Spinoza’s God and Metaphysics: The Internal Inconsistencies

Brandon Sarkauskas

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Approved: ___________________ Date: __________
Thesis Director Signature

Dr. Timothy Morris

Approved: ___________________ Date: __________
Second Reader Signature

Thomas Cavenagh, J.D.
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Abstract

This paper is a defense of the 17th century Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza's conception of "God" and "substance", and the resulting metaphysical system that Spinoza develops as a result of such conceptions. The paper responds to a number of philosophical critiques presented by Spinoza's contemporaries and present-day interpreters. Paying close attention to Spinoza's conception of "God" and "substance", the paper argues that critics of Spinoza's philosophy fundamentally fail to correctly understand Spinoza's choice of terminology and thus do not provide defensible critiques of Spinoza's philosophical position. Moreover, the paper proposes possible responses that Spinoza would employ to adequately defend his philosophy in the face of modern-day critiques, given the development of philosophical thinking since the 17th century.
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Introduction and Purpose

This paper is first and foremost a defense of 17th century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s conception of God and the subsequent metaphysical system that follows. More importantly, it is a defense of the objections that arise from both Spinoza’s own contemporaries and from current-day interpreters that have sought to make sense of Spinoza’s highly complex and extensively detailed writings. However, this paper is also a defense of my own personal beliefs that derive the majority of their reasoning and argumentation from Spinoza’s notion of God and his metaphysical system, with special regard to Spinoza’s conception of the substance-mode relationship and the mind-body problem. In this regard, a successful defense of Spinoza’s arguments is a successful defense of my own personal beliefs. While my personal stance may deter some readers from assessing the argumentation in this paper objectively, due to a perception of bias, it is nonetheless valuable to the reader seeking to explore Spinoza’s concepts, since Spinoza supposes that his framework solves many of the problems that have daunted philosophers for the last 2,500 years. I must stress, though, that my own convictions are not the result of a blind deference to Spinoza’s claims. Rather, my beliefs result from the strength of Spinoza’s argumentation and it is on those grounds that I wish this paper to be judged. However, to deny that this paper has a personal element in which I sincerely hope that Spinoza’s metaphysics is defensible would be disingenuous. Therefore, I implore the reader to recognize that it is my solemn intention to explore Spinoza’s metaphysics objectively, and in an unbiased way as is possible, while also realizing that I have a vested interest in an adequate defense of Spinoza’s metaphysics, since I subscribe to Spinoza’s system.

Having stated the basis for the formation of this paper, it is now necessary to explicate the manner in which this paper will proceed. To begin with, it is important to place Spinoza’s
thought within a particular context and historical time, given that a resurgence of contemporary scholarship has begun to focus on Spinoza’s thought, which may be distinct from the understanding in Spinoza’s own historical context. While this does not affect the validity of his reasoning nor argumentation, it is still important in understanding the language Spinoza used to formulate his arguments. As a philosopher in the latter half of the 17th century, Spinoza was undoubtedly in the midst of both aggressive political maneuvering and war, and also in the highly contested intellectual landscape of the time. As Matthew Stewart notes, “the seventeenth century was an age of glitter and strife; of spiritual awakening followed by religious wars, civil wars, revolutions, invasions, and acts of ethnic cleansing; of explosive growth […] of a new kind of science rising with all the promise of a slumbering God”\(^2\). A contemporary of Rene Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz, Spinoza’s use of language is particular to the time in which he was writing. In this regard, while language alone may not fully explain the apparent inconsistencies within Spinoza’s works, language nonetheless plays an important role in correctly determining the meaning of Spinoza’s arguments. Furthermore, a brief biography of Spinoza is necessary, if only to illustrate the prominence of his thought with respect to his contemporaries and the harsh criticisms it received, which adds value to the current exploration of Spinoza’s thought, given that some earlier objections to Spinoza’s positions may still contain merit. After expounding upon the intellectual and personal development of Spinoza, the paper will then proceed to examine Spinoza’s work\(^3\), in itself, paying particular attention to Spinoza’s definition of crucial

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\(^1\) Nearly ten years prior to Spinoza’s birth, his future homeland, the Netherlands, engaged in the early stages of the Thirty Years’ War. By 1635, just three years after Spinoza’s birth, the Netherlands formally allied with France and declared war on Spain. Additionally, while Spinoza lived in the Netherlands during the height of the so-called “Dutch Golden Age”, no one, Spinoza included, was exempt from the threat of violence as a result of religious agitation, of which Spinoza was clearly implicit.


\(^3\) In the treatment of Spinoza’s work, I rely solely on the Ethics which is most representative of Spinoza’s mature intellectual thought. While certain works such as Spinoza’s Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect and Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being may give insight into certain issues arising in Spinoza’s metaphysics, I
terms and the implications drawn from the characterization of certain key elements. Most importantly, the paper will explain how and why (if any such reason exists) Spinoza’s God appears the way it does, and the effects that Spinoza’s conception of God has in his resulting metaphysical framework. After analyzing objections to Spinoza’s claims, made from both his contemporaries and current-day interpreters⁴, a defense of Spinoza’s arguments will be presented, culminating in my own personal decision to either reject or accept Spinoza’s conception of God and his framework based on the totality of the arguments presented both for and against Spinoza’s position.

