer than that a being absolutely infinite must be defined...as a being that consists of infinite attributes, *each of which expresses a certain eternal and infinite essence*"(E1P10S, my italics). Note that Flage's argument does not entail that God lacks a constitutive essence. Because God is the only substance and consists of all attributes, He does not have to be differentiated from other substances.

After E1P10 Spinoza most often asserts that attributes *express* rather than *constitute* the essence of substance. After E1P11, the expressing relation is used exclusively in eight propositions (E1P16, E1P19, E1P25, E1P29, E1P31, E1P32, E1P35) of Part 1, the constituting relation in only one

(EIP20), which is considered below. This terminological shift signifies that Spinoza turns his focus from the constitutive essence of substance to the essence of substance per se, which is defined by description. A definition by description identifies the essence of God without reference to what God may consist of. It tells us what quality all attributes of God have. I suggest that the essence of substance per se is given in EIP34, where the essence of substance is asserted to be "God's power...itself." Spinoza writes, "from the necessity of God's essence it follows that God is the cause of himself (by E1P11) and (by EIP16 and EIP16C) of all things. God's power, by which he and all things are and act, *is his essence itself, q.e.d.*" (EIP34D, my italics). When Spinoza writes that God's attributes express his essence, therefore, we should understand him to mean that God's attributes express His essence itself (cf. EIP10S). In other words, God's attributes express His power (cf. EIP36). It is because the essence of substance per se (i.e., power) is expressed by every attribute of God that He is more than a bundle of substances.

#### ***Natura Naturans* as the Essence of Substance Per Se**

To this point I have only made the weak claim that there are two senses of 'essence' in the *Ethics*. On the one hand, attributes are constitutive of God's definition and essence. On the other hand, attributes express God's power (i.e., the essence of substance per se). The claim is weak because both of these conceptions of God's essence are prominent in the *Ethics*, and I have done little more than identify and distinguish them. Flage uses the distinction between God's constitutive essence and God's expressed essence to make substantial claims. First, he identifies the essence of substance per se with *Natura Naturans*. Second, he argues that the expressed essence has metaphysical significance, whereas the constitutive essence has purely epistemological significance. The first claim is well founded and helpful, but the second is problematic.

Flage writes, "the power of God, that is, the ability to act (compare EIP11D3), is the essence of God as *Natura Naturans*" (Flage 1989, 157). Flage's argument hinges on the similarity of the account of God's essence in EIP34 and the account of *Natura Naturans* in EIP29. It is of God's essence for all things to follow from God as their cause (EIP34). God's power is that by which all things act, and therefore power is His essence (EIP34). In other words, God, as the cause of all

things, has power as His essence. In EIP29, *Natura Naturans* is defined as "what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or [*sive*] such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, i.e., (by EIP14C1 and EIP17C2), God insofar as he is considered as a free cause" (EIP29). The important phrase is 'God insofar as he is considered as a free cause' because insofar as God is considered as a cause, He is power (cf. EIP34-36). This seems to be a likely interpretation since Spinoza asserts that "in nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the *divine nature* to exist and produce an effect in a certain way" (EIP29, my italics). Insofar as God is a free cause, His essence is power and He is the cause of everything. Insofar as He is determined by *Natura Naturans*, He is *Natura Naturata* (EIP29D).

God's power pervades all of His attributes and is expressed in each of them. If this were not the case, then there would be nothing that attributes could be attributes of, and they would themselves be substances. Of course, *Natura Naturans* is by definition 'such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence.' Although Spinoza identifies *Natura Naturans* with God's power, he also identifies *Natura Naturans* with the attributes that express God's essence. Consequently, there is a question regarding how substance's constitutive essence and the essence of substance per se are related. Flage's second claim is meant to address this issue.

According to Flage, when Spinoza denies that hypothetical substances of one attribute can be distinguished by their constitutive essences (i.e., their attributes) "the metaphysical notion of a constitutive essence is abandoned" (Flage 1989, 153). From this point on, Flage asserts, "the metaphysical notion of the constitutive essence of substance is replaced by a purely epistemological notion of the constitutive essence of substance: insofar as substance is conceived as composed of attributes, this merely provides one with the explication of substance" (Flage 1989, 154). In Flage's account, substance *as known* is constituted by attributes. In other words, the constitutive essence has purely epistemic significance: the attributes, which express the essence of substance per se, explain *Natura Naturans*. An implication of Flage's account is that the attributes exist objectively only to the extent that God expresses His essence through them. We know what substance is per se through substance's attributes, but the attributes constitute substance only subjectively or ideally. The constitutive essence is subjective and has purely epistemological

significance; the essence of substance per se is objective and has metaphysical significance.

