Spinoza's *Ethics*

An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide

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Contents

Writing and Reading the *Ethics*

One reason for the difficulty of reading the *Ethics* is that Spinoza wrote it using 'the geometrical method'. The *Ethics* is not written in paragraphs of fluent prose, but in definitions, axioms, propositions and demonstrations.

Why does Spinoza use the geometrical method, which he himself admits is 'cumbersome'? Setting out propositions geometrically was not a wholly uncommon mode of philosophical presentation at the time. It enables the philosopher to construct a grid of cross-references, each proposition demonstrable by reference to earlier ones, building up to a complex network of interrelated truths. Many students, once they get used to it, actually prefer Spinoza's geometrical method to the florid prose of Hume or the awkward textual constructions of Kant. Every proposition is fully explained, right there and then. If you cannot understand how a proposition is justified, Spinoza tells you exactly which earlier propositions you need to return to in order to demonstrate it. It is a remarkably clear and efficient method of writing.

Spinoza has another good reason for using the geometrical method, namely, that it has an important relation to the way the reader's understanding develops. Earlier, I called the *Ethics* a workbook designed to help the reader develop his or her own reasoning.

The *Ethics* is therefore not like philosophical texts written in prose. It is not a commentary on reality that explains the truth. Rather, it is an exercise in *unfolding* the truth through the *active thinking* of the reader. The *Ethics* is philosophy as activity and performance. As we read it, we are meant to be caught up in a certain movement of thought and to understand the truth through the activity that Spinoza draws us into. The reader is displaced from her usual position of externality to the text and made to be part of its workings. This is one reason why the *Ethics* is so difficult to read, but also why it is so intoxicating.

In the *Ethics*, you will encounter the following elements:

- **Definitions** which set out the meanings of key terms.
- **Axioms** which set out basic, self-evident truths. (More will be said about definitions and axioms in Part I.)
- **Propositions** – the points that Spinoza argues for – and their **demonstrations**.
- **Corollaries**, which are propositions that follow directly from the propositions they are appended to.

- **Scholia**: explanatory remarks on the propositions. In the scholia, Spinoza comments on his demonstrations, gives examples, raises and replies to objections and makes piquant observations about people's beliefs and practices. The scholia are some of the most interesting and enjoyable passages of the *Ethics*.

Before we begin, here are a few tips for reading the *Ethics*:

- It is important to read the book sequentially. Because the later propositions depend on earlier ones, this is not a book in which you can easily skip back and forth.
- If time allows, read the whole of the *Ethics*. If your university course treats only some sections of the text, read the whole Part in which those sections occur.
- Read slowly and carefully. Try to understand what Spinoza is trying to prove and to work through Spinoza's demonstration.
- Sometimes it is helpful to read over a few propositions quickly, to get a gist of where Spinoza is going, before returning to read the demonstrations and scholia in detail.
- You may need to read some demonstrations multiple times (and even then, they may not make sense).
- You will encounter a lot of terms that are unfamiliar or that don't mean what you think they mean. Don't panic – this book is here to help.

Make use of this *Philosophical Guide* to whatever extent you find helpful. It can be read concurrently with the *Ethics* or referred to afterwards. I clarify Spinoza's meaning as I understand it, based on my extensive work with his text and commentaries on it. I offer relevant examples as often as possible. I have developed a series of figures which illustrate some of Spinoza's most difficult points. My concern throughout has been with the experience of you, the reader, as you encounter the difficulties of the *Ethics*, and as you discover its fascination.

Abbreviations

I refer to Edwin Curley's translation of the *Ethics*. Quotes and other references are not to page number, but rather to proposition number

(and, where relevant, corollary number, scholium number, etc.). I make use of the following abbreviations.

D = Definition
A = Axiom
P = Proposition
Dem. = Demonstration
C = Corollary
S = Scholium
Exp. = Explanation
L = Lemma
Post. = Postulate
Pref. = Preface
App. = Appendix
Def. Aff. = 'Definitions of the Affects' at the end of Part III.

1. A Guide to the Text

Part I: Being, Substance, God, Nature

Probably the most difficult challenge you will face in reading the *Ethics* is getting through Part I. You are presented with strange terminology, difficult metaphysical concepts and a series of arguments that don't seem to be about anything real or concrete. These barriers can make reading this Part confusing, frustrating and boring. But with a little guidance, these initial sections will open up and become clearer. Once you have grasped the basic ideas Spinoza sets out, you will begin to understand his conception of reality, and that gives you the key to everything else in the book. The aim of this section is to help you to read this first Part and to clarify your own understanding – not only of Spinoza's text, but of reality itself.

One of the reasons for the difficulty of Part I is that it is concerned with ontology. Ontology is the theory of being: before we understand what *things* are, we need to understand what *being* is. What are we talking about when we say that things *are*? What is the source of the *being* of things?

Spinoza's basic idea is that *being is one*, that *being* is equivalent to God and that all the individual beings we experience are 'modes' of being and thus 'modes' of God. This is what Spinoza tries to convince you of in Part I.