**Modern Resurgence and Historical Context**

Surprisingly, Spinoza’s thought has seen a resurgence of scholarship aimed at both the academic and general audience. I say “surprisingly”, because for a long time, Baruch Spinoza has been relegated to the shadows of philosophical giants such as Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and others. Yet, a number of modern authors have published works engaging with the ideas of Spinoza. Scholars such as Matthew Stewart and Rebecca Goldstein have published books⁵ within the last ten years with the aim of bringing Spinoza’s ideas to a contemporary audience. Moreover, serious, academic scholarship has also undertaken a

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⁴ While I only consider two authors in treatment of my defense of Spinoza’s metaphysics, I consider them to be representative of a larger body of criticism aimed at Spinoza. In particular, I see Pierre Bayle as the progenitor to many other criticisms against Spinoza, including the current-day critic, Edwin Curley. Additionally, Beth Lord’s criticism is considered because of the sheer force of her ingenuity, in which, to my knowledge, no other criticism similar to hers is represented in the scholarly literature.

Spinositic Renaissance with excellent and thought-provoking commentaries written by Yitzhak Melamed6, among others.

I mention this resurgence of Spinoza’s thought because it provides the context in which I, myself, became familiar with Spinoza’s work (which may subsequently influence my interpretation of Spinoza) and also because it illustrates the serious need to correctly understand Spinoza’s ideas in the face of contemporary scholarship. Frankly, the importance of any philosophy is a measure of that philosopher’s effect on others. While Spinoza is certainly not the most famous philosopher today, the explosion of works aimed at exploring his thought indicates that either Spinoza has some brilliant ideas worth exploring, or that Spinoza has some serious metaphysical flaws which are being discovered. In either case, the need to examine Spinoza’s work in the face of his commentators is staggering.

Furthermore, contemporary science, which has typically been opposed to the utility of philosophy’s description of ‘reality’, has begun to develop theories which correspond to the ideas first presented by Spinoza7. In light of discoveries made in the scientific fields, the extent to which Spinoza’s concepts correlate to the reality that is revealed by contemporary physics, astronomy and psychology may be of some importance. While this paper is certainly not a defense of Spinoza’s thought in context of contemporary science, it is still a defense of Spinoza’s metaphysics. Therefore, any worthy objections offered by science and/or scientists may lend

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7 In particular, I have in mind physicists such as Lawrence Krauss and his work, A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing, in which Krauss is generally opposed to any claim that the question of “why” there is a universe. Krauss supposes that the question “why” is a generally outdated philosophic question easily answered by modern science. Incidentally, Krauss explores the possibility of a necessary universe, for which there is no answer to the question “why”, which coincides with Spinoza’s general metaphysics. See: Krauss, Lawrence. A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing. New York: Atria Paperback, 2012.
insights into the problem areas of Spinoza’s philosophy where commentators have found discrepancies. However, contemporary research, especially in neuroscience, seems to indicate that Spinoza’s thought, while lacking the mechanical explanation for certain behaviors, still offers an accurate and fair portrayal of psychology, as understood by the contemporary neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio. Furthermore, Spinoza’s God is the God which Albert Einstein, the famed physicist, who gave the world the theory of relativity, claimed to adopt, by stating, “It seems to me that the idea of a personal God is an anthropomorphic concept which I cannot take seriously. I feel also not able to imagine some will or goal outside the human sphere. My views are near to those of Spinoza”. Certainly, just because Einstein seemed to favor Spinoza’s God it does not mean that Spinoza is necessarily correct. However, it does indicate that Spinoza’s philosophy is perhaps not in contention with the understanding of contemporary astronomers or physicists, as is the case with many other religions or philosophies; this of course means little if Spinoza’s metaphysics is ultimately proved to be indefensible. However, if Spinoza’s claims are able to withstand serious objections, then perhaps Spinoza offers a viable metaphysical system which is not in discord with contemporary science, as so many religions and philosophies are today.

Most important though, is the historical context in which Spinoza found himself. Like anyone born in the early 1600s, Spinoza’s exact date of birth cannot be verified. Yet, most sources point to November 24, 1632 as the day that Bento Spinoza was born. “Bento” was Spinoza’s given first name. However, as a born Jew, Bento translates into Hebrew as “Baruch” – meaning “blessed”. Baruch Spinoza, the name by which most know him, was born in

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Amsterdam to a middle-class, merchant, Jewish family. Baruch’s surname, Spinoza, traces its lineage back to Portugal/Spain where his ancestors were forced to flee, for the fear of facing religious persecution as Jews in the Spanish empire. Luckily for Baruch, Spinoza’s family settled in Amsterdam, a city in the Netherlands, in a time where the Dutch were experiencing the “Golden Age” of both political and ideological development. By settling in Amsterdam in the time they did, Spinoza’s family was able to practice their faith with little fear of persecution. Additionally, free from the threat of persecution, Spinoza’s father was able to establish a profitable merchant business that would ensure Spinoza had the luxury of attending school and cultivating his intellectual prowess.