Flage is not entitled to draw this conclusion. One may argue that the constitutive essence is identical to the expressed essence, in the following sense. The attributes which constitute God's essence are different ways in which His power is expressed. On this account, each of God's attributes is one sort of activity of God. God's power is an activity which is expressed as extension, thought, etc. As De Dijn writes, "far from being only a way of apprehending substance, an attribute--as constituting the essence of substance-- determines the *sort* of activity that substance is capable of: it determines the sort of effects or modifications that follow from substance" (De Dijn 1996, 197). God's power is not an 'energy' that exists 'behind' His attributes, but is rather the attributes themselves insofar as they express power. Thus, God is constituted of the various ways in which He expresses His power. If the attributes are real only insofar as they express God's power, as Flage claims, then they are real to the same extent that his power is real. This account is consistent with the force of Flage's argument but avoids the subjectivist conclusion.

I believe that something like De Dijn's account is right, and the possibility of this sort of account (cf. Donagan, 89) is sufficient to demonstrate that Flage is not entitled to the conclusion that the constitutive essence of substance has no metaphysical status. Since the subjective account of attributes is highly problematic (cf. Hubbeling 1967, 42; Hart 1983, 18), Flage's second claim should be set aside. However, this does not nullify the force of Flage's first claim or the significance of the distinction between constitutive and expressed essences. In De Dijn's account the distinction is still significant because there is a conceptual distinction between the essence of substance per se (i.e., His power) and all the sorts of activity (i.e., the totality of God's attributes) that make up without remainder the essence of substance per se. In the next section I use this distinction to demonstrate that EIP20 refers only to *Natura Naturans*.

### **The Immutability of God**

To this point I have argued that there is a useful conceptual distinction to be made between substance's constitutive essence and the essence of substance per se. Furthermore, I have argued that the essence of substance per se should be identified with *Natura Naturans* and God's power. The essence of God *qua Natura Naturans* is power, and power is God's essence itself.

Furthermore, God's essence itself is expressed by His attributes.

With these conclusions, we are prepared to interpret EIP20. EIP20 asserts that "the same attributes of God which (by E1D4) explain God's eternal essence at the same time explain his eternal existence, i.e., that itself which constitutes God's essence at the same time constitutes his eternal existence. So his existence and essence are one and the same." The key to understanding this passage is Spinoza's claim that the attributes of God 'explain' his eternal essence and his eternal existence. 'Explain' appears in similar contexts in E2P5 and E4P4, where God is asserted to be a power which is explained by a particular attribute or a person's 'actual essence,' respectively (E2P5D, E4P4D). In these two passages God, considered as the free cause of all things, is understood in terms of an attribute or a mode which expresses His power. The attribute and the mode explain God's power as being a sort of activity or expression of a sort of activity, respectively. This is an example of how the constitutive essence of God and *Natura Naturata* can serve as the means by which God's power is known. It must be kept in mind, of course, that neither God's attributes nor *Natura Naturata* are really distinct from God (i.e., nature), but they are distinct from God considered as power insofar as they express His power. Likewise, God's power itself is distinct from any one of His attributes and God's power is conceptually distinct from the totality of His attributes.

Spinoza asserts that the attributes of God explain His eternal essence. If Spinoza's use of 'explain' follows his use elsewhere, this assertion can be translated as 'God's power is being expressed by His attributes.' What is being explained is God's causal activity (the essence of God per se) insofar as each attribute is a certain sort of activity. In other words, when Spinoza writes, "attributes...explain God's eternal essence," God's eternal essence is His power. The argument for the immutability of God is that God's existence and essence are eternal truths, but 'God's existence and essence' refer only to God per se. Since the essence of God per se--God's power--is God *qua Natura Naturans*, what is explained in EIP20 is God *qua Natura Naturans*. As such, there is no problem with claiming that the essence and existence referred to in EIP20 is immutable in the sense that it does not undergo modal change, for God *qua Natura Naturans* does not change. On the other hand, *Natura Naturata* can undergo modal change. Consequently, God (*qua Natura*

*Naturans*) can be immutable while God (*qua Natura Naturata*) changes.

We neither have to make the blanket statement that God is changeable nor make the questionable claim that God's modes are in Him only insofar as they are caused by Him. Considered in one way, God is immutable; considered in another way, He changes. Consequently, Curley's argument against the traditional interpretation fails. This is the conclusion I hoped to reach, but it is not completely satisfying. It leaves unanswered the question of exactly how the relationship between God and His modes should be characterized. However, our analysis of the relationship between attributes and substance per se suggests that the traditional interpretation, that modes are merely qualities, is not quite right. It is plausible that modes are expressions of God's power. Modes are predicates of God in the sense that they are particular expressions of attributes of God and, thereby, of God's essence. Modes as expressions need not be either mere inhering qualities of God nor be merely causally dependent of God. Rather, they could be immanent expressions of God's essence, and as such they could have 'thingness.' Unfortunately, this possibility cannot be further explored here (see E1P25, E1P31, E1P32, E3P6, E4P4).

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