The Seventeenth-century Common-sense View

One way in to the *Ethics* is to consider the readers for whom Spinoza was writing. Seventeenth-century readers came to Spinoza's text with a certain common-sense view of the world, a view which Spinoza hoped to convince them was misguided. Taking their perspective helps us to understand his purpose; at the same time, it makes us question the common-sense views that we too bring to the text. This helpful method of starting to read the *Ethics* I borrow from Curley (1988).

Spinoza knew that his readers would come to the *Ethics* with some ontological ideas already in mind. This is no less true today than it was in the seventeenth century. Even if you don't have a well worked-out theory of being, it is inevitable that you hold *some* conception of reality. It is likely, for instance, that you think of the things in the world around you as separate, individual objects. Probably you think of yourself as something that is independent of material things and different from them due to your subjectivity, consciousness or free will. Perhaps you think of your mind as a wholly material part of the body, or perhaps that your mind is a different, immaterial kind of entity. You may think of yourself as having a soul that will exist in another form after death.

Spinoza's seventeenth-century readership would have held a similar set of views, a combination of the Aristotelian principles that had been the basis of science and metaphysics for hundreds of years, and the philosophy of minds and bodies that had recently been proposed by Descartes. Spinoza's readers were thoroughly familiar with certain Aristotelian principles, the most basic of which is the idea that the universe is made up of substances and their attributes. For Aristotle, substances are the basic, independently existing 'things' of the universe, and attributes are their changeable properties. Whereas attributes depend on substances for their existence, substances do not *logically* depend on anything beyond themselves. The existence of a substance, such as a human body, does not *logically require* the existence of anything else to be what it is. By contrast, the property 'weight' cannot exist unless it is the weight of some body. 'Weight' does not exist independently; it *logically requires* the existence of a substance in order to exist.

Descartes heavily revised this Aristotelian picture in his 1644 work *Principles of Philosophy* and in his earlier *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The ideas in these texts shook up the Aristotelian world-view which

had held sway for centuries. Descartes agreed with Aristotle that the universe is made up of innumerable substances with changeable properties. But he believed that underlying those changeable properties, every substance has one fundamental property that is essential to it. Substances which are bodies have the property of *extension*. 'Extension' is a term philosophers use to refer to the way things take up space, or their physicality (imagine a point 'extending' itself in space to become a line, then a two-dimensional figure, then a three-dimensional figure). Although the particular extent of a body is subject to change, the property of *extension as such* is not removable or changeable. Descartes also believed there were non-physical substances, minds, which have the essential property of *thinking*. Just as extension is essential to what it is to be a body, thinking is essential to what it is to be a mind. These essential properties, extension and thinking, Descartes called 'principal attributes', whereas he called changeable properties 'modes' of those attributes. Substances, for Descartes, are either 'extended substances' (bodies) or 'thinking substances' (minds), and these two kinds of substance are fundamentally different. Descartes posited, and attempted to demonstrate, a necessarily existing infinite thinking substance, God, who creates and sustains the existence of all these substances.

A seventeenth-century Cartesian, then, believed that the world is made up of an enormous number of substances, some of them minds and others bodies, whose existence is made possible by a necessarily existing God. Figure 1.1 represents this common-sense view of multiple substances with their principal attributes.

Spinoza's objective in Part I is to convince readers that their common-sense, Aristotelian–Cartesian view of a world of multiple, individual substances is wrong. He does this by letting readers discover that if they start with *good definitions* of terms like substance, attribute and God, they will *not* arrive at the conception of reality described by Descartes or Aristotle. They will, instead, work through Spinoza's propositions and arguments to arrive at the *true* conception of reality: a single substance equivalent to God.

Definitions

This is why Spinoza begins Part I with *definitions*. If we are going to make use of terms like substance and attribute in order to understand