By all accounts, Spinoza was a promising intellectual from a very young age. Spinoza soon quickly grew to be one of his Rabbi’s most cherished students. However, Spinoza also quickly fell out of favor with his religious community, and in particular his Rabbi mentor, Saul Morteira, for his inquisitive nature into the existence of God, which threatened orthodox Jewish beliefs of the time. Due in large part to Spinoza’s unwillingness to cease his theological questioning, despite many attempts to get him to do otherwise, Spinoza was excommunicated for reasons which are still not explicitly clear. It is worth quoting (at some length) the verdict read regarding Spinoza’s excommunication, if not but to illustrate the perceived radical nature of Spinoza’s thoughts, which are made evident by the incredibly harsh fate Spinoza was assigned by the Jewish religious leaders of his day:

The lords of Mahamad […] having long known of the evil opinions and deeds of Baruch de Espinoza, have endeavored by various ways and promises to turn him from his evil
ways. But having been unable to reform him, but rather, on the contrary, daily receiving more information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about the monstrous deeds he did, and having for this numerous trustworthy witnesses who have deposed and born witness to this effect in the presence of said Espinoza, they [...] have decided [...] that the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel [...] Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him [...] the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven.¹³

The enthusiasm by which the Jewish religious leaders of his day cursed him is nothing but the testament to the radical nature of Spinoza’s thought. More importantly, this excerpt illustrates the rather unstable religious climate in which Spinoza found himself. Although the Dutch were generally tolerant of religious diversity at this time, there was still an expectation of religious hegemony among the various groups. Outsiders and radicals, of whom Spinoza was certainly one, threatened the religious order of the day. In this regard Spinoza had to be careful about the publishing of his work in this context. While a certain degree of religious skepticism was tolerated, the whole-sale rejection of a personal God, a view that Spinoza clearly holds, which will become evident from my treatment of Spinoza’s metaphysical system, was simply too radical of an idea for the people of the time to accept. I mention this because it offers a plausible explanation for the consistent use of the term “God” throughout Spinoza’s work, even though I think it is more accurate to say that Spinoza really means “Nature” or “Substance”, instead. Spinoza’s use of the term “God” is thus a defensive mechanism by which Spinoza can maintain

¹³ Stewart, Courtier and Heretic, 33-34
the illusion of a certain degree of religious hegemony, should his life ever be threatened on account of his beliefs.

**God, Nature and Substance: the Basics**

The poet Novalis once called Spinoza “the God intoxicated man”, and even if he was wrong, as Jonathan Bennett reminds us, “he was obsessed with God”\(^{14}\). Yet, Spinoza’s primary philosophical concerns were not strictly theological, as his characterization as a “God intoxicated man” might suggest. Rather, Spinoza was primarily a metaphysician – more concerned with the nature and existence of reality rather than the nature and existence God – yet, both Novalis and Bennett are correct in attributing to Spinoza an obsession with God. For Spinoza, God is the foundation of his entire metaphysical system. *The Ethics*, the work which most accurately reflects Spinoza’s mature thought, both begins and ends with a discussion of God. The easiest answer as to why Spinoza was both an ardent metaphysician and “God intoxicated man” is plainly, that for Spinoza, God is the *only* reality.

The role of God in Spinoza’s metaphysical system is both extremely complex and nuanced, but also relatively simple and straightforward. The simplicity stems from the fact that for Spinoza, God is Nature, and the complexity comes from correctly interpreting Spinoza’s proof of such a statement. In the *Ethics*\(^ {15}\), the terms “God” and “Nature” are used

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\(^{15}\) As a matter of reference, it is worth noting that I rely strictly on the translation of the *Ethics* by Samuel Shirley, which is compiled in the complete edition of Spinoza’s works, edited by Michael Morgan. Any in text reference to Spinoza’s *Ethics* is of an abbreviated nature, for which the sole purpose is to avoid the awkward listing of which particular part, definition, axiom, corollary and scholium the quotation is derived. An index of the abbreviations is as follows: “E” refers to the work, the *Ethics*, followed by “P” and a corresponding number –which indicates the part of the *Ethics* from which the quote is derived, and ordinary numbers after “pr” which indicates the number of the proposition in the part to which I am referring. Respectively, “D” refers to a definition offered by Spinoza; “A” an axiom; “C” a corollary; and “S” a scholium”. For example, “EP2pr13s” refers to the *Ethics*, Part Two, and the scholium to proposition 13. For Spinoza’s collected works see: Spinoza, Baruch, *Spinoza Complete Works*. Translated by Samuel Shirley. Edited by Michael Morgan. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002.
interchangeably and, for Spinoza, are used to refer to the same concept. While the term “God” appears more frequently than Spinoza’s use of the term “Nature”, it would be fairer to Spinoza’s philosophy to assert that when Spinoza uses the term “God”, he really means “Nature” and not vice versa. Although it is mere speculation on my part, the term “God” probably appears more than “Nature” simply because it is a concept that is more readily grasped by the majority of the readers. However, this is not to suggest that Spinoza was modifying his philosophy to be comprehensible by the masses, but rather that Spinoza found himself in an intellectually unforgiving time. Even living in the Hague, Spinoza would not have been immune to the pressures and dangers of agitating society by pressing his pantheism upon it.

Spinoza’s position as a pantheist has been the source of debate among scholars in the field. Certain commentators, such as Richard Mason and Edwin Curley, argue that although Spinoza uses the term “Nature” to refer to God, Spinoza is not really a pantheist in the sense the term is most widely understood –meaning that Spinoza confers a sort of divinity unto the natural world and the mundane things within it. However, interpreters such as Jonathan Bennett and Yitzhak Melamed argue that to interpret Spinoza as anything but a pantheist is incorrect. While this debate is important, it is best dealt with in an essay that aims to establish a new interpretation of Spinoza’s metaphysics. While my work certainly offers a particular interpretation, my goal is not to argue that Spinoza is a pantheist, but rather to accept this as part of my interpretation and assess the consequences of such an interpretation. The important thing at this juncture, however, is to understand why the debate exists at all. A suitable answer to the question why the debate over Spinoza’s pantheism even exists is found in Part I of the Ethics, entitled “Concerning God”.

16 The interpretation of Spinoza as a pantheist is a source of debate among leading scholars. For the purposes of this paper, it is more important to understand why the debate may exist, rather than to solve this problem of interpretation.
Part I of the *Ethics* opens with a set of definitions which are considered in themselves intuitive and not the source for argument or debate; the definitions Spinoza provides he considers to be self-evident. Most notable among these definitions is EP1D6, “By God I mean an absolutely infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence”\(^{17}\). Here, Spinoza subtly cues the reader to the third term which can be used interchangeably with “God” and “Nature”: “substance”. Spinoza’s lack of inclusion of the indefinite article “a” when discussing “substance” clues the reader that for Spinoza, God is not merely *a substance*, but rather *substance itself*. The concept of Spinoza’s God starts to take shape when one considers Spinoza’s definition of substance, EP1D3, defined thus as “that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed”\(^{18}\).

Clearly, since God has been equated with substance, then God, too, must be “conceived through itself”, requiring nothing but the conception of itself to form itself. God is therefore a self-caused being, and when considered as such, EP1pr7 results from EP1D1 to produce the statement that “existence belongs to the nature of substance”\(^{19}\). Spinoza therefore uses a modification of the ontological argument for the existence of God by arguing that God (“substance”) necessarily exists\(^{20}\).


\(^{20}\) The ontological argument for the existence of God was first proposed by medieval philosopher and theologian, St. Anselm of Canterbury. Although I do not have adequate room to explain, in detail, the arguments that St. Anselm employs to argue for the existence of God, it is worthwhile to briefly outline the argument as Spinoza would have interpreted it. St. Anselm argues that, by definition, God is a perfect being, and given the assumption that it is more perfect to exist than to not exist, God, being perfect, must therefore, by definition, have the quality of existence. This line of argument was still employed to prove the existence of God in Spinoza’s own time, by the French philosopher, Rene Descartes, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In large part, it is safe to say that Descartes adopts a very similar line of argument to that of St. Anselm, and subsequently, so does Spinoza. While
While Spinoza has effectively proven God’s existence (at least in his own estimation), there is much to be said about the nature and essence of this substance. However, before an adequate discussion of Spinoza’s use of the term can be handled, it is first necessary to examine the Aristotelian and Cartesian uses of the term, since foremost, Spinoza was not writing in a void, and secondly, the attribution of these uses of the term “substance” may bias the reader toward a position that Spinoza himself does not hold.

The Aristotelian position can best be summarized by the words of Yitzhak Melamed, who writes, “For Aristotle, the term ‘substance’, in the fullest sense of the word, applies only to particular things, such as a particular horse or a particular man”\(^{21}\). Although a rather crude characterization, Melamed points out a rather subtle nature of Aristotle’s substance. For Aristotle, substance is the substratum in which properties inhere. Therefore, the primary quality of Aristotle’s substance is, as Melamed notes, its “predicative independence”\(^{22}\). While this characterization is not altogether different from Spinoza’s definition of substance, it is certainly not the same. Foremost, both Spinoza and Aristotle share the notion that substance is independence in terms of predication—that is, primary substances are not said to be predicated of anything else; they are always the subject of predication. For Aristotle, whatever is not a primary substance must rely on a substance in order to inhere, and thus manifest itself. Spinoza, likewise, shares a view of substance that is independent in terms of predication. However, for Spinoza, there are no secondary substances which would be capable of inhering in the primary substance.