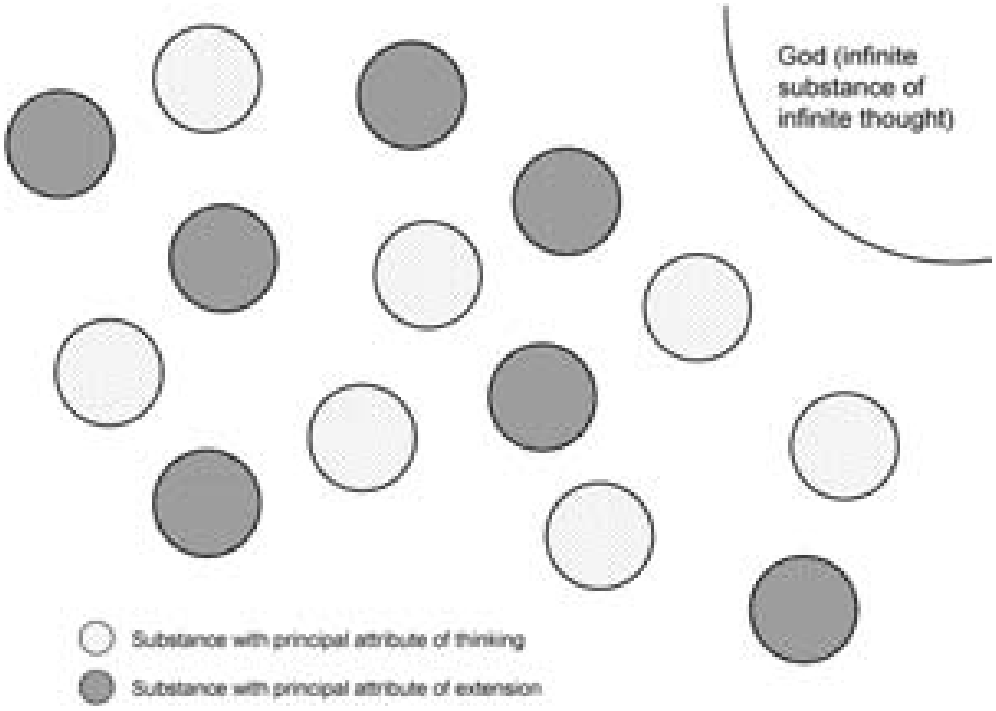

Figure 1.1 The seventeenth-century common-sense view of the world

reality truly, we need to start with a clear understanding of those terms.

Spinoza defines ideas that his readers believe they already understand. In so doing, he clarifies our understanding of these ideas, revealing that our concepts of substance, attribute, mode and God are not as clear and consistent as we imagine.

Let us now look at some of the definitions in detail. Things are likely to seem a bit patchy and incoherent until everything comes together around Proposition 15. Be patient, read carefully and things will soon fall into place.

D1 states: 'By **cause of itself** I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.' If you think about this, you will see what Spinoza means. Something which *causes itself* brings about its own existence; logically, it must already exist in order to bring about its own existence. It exists 'prior' to its own existence. A being that is cause of itself, then, cannot *not exist*. Its nature cannot be conceived as not existing. In other words, it is in its very nature to exist; its essence involves existence.

The existence of 'cause of itself' must be of an eternally active nature. For if this thing had to exist 'prior' to its own existence, it cannot be the case that it ever 'started' to cause its own existence (to start to cause its existence would require that it already existed, which would require that it already caused its existence, and so on). Nor could it 'finish' causing its existence and continue to exist. This thing must be eternal, not only in the sense of eternally existing, but

in the sense of eternally bringing about its existence. The essence of 'cause of itself' is to exist as the eternal activity of 'actualising' itself. It exists both as the power to cause its actuality and as the actual effect of its own causal power.

Now read D3: 'By **substance** I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself.' To understand this definition, we need to understand what Spinoza means by the word 'in'. When Spinoza uses phrases such as 'in itself' and 'in another' (as in D5), 'in' does not mean 'inside'. Rather, 'in' denotes a relation of logical dependence. What is 'in itself' depends logically on itself. What is 'in another' depends logically on another thing: that other thing is *prior in nature* to it.

Substance *is in itself*; this means that a substance depends, for its being, on itself alone. Similarly, the concept of a substance is not formed from the concept of another thing. A substance is not understood through the concept of something else, but rather *is conceived through itself* alone. A substance requires nothing beyond itself to exist and a true understanding of it requires nothing outside of the concept of the substance itself. In other words, a substance is that which is ontologically and epistemologically independent and self-subsistent. Note that Spinoza's definition of a substance does not contradict the seventeenth-century common-sense view, which similarly understands a substance to be independent. Spinoza does not disagree with that view; he merely clarifies it.

Skip ahead to D5: 'By **mode** I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived.' Whereas a substance *is in itself*, a mode *is in another*. The being of a mode depends on the being of another thing which is logically prior to it, and the mode can be truly understood only through the concept of that logically prior other thing. This means that in order for a mode to *be*, and in order for it to *be conceived*, something else must already be and be conceived. The mode is defined as 'the affections of a substance', which means the changeable properties of a substance. So the being that is logically prior to the mode is a substance, and a mode is dependent on substance, both in its being and in its being-conceived. In Part I, Spinoza uses the words 'mode' and 'affections' interchangeably. The mode is a mode of substance or its affections: the changeable properties that are ontologically and epistemologically dependent on a substance.

From D1, D3 and D5, we understand what a substance is, in its most basic definition. A substance is, simply, *that which is* prior to, and independent of, its modes. At its most basic, a substance is pure, indeterminate being. This pure, indeterminate being *is* and *is conceived*. The very first principles of reality are that *there is being* and *there is conceiving of being*. A substance depends on itself alone for its being, strongly suggesting that it is 'cause of itself', the eternal activity of causing its existence. If that suggestion turns out to be right, then *being as such* is the power of making itself actual.

We now need to look at Spinoza's definition of **attribute** in D4. This is a difficult concept to grasp. The definition of attribute as 'what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence' can be misleading. Spinoza does not mean that each person's intellect perceives a substance in a different way. Nor does he mean that attributes are subjective illusions or 'mere appearances'. But he does mean that attributes are the different ways in which a substance *can be* perceived. The intellect can truly perceive a substance, but not as pure, indeterminate being. The intellect always perceives a substance *as* one of its attributes. An attribute *is the substance itself*, as perceived in a certain way.