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\(^{22}\) Melamed, “Building Blocks”, 4.
Moreover, Spinoza views substance as causally independent as well, meaning that substance does not rely on anything external to it in order to exist. The explanation for Spinoza’s divergence from Aristotle can only truly be comprehended after an examination of Descartes’ notion of substance.

Descartes, following in line with the Aristotelian conception of substance, differs from Aristotle on one key point that both aligns him more with Spinoza, but also serves to confuse scholars that seek to compare Descartes and Spinoza. Again, Melamed provides a clear example of the variance between the Aristotelian and Cartesian concept of substance: “Aristotle defines the independence of primary substance solely in terms of predication, Descartes stipulates that substance in the full sense of the word must also be causally independent”23. Clearly, what Melamed illustrates is that for Descartes, true substances, in the fullest sense of the word, must be self-subsisting and not reliant on anything else to exist. Of course, this aligns with what we know about Spinoza’s concept of substance. However, to say that Spinoza and Descartes share a symmetrical view of substance is a grave error. For Descartes, the notion of the soul or human mind plays a central role in his metaphysics. Explicitly stated, Descartes’ goal in his famous work, Meditations on First Philosophy, is not only to prove the existence of God, but also that the immaterial soul is something distinct from the substance of the body, but also substantial (that it is a substance). To establish the existence of the soul as a separate form of substance, that which truly exists but is simply immaterial, Descartes needs to make some concessions to his characterization of substance. Foremost, Descartes is not as strict in his use of language as Spinoza. Descartes grants the recognition of substantiality to human minds, even though he also admits that human minds (along with everything else) causally depend on God for subsistence.

Here, Descartes and Spinoza make a marked departure on their respective notions of substance. For Descartes, the title of “substance” can be granted to things which are created and sustained by God. As Melamed notes, “[For] Spinoza, he seems to have little patience for the Cartesian in-between category of ‘created substance. […] Descartes’ willingness to grant the status of ‘created substance’ to things which ‘need only the ordinary concurrence of God in order to exist’ may rightly seem a mere concession to popular religion”24. Clearly, Spinoza’s notion of substance does not align completely with either the Cartesian model of substance or the Aristotelian concept which Descartes’ model expands upon. Rather, it should be clear that Spinoza’s notion of substance shares characteristics with both notions, but is altogether different. Of course, the tendency to align Spinoza’s concept of substance with the Cartesian notion is strong, since Spinoza follows Descartes in the so called “rationalist” branch of philosophy25. However, to read Spinoza as simply adopting the Cartesian notion of substance is a grave error and a possible source of many of the critiques against Spinoza’s metaphysics, since substance (God or Nature) plays such a central role in Spinoza’s metaphysics.

So while it should be clear that Spinoza’s concept of substance differs from that of his predecessors, much more needs to be said of his notion of substance to truly understand why substance plays such a central role in his discussion of God and nature. As has been previously noted, one of the core tenets of Spinoza’s conception of substance is its causal independence and

25 The “rationalist branch of philosophy” during the Early Modern period of philosophy refers most aptly to a style of philosophy which thought that any given truth about the world could be understood purely through rational inquiry. It compares with another popular branch of philosophy in the Early Modern period, the “empiricist branch of philosophy”. In contrast, the empiricists believed that any truth about the world would have to be derived from empirical data. While it is easy to label any given philosopher during the Early Modern period as either “rational” or “empirical”, the lines are not so clearly drawn. The main point I wish to address regarding the “rationalist” movement, is that Spinoza is often aligned with Descartes in this enterprise, and for that reason, I believe many scholars, both of the Early Modern period, and today, make the mistake of assuming that Descartes and Spinoza share a definition of substance –Bayle and Curley are notable examples from both eras.
its necessary existence. For Spinoza, there is no simpler way to describe substance other than to say that it exists necessarily and is self-caused. Spinoza’s proof of the necessary existence of substance relies in large part on his definition of an attribute, defined in EP1D4 thus, “By attribute I mean that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence”26. Some scholars wish to question an interpretation of Spinoza’s definition of an attribute that ignores the suggestion that an intellect is necessary to perceive an attribute, and that therefore an intellect is necessary for the existence of an attribute. However, for the limited discussion of this paper, it is best to interpret Spinoza’s definition of an attribute as that which constitutes the essence of a substance –without regard to the role an intellect27. With this definition established, Spinoza proves the causal independence of substance through EP1pr2 and EP1pr3, “Proposition 2: Two substances having different attributes have nothing in common. Proposition 3: When things have nothing in common, one cannot be the cause of the other”28. Of course, to fully appreciate Spinoza’s proof of the causal independence of God, one only need be reminded that for Spinoza, God consists of infinite attributes –that is, God has every conceivable attribute which is not itself simply a negation. Therefore the logic is easily followed that if God possesses all the attributes, then no other substance can have anything in common with God, and thus no other substance can be the cause of God. Additionally, Spinoza’s concept of God as consisting of infinite attributes also leads one to the conclusion that not only is God not caused by any other