To clarify this, adopt the position of the seventeenth-century common-sense reader. You believe that the world is full of substances, as defined in D3, and that those substances can be perceived by the intellect. But what we perceive is not *substance as such*. That is, in our sensory experience and thinking we never perceive pure, bare 'being'. Rather, we perceive being *as* one of two kinds: either physical bodies or minds. We perceive substances *as* extended things and *as* thinking things. Descartes understands extension and thinking to be fundamental properties of substances. But Spinoza disagrees. For him, extension and thinking are not properties of a substance, but rather two different 'ways' that a substance can be perceived. Extension and thinking are two *expressions* of the essence of substance (as Spinoza puts it at P10S). Attributes are the ways in which the essence of a substance is expressed and perceived. It is incoherent to think of a substance without an attribute, because the intellect necessarily perceives substance *as* one or more of its attributes.

Spinoza will demonstrate later in the text that extension and thinking are two of the attributes of substance. At that point it will also

become clear why Descartes, along with the common-sense reader, is wrong to think of attributes as properties. Attributes are not properties of a substance and they are not separable from a substance. Attributes constitute *what the substance exists as*.

These four definitions are what we need most for what is coming next. We will not examine the other four in detail now, but do read them over. This is all bound to be somewhat perplexing at first, but if you have some sense of what Spinoza means by cause of itself, substance, attributes and modes, you now have the basic building blocks of Spinoza's ontology.

Axioms

The seven axioms that follow the definitions are Spinoza's basic logical principles. He takes them to be self-evident, eternal truths. For example, 'whatever is, is either in itself or in another' (A1): anything that has being is either an ontologically independent substance or an ontologically dependent mode. Spinoza thinks that this, and all the other axioms, are basic, uncontroversial statements of logical relation.

Some of the axioms may not appear to you to be self-evident. Take A3 and A4, which look particularly strange. A3 says that effects follow necessarily, and only, from causes that have the specific qualities, or *determinations*, required to produce those effects. In other words, every effect has a determinate cause, which is logically prior to that effect. This means, first, that every effect has a cause, and second, that every effect is 'in' its cause: the existence of the effect depends logically on the existence of the cause. Similarly, the knowledge of the effect depends on the knowledge of its cause (A4). For example, water is the cause of rain. Rain depends on water, both in terms of its being and in terms of the true understanding of it: there is no being of rain without the prior being of water, and you cannot fully know what rain is without knowing what water is. The being and knowledge of the effect (rain) depend on the being and the knowledge of the cause (water).

An important implication of A3 is that, given a specific determinate cause, its effect will *necessarily* follow. When water exists in a way that includes all the determinations necessary for rain, rain will follow necessarily. An important implication of A4 is that knowing

something truly means understanding how it follows from its cause. If we are to understand rain truly, we must truly understand how it follows from the nature of water. Spinoza believes that effects are 'in' their causes and are unfolded from them. This metaphysical way of thinking about causation seems alien to us now, but in the seventeenth century it was far more prevalent than the empirical model of cause and effect that we are familiar with today. That is why Spinoza states A3 and A4 as axioms, which he would expect all his readers to accept.

We are now ready to look at Spinoza's propositions. Each proposition, along with its demonstration, is an argument for a specific point, with the propositions building and combining to form argumentative arcs. (The whole book can be seen as one big arc, encompassing numerous smaller arcs.) We shall look in detail at the arc that stretches from P1 to P14, in which Spinoza seeks to convince us that there is only one substance, and that is God.

Propositions 1–5

Remind yourself of the seventeenth-century common-sense view by looking at Figure 1.1. In this first stage of the argument, Spinoza seeks to demonstrate that there cannot be two or more substances of the same attribute. That is, there cannot be multiple substances sharing the attribute 'thinking' or multiple substances sharing the attribute 'extension'. Let us see how Spinoza gets there and why this is significant.

P1 states that a substance is prior to its affections (i.e. its modes). This is evident from the definitions, as Spinoza says, since the modes depend on substance for their being, whereas substance depends only on itself. Substance must be logically and ontologically prior to its modes.

P2 tells us that two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another: they are two separate beings that are perceived in two separate ways. Each substance exists independently and is conceived independently, so the being of one does not 'involve' the being of the other, and the concept of one does not 'involve' the concept of the other. They are ontologically and epistemologically distinct. Since their being is not 'involved' (i.e. one is not bound up in the other) and their concepts are not involved (the

concept of one is not bound up in the concept of the other), these two substances cannot be causally related in the sense described in A3 and A4 (P3).

In P4 we learn that there are two ways of distinguishing substances from one another: either they are distinguished by existing as different attributes or they are distinguished by having different affections (modes). This is because reality consists of nothing but substances (as their attributes) and the modes of substances, so there is no other way to distinguish them.

Up to now, Spinoza's definitions and propositions have not broken with the Cartesian position. The seventeenth-century common-sense reader can accept Spinoza's definitions and axioms, and P1–4, without challenging his own world-view. With P5, however, things change, for this is where Spinoza makes his first major break from the common-sense view. He argues that in nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same attribute. This is significant because if Spinoza is right, there cannot be multiple thinking substances (human minds) or multiple extended substances (bodies), as Descartes believed. Because it is so important, we shall look at P5 in some detail.

Spinoza's question in P5 is this: *can there be more than one substance of the same attribute?* Descartes thought that there could be multiple substances of the same attribute, as we can see in Figure 1.1. To test Descartes' position, let us examine three substances, depicted in Figure 1.2. Substances A and B share the same attribute, but differ in their modes (represented by the differently shaped 'surface manifestations' of the substances). Substances B and C have different attributes, and also differ in their modes.

Now, look at the demonstration for P5. If there were two or more distinct substances, they would have to be distinguished from one another either by a difference in their attributes or by a difference in their modes; that was demonstrated in P4. Let's take each of these options in turn.

First, assume that two substances are distinguished from one another by a difference in their attributes, as substances B and C are in Figure 1.2. In this case, the two substances have different attributes and can be distinguished. But if different attributes are the *only* way to distinguish substances from one another, then two substances with

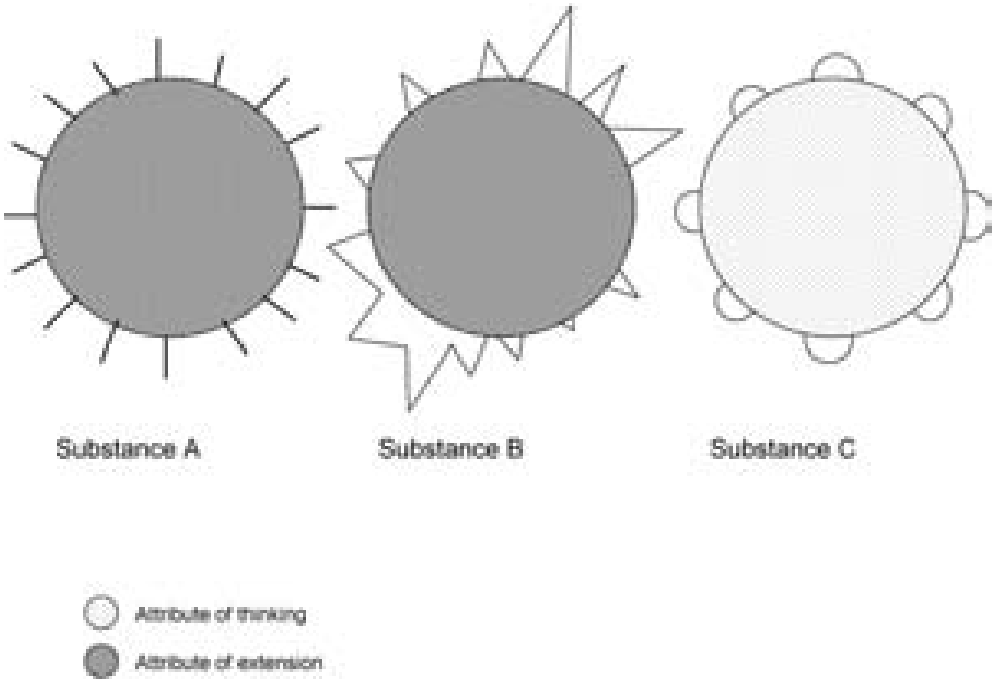

Figure 1.2 Distinguishing substances in IP5

the *same* attribute (A and B) cannot be distinguished. They are both pure, indeterminate being, perceived as extension. There is no other way of distinguishing A from B, so they must be the same substance. Therefore, there is only one substance of the same attribute.

Next, consider whether A and B could be distinguished from one another by the difference in their modes. In this case, Spinoza says, we are merely talking about a difference of mode, and not about a difference of substance. The fact that the modes are different does not mean that the substances are distinct. This is because substance is prior to its modes (P1), and substance is understood through itself, not through its modes (D3). In order to compare the substances *as such*, we must 'put the modes to one side' and consider the substances in themselves. When we ignore the surface manifestations and consider the substances in themselves, substances A and B cannot be distinguished from one another, so they must be the same substance. Therefore, there is only one substance of the same attribute.

This is more easily understood if we remember that attributes are *what the substance exists as*. Two substances sharing the same attribute exist as, and are perceived as, the same thing. The attributes cannot

be taken away to reveal two different substances underneath, for a substance without its attributes is just pure, indeterminate being. An attribute is the most basic determination of being. Two substances with the same basic determination cannot be distinguished; therefore they are the same thing. There cannot be multiple substances sharing the same attribute.

Problems with P5

A problem with Spinoza's demonstration has probably already occurred to you. Spinoza argues that two substances having the same attribute are, in fact, *only one substance*. But couldn't there be two substances with the same attribute that are numerically distinct, i.e. standing side by side in space, as A and B are in the figure?