27 An interesting discussion of Spinoza and Idealism, as Spinoza relates to German Idealism, is represented in the collection edited by Yitzhak Melamed and Eckart Forster, Spinoza and German Idealism. Interestingly, I think that a connection can be drawn between Spinoza and George Berkeley, representative of another type of idealism, specifically regarding the necessity of an intellect to perceive an attribute. However, since this issue is one of interpretation, and not logical inconsistency, I elect not to discuss it here. See: Yitzkhak, Melamed and Eckart Forster eds.. Spinoza and German Idealism. Cambridge,UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
substance, but plainly that there is no other substance. Spinoza himself arrives at this conclusion in EP1pr14:

There can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God.

Proof: Since God is an absolutely infinite being of whom no attribute expressing the essence of substance can be denied (Def. 6), and since he necessarily exists (Pr. 11), if there were any other substance but God, it would have to be explicated through some attribute of God, and so there would exist two substances with the same attribute, which is absurd (Pr. 5). So there can be no substance external to God, and consequently no such substance can be conceived.

Aside from the causal independence of God, Spinoza’s proof for the existence of only a single substance is absolutely crucial to understand in order to make sense of his larger metaphysics. Spinoza emphasizes that God is the only substance and, as such, everything must be understood through God. This sort of monism gives us the answer as to why the debate over Spinoza’s position as a pantheist is in question. For Spinoza, everything observable, and even thinkable, is God. It should, therefore, be little trouble to see why some scholars ardently believe that Spinoza is a pantheist. Reinforcing this notion, Spinoza further concludes in EP1pr15 that, “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God.” Here, Spinoza has simply stated what should be intuitively obvious to any astute reader. Yet, Spinoza also needs to explain the apparent individuation of all the entities comprise the world. While for Spinoza

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29 Monism is the general philosophical doctrine that only one substance exists. While Spinoza is certainly a monist, he is not the only one. Additionally, Spinoza’s very apparent monism has led to a variety of interpretations from Early Modern and contemporary philosophers that argue either for or against the claim that Spinoza is a pantheist. I think the most accurate way to describe Spinoza is as a monist and a pantheist. Spinoza believes that God is literally the only thing that exists and therefore everything observable or even thinkable is within God. Spinoza thus confers a sort of divinity (although he is by no means religious) upon all existing things.

everything is God, Spinoza is also faced with the difficulty of explaining the existence of the individual things that appear in the corporeal world that we all deal with on a daily basis. Spinoza’s solution is “modes”.

True to the geometric method, Spinoza provides a concise definition of the term “mode”: “By mode I mean the affections of substance, that is, that which is in something else and is conceived through something else”31. Unsurprisingly, Spinoza’s sparse definition of mode has led to a variety of interpretations from scholars. The details of these various interpretations are better suited for a later point in this essay, given that the interpretations by Curley and Bayle are also the source of insurmountable problems for Spinoza’s metaphysics under their particular characterization of a mode. However, for our current purposes, the most prudent way to understand Spinozistic modes is to consider the role they play in the existence of particular things. What should be obvious from Spinoza’s own definitions, is that modes cannot exist independently of substance. While this should be obvious given Spinoza’s proof for the existence of only one substance, it is also reinforced through the definition Spinoza provides for modes. Foremost, Spinoza notes that modes must not only be conceived through something else, but most also exist through something else. Since the only thing that exists is substance, for Spinoza, modes clearly must exist in substance and be conceived through substance. Additionally, Spinoza notes that modes are the “affections of substance”, suggesting that modes are simply modifications of substance. However, the modes can both be understood as particular things, and certain qualities or states of substance as well32. As Melamed notes, “This means that the Atlantic Ocean, Napoleon Bonaparte, and even rhinoceroses are all in God and are modes of

32 The proper way to consider a Spinozistic mode is that it is a quality or property of substance; it is the predicate whereas substance is the subject.

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God. The traditional understanding of this doctrine is that, for Spinoza, Napoleon, rhinoceroses, and all other modes inhere in God and are states of God”33. Clearly, modes are Spinoza’s answer to the existence of particular things or objects. More importantly, though, as evidenced by Melamed’s example, Spinozistic modes are changeable and therefore do not represent God’s essence. Unlike attributes which are infinite and eternal according to EP1pr19, “God, that is, all the attributes of God are eternal”34, modes are not eternal because their essence is distinct from their existence. As Melamed notes, “Strictly speaking, eternity is the existence of substance or of the thing whose essence and existence are one and the same (E1p20), while duration is the existence of modes or things whose existence is different from their essence”35. Since modes do not exist necessarily like substance or attributes, modes are inherently non-eternal and thus subject to change. Again, this is aligned with a common understanding of the world where everyday objects change.