The answer is no, for the simple reason that substances are not *in space*. For Spinoza, space is not a container for substances, but a mode of substance. If space were a container for substances, its existence would be independent of substances. That would mean space was itself a substance that other substances were dependent on, which would contradict D3. Spinoza understands space to be among the modes that we must 'put to one side' in P5. Substances are *prior* to space and thus cannot be considered as having positions *in* space. For this reason, there could not be two 'duplicate' substances with the same attribute sitting side by side. If you can imagine two substances as having the same attribute, you are really thinking of one substance.

Here is another problem that might have occurred to you. Doesn't Spinoza jump illegitimately from the conclusion 'two substances with the same attribute cannot *be distinguished* from one another' to the claim that 'two substances with the same attribute cannot *be distinct*'?

For Spinoza, these two statements are the same. It is not merely the case that we human beings cannot distinguish one substance from another. It is logically impossible to do so. There simply are no grounds for the distinctness of substances other than their having distinct attributes. If two substances share an attribute, they are not distinct.

If we accept P5 – and Spinoza thinks we *must* accept it – then our world-view necessarily changes. No longer do we believe in the world of Figure 1.1. Our world now looks more like Figure 1.3.

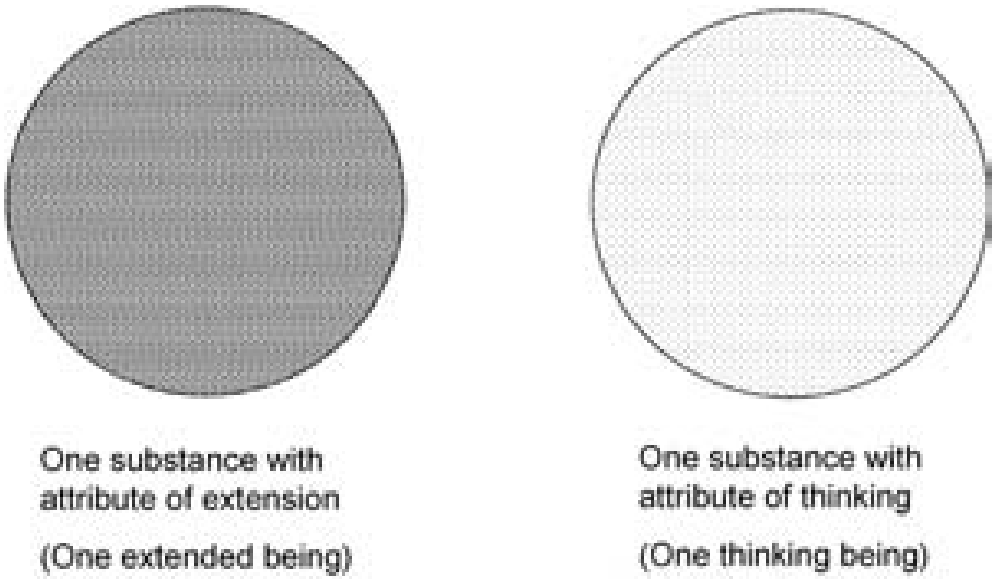

Figure 1.3 Our view of the world after IP5

Propositions 6–10

With P5, Spinoza has shown that there cannot be multiple substances sharing the attribute 'thinking' or multiple substances sharing the attribute 'extension'. Since there cannot be two or more substances of the same attribute, there can be only one thinking substance and one extended substance. That leaves open the possibility that there are multiple substances, since there can be as many substances as there are different attributes. The purpose of the next set of propositions, 6–14, is to show that there is only *one* substance with *all* the attributes, and that is God.

Let us continue to imagine that there are at least two substances, as in Figure 1.3. P6 tells us that since these substances have nothing in common – their different attributes mean they have different essences, after all – they cannot cause or produce one another. Since (according to P5) every substance has a different attribute, no substance can be the cause of another substance. A substance must therefore be 'cause of itself'. We already suspected this from reading D1 and D3, but Spinoza demonstrates it at P7. As cause of itself, it is in the nature of a substance to exist. Therefore, 'it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist' (P7); the essence of a substance involves existence. This means that substance is both cause and effect of itself.

Substance is the power of bringing about its own being; it is the activity of making itself actual.

Spinoza goes on to argue that every substance is necessarily infinite (P8). For a thing to be finite, it must be limited by something else of the same nature (D2): a plant is prevented from growing infinitely large, or living infinitely long, by other physical things that limit it. But a substance cannot be limited by something else of the same nature, because there are no two substances of the same nature (P5). Therefore, a substance cannot be finite; it must be infinite in its existence. Furthermore, Spinoza says, it follows from P7 that substance is infinite. It pertains to the nature of substance to exist: its essence includes existence. But being finite involves a negation of existence – at some point the finite thing will cease to exist. But the essence of substance involves existence; it cannot involve the negation of existence. Substance is infinite being or infinite self-actualisation: it is 'an absolute affirmation of existence' (P8S1).

Up to now, we have been considering substances that have one attribute each. But in P9 and P10, Spinoza reveals that a substance

can have more than one attribute, and indeed, the more 'reality or being' a thing has, the more attributes belong to it. In other words, if a substance has *more being*, there is more of what it is. There may be two, three or more ways of perceiving what it is. This means a substance could have two, three or more attributes that express what it is. Indeed, a substance could have infinite attributes, infinite ways in which its reality, or being, is expressed. And, according to D6, a substance of infinite attributes would be God.

P11: The Necessary Existence of God

This brings us to Spinoza's proof for the existence of God in P11. 'God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.' Spinoza's demonstration is very short: if you think you can conceive of God not existing, then, by A7, his essence does not involve existence. But P7 demonstrates that it pertains to the nature of substance to exist, because substance is cause of itself. It would be absurd to say that the essence of a substance of infinite attributes did not involve existence. Since God is that substance (by D6), God exists necessarily.

Here is another way to understand Spinoza's proof. Think carefully about what has already been demonstrated about substance. A substance is not a 'thing', but the *power* of actualising its own existence. A substance of one attribute actualises itself infinitely (P8), but only *as* one type of being: as extended things, for example. A single-attribute substance is therefore non-actual with respect to all the other attributes. But a substance of *infinite* attributes has an infinite amount of reality, being and power. It actualises itself as infinite types of being with respect to *every* attribute. There is no attribute which this substance does not actualise itself as. A substance of infinite attributes is an infinite power that makes itself actual in every way possible. If this substance were non-actual, it would not be that power to actualise; it would not be substance at all. Thus, a substance of infinite attributes is *necessarily actual*. Its essence involves existence, not only logically but *actually*.

In short, Spinoza argues that you cannot conceive the non-existence of God because you cannot conceive the non-existence of *being*. God, or a substance of infinite attributes, is *being as such*, which is expressed in infinite ways to an infinite extent. That is why 'there is nothing of whose existence we can be more certain than we are of

the existence of an absolutely infinite, or perfect, Being – that is, God' (P11S). God is 'complete' in that its being comprises all the being that there is. This is what Spinoza means by the term 'perfection' introduced towards the end of P11S.

Problems with P11

Many readers, even if they accept the cogency of Spinoza's arguments in P11, still resist his conclusion that God necessarily exists. You may be in that position now. If so, ask yourself: Why do I find P11 difficult to accept? Here are some suggestions and responses.

1. *You accept that Spinoza has demonstrated the existence of a substance consisting of infinite attributes, but not the existence of God.* It's true that what Spinoza demonstrates in P11 is the existence of 'a substance consisting of infinite attributes'. He defines God as this substance in D6. Spinoza's definition of God is not arbitrary; he believes that all philosophers and religious authorities would agree that the essential nature of a divine being is to be a substance with infinite attributes expressing eternal and infinite essence. That is, the definition of a divine being includes ontological independence, infinite power and eternal being. If you accept that P11 demonstrates the existence of a substance of infinite attributes, and if you accept that the being that has these qualities is what we understand by 'God', then you must accept that P11 has demonstrated the existence of God.

2. *You follow Spinoza's argument, but do not believe in God and so you cannot accept Spinoza's conclusion.* See the response to 1, above. If you do not believe in God, what you do not believe in is probably the God of the Bible. Spinoza does not demonstrate the existence of *that* God; he demonstrates the existence of a substance of infinite attributes. He thinks we ought to call this substance 'God' because what we truly understand by 'God' is a substance of infinite attributes. But just as we are not compelled to give the name 'square' to a four-sided figure, we are not compelled to give the name 'God' to a substance of infinite attributes. If you prefer, you can call it being, substance, power or nature. You cannot not believe in *being*; so you cannot not believe in Spinoza's God.

3. *You follow Spinoza's argument, but you believe in a personal God and so cannot accept Spinoza's definition of God.* See the response to 1 and 2,

above. Spinoza says that the God you believe in is *essentially* (if you abstract from all its other qualities) a substance of infinite attributes. The God of the Bible, or of any religion, is truly understood to be a substance of infinite attributes, but is mistakenly *represented* by human beings to be an anthropomorphic figure who intervenes in human affairs. Spinoza wants to convince you that you should truly understand God as infinite substance, rather than believing in the 'image' of God as portrayed by organised religion.

4. *You accept that Spinoza has demonstrated the necessary existence of God in a logical sense, but still cannot accept that God actually exists.* Re-read the explanation of P11, above. If you're still not convinced, look at a study such as Mason (1997).

5. *You believe that Spinoza's argument is invalid or his premises are not acceptable.* Work through the definitions and propositions prior to P11 to determine where you think the problem is. If you cannot find a problem but are still convinced there is one, look at a critical analysis such as Bennett (1984), and decide whether you think the objections to Spinoza are good ones.