A common misinterpretation of Spinoza also assumes that Spinozistic modes are merely “parts of God”. I must stress that this is a grave error and that such an interpretation is the source of unwarranted critiques by Pierre Bayle and Edwin Curley36. Plainly put, Spinozistic modes cannot be a “part” of God, since EP1pr13 clearly states “absolutely infinite substance is indivisible” – that is “infinite substance” or God, cannot be divided, and thus there cannot be any “parts of God”37. Rather, modes must be understood as existing through God or substance. For Spinoza, substance must be understood as indivisible due to the very definition of substance. EP1pr1, which Spinoza proves through EP1D3 and EP1D5, states that “substance is by nature

35 Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 34.
36 A fuller explanation of the error that Pierre Bayle and Edwin Curley make is dealt with later in the essay.
prior to its affections”, and since modes are merely the affections of substance, they cannot have existed prior, temporally speaking, to substance\(^{38}\). On its own, this seemingly does not support Spinoza’s claim that modes are not simply parts. However, Spinoza’s proof for EP1pr12 makes it clear parts must be prior to a whole, which is in direct opposition to Spinoza’s definition of substance, which makes it clear that substance comes ontologically before modes. Ultimately, since modes would have to exist before substance (which is by definition impossible), modes cannot be considered “a part of God”, and must instead be understood as qualities of God.

**Implications of Spinoza’s Conception of God**

Now that the basic building blocks of Spinoza’s metaphysics have been outlined, it is useful to examine what implications can be drawn, both from Spinoza and from the reader, about God and metaphysics at large, since this will help highlight key areas of criticism from Spinoza’s interpreters. Spinoza condenses the entire first part of the *Ethics* in his first sentence of the appendix, as such:

I have now explained the nature and properties of God: that he necessarily exists, that he is one alone, that he is and acts solely from the necessity of his own nature, that he is the free cause of all things and how so, that all things are in God and are so dependent on him that they can neither be nor be conceived without him, and that lastly, that all things have been predetermined by God, not from his free will or absolute pleasure, but from the absolute nature of God, his infinite power.\(^{39}\)

While this summary neatly condenses Spinoza’s building blocks of metaphysics, it also introduces aspects of Spinoza’s God that have not yet been discussed, namely: how God acts.

However, to say that God “acts” would be misleading. Although Spinoza himself uses the term “acts” with respect to God, Spinoza uses the term in a narrow way that is not consistent with the common usage of the term. To understand exactly what Spinoza means when he says that God “acts solely from the necessity of his own nature”, it is again useful to look at Part I of the *Ethics.* Foremost, God’s nature is that of necessary existence as evidenced from EP1pr20, “God’s existence and his essence are one and the same”\(^{40}\). Clearly, then, any act of God must be the result of necessity, and not of will, since will is contingent and therefore cannot belong to the nature of God, since God exists necessarily. To further clarify this point, Spinoza himself notes in EP1pr32 that “Will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary cause” and that in EP1pr32C to this proposition, “hence it follows, firstly, that God does not act from freedom of will”\(^{41}\). It should therefore be clear in what sense God “acts”. Namely, God does not act according to his will, but out of necessity, which of course leads to the conclusion that God is determined, as is everything else. For Spinoza’s God, there are no choices. However, this leads to a seeming contradiction due to Spinoza’s use of the phrase, “he is the free cause of all things”. It appears that Spinoza has reached an impasse whereby his God is both determined, yet a free cause. To reconcile this apparent contradiction, one again must be versed in the terminology employed by Spinoza. Spinoza considers God a free cause because God is self-caused –that is, God is the immanent cause of himself. In this regard, Spinoza considers freedom to be the freedom from any dependency on another being for existence, not the freedom to exercise a will, or in a more anthropomorphic sense, political freedom. In this sense, God is free because God does not depend on anything external to himself in order to exist, but since God exists necessarily, by his nature, God is therefore determined. In regard to specific modes, it is apparent

that particular things that exist, things which depend on God for existence, are predetermined. Again, Spinoza is clear on this issue in EP1pr33, in which he maintains that “things could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case”\textsuperscript{42}. The implications of Proposition 33 are obvious: since God is the efficient cause of all things, all things are necessarily predetermined and could not be otherwise. For Spinoza, the entire universe is determined; nothing in nature is contingent.