This is one of several points in the text where Spinoza causes us, even today, to challenge our own ideas about reality. Spinoza knows we are likely to resist his claims, but he also believes that his claims are true and that, if we think them through clearly, we cannot *truly* reject them. Of course, the reader is not obliged to accept Spinoza's argument for the existence of God, and if his argument is weak, then we should not accept it. But if his argument is plausible, then we should put our presuppositions to one side and work with Spinoza's conclusion. As an experiment, try living with the belief that God is *being as such* and that all being is God. As we read more about Spinoza's God, we must actively work to understand God as being and not to imagine the anthropomorphic God of the Bible.

Propositions 12–14

The next important proposition, bringing us to the end of this argumentative arc, is P14. After two propositions (P12 and 13) in which he demonstrates that a substance cannot be divided, Spinoza says that 'except God, no substance can be or be conceived'. In other words, God, or *being as such*, is the only substance there is. If you have

read the explanation of P11 carefully, you will see immediately why this is. God is a substance of infinite attributes, each one of which expresses infinite essence. If there were a substance other than God, it would have to have at least one attribute. But this attribute would have to be one of the infinite attributes pertaining to God's essence. By P5, no two substances of the same attribute can exist. So it follows that except God, no substance can be or be conceived.

In other words, each attribute pertains to only one substance (P5). God has *all* the attributes; so God is the one and only substance. God is infinite being expressed in every way possible. There is no other 'being' that another substance could 'be'.

Spinoza has now demonstrated that reality consists of one substance, God, and that God is infinite being with infinite essence. *God is being itself*, and for this reason it is logically impossible to think of God as not existing. If you can imagine God as nonexistent, you are not thinking of God consistently; it is not possible to disbelieve in being or to be sceptical about being. *Being is*, and it is expressed in infinite ways. God is thinking being, God is extended being and God is being as every other attribute too. This is expressed in the two corollaries to P14. In nature there is only one, absolutely infinite substance (P14C1). Therefore, thinking things and extended things – everyday minds and bodies – are not substances or independent beings (P14C2).

Our picture of reality now looks very different. It is an inversion of the Cartesian picture of Figure 1.1. We now understand reality to be *one* substance, God, which exists as infinite attributes. Figure 1.4 represents Spinoza's reality after P14, but be careful not to let it mislead you. God/substance/Nature is *infinite* and *active*, two qualities which cannot be adequately depicted in the figure.

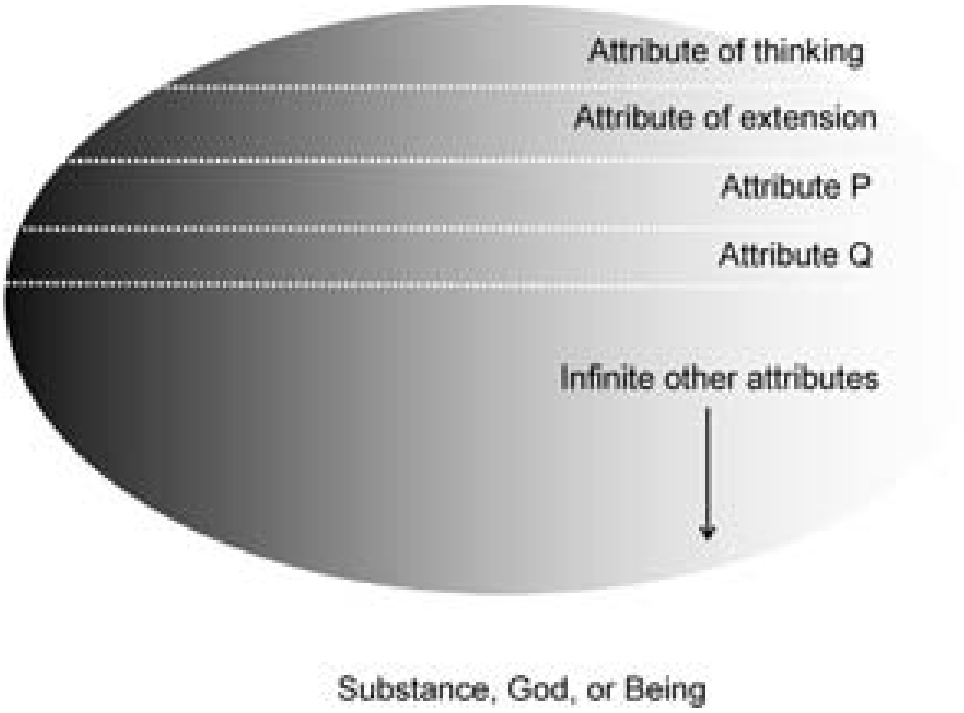

Figure 1.4 Our view of the world after IP14

The view that all reality is *one being* is called monism, and you can see now why Spinoza is considered a monist. One implication of monism is that all entities, including ourselves and the things around us, are somehow parts of one single being. Furthermore, since there cannot be any 'gaps' or divisions in substance (P13), we must be *continuous* parts of that being. But if Spinoza is right that all being is one, why does our experience seem to reveal a world of differentiated, individual beings? What causes us to feel that we are emphatically distinct from the things and people around us? If we are 'parts' of substance, i.e. parts of God, does that mean God is like a patchwork made up of all the things in existence?