I must also be careful to note that although Spinoza advocates for a determined universe, Spinoza is not advocating for the teleological universe of Aristotle. While it may be somewhat disheartening, Spinoza is not suggesting that the universe is purpose-driven. Teleology has no place in Spinoza’s metaphysics from the sheer fact that Spinoza disregards the notion of a free will. Unlike Aristotle, Spinoza is not claiming that an acorn becomes an oak tree merely because the acorn is attempting to fulfill its essence, but rather that the acorn cannot possibly become anything but an oak tree. A key point in the difference between Aristotle and Spinoza is the concept of agency. Since there is no agent capable of “willing” in Spinoza’s system, the acorn really has no “purpose”, since a “purpose” supposes a plan of some sort. Spinoza is worried that interpreters of his philosophy will mistakenly attribute purpose to the necessity of nature, “For example, if a stone falls from the roof on somebody’s head and kills him, by this method of arguing they will prove that the stone fell in order to kill the man; for if it had not fallen for this purpose by the will of God, how could so many circumstances […] have chanced to concur?”\textsuperscript{43}. Spinoza’s answer to such a question should be obvious from the wording of the question itself. The idea that the will of God causes certain actions is absurd (in the truest sense of the word) for Spinoza. In Spinoza’s metaphysics, God does not have a will, but only acts from necessity. To

therefore suggest that the stone fell with purpose in order to kill the man (or that the acorn grows with purpose into an oak tree) necessitates the existence of a will by which the stone is acting. However, since will is not free, but determined, it should be obvious that such attributions of purpose cannot exist in Spinoza’s metaphysics.

Another important implication of Spinoza’s metaphysics has also yet to be addressed: the origin and nature of the mind. However, since the origin and nature of the mind is the primary concern of Part II of the *Ethics*, I do not feel remiss in having postponed the discussion until now. In general, the mind-body problem has been a central theme throughout the history of metaphysics, and for Spinoza, the relationship of the mind and body is a central topic to his treatment of metaphysics.

Spinoza’s discussion of the mind rests primarily on Spinoza’s understanding of an attribute. As a reminder, Spinoza considers an attribute to be “that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence”

44 Spinoza, “Ethics”, trans. Shirley, ed. Morgan, 217. Likewise, Spinoza considers God to possess an infinite number of attributes. A proper understanding of Spinozistic attributes is crucial, since for Spinoza, the mind (and the body) is an attribute of God. EP2pr1 states “thought is an attribute of God, i.e., God is a thinking thing” and similarly, EP2pr2 states “extension is an attribute of God, i.e., God is an extended thing”

45 Spinoza, “Ethics”, trans. Shirley, ed. Morgan, 245. Although the proof that the mind is an attribute of God should be rather obvious, Spinoza nonetheless offers proof for this claim by stating, “a being that can think infinite things in infinite ways is by virtue of this thinking necessarily infinite. Since therefore by merely considering Thought we conceive an infinite being, Thought is necessarily
one of the infinite attributes of God.“46 Unsurprisingly, Spinoza offers the same proof for the
eexistence of Extension. However, it is crucial to note that for Spinoza, Thought and Extension
are the only two attributes of God which are knowable to human beings, even though God
consists of an infinite number of attributes. However, it is important to note that a careful reading
of Spinoza recognizes the distinction between Thought, as it is considered an attribute of God,
and specifically the human mind. For Spinoza, the individual human mind is a specific
modification of the attribute of Thought—that is, the mind is a narrower subset of the larger
category of Thought. Spinoza’s primary reasoning for the distinction between the mind and
Thought rests on notion that the mind is nothing but a particular thought. Spinoza reinforces this
interpretation by asserting “that which constitutes the actual being of the human mind is basically
nothing else but the idea of an individual actually existing thing”47. Moreover, Spinoza offers
the claim that “the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body—i.e., a definite
mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else”48. The relationship between Spinoza’s
conception of Mind and Body is undoubtedly confusing, but is also rather clear that the two are
inextricably related. For Spinoza, the Mind is the thought of the Body. Adding further to the
confusion, the Body is nothing more than a particular modification of Extension. However, this
should not be too troubling, since the variety of particular corporeal things is manifestly obvious
to anyone and everyone. Yet, Spinoza is not suggesting that the Mind and the Body are the same
thing, nor is he suggesting that they exist under the same attribute. Rather, the Mind is a
particular thought of a particular mode of Extension. However, the Mind does not follow under
the same attribute as the Body, since EP2pr6 makes it clear that “the modes of any attribute have
God for their cause only insofar as he is considered under that attribute, and not insofar as he is

46 Ibid.
considered under any other attribute”49. Here, Spinoza argues that since attributes are conceived independently of any other attribute, according to EP1pr10, the mode of any attribute must involve the conception of their own attribute, and not that of another attribute. In terms of Thought and Mind, since Thought exists independently of any other attribute, the specific mode of Thought, the Mind, can only be conceived through its attribute, which is Thought. Therefore, even though Body and Mind are inextricably linked, they cannot be conceived under the same attribute, and are thus caused by God in different ways. Implicit in this discussion is the obvious truth that the attributes of Thought and Extension express the essence of the singular substance God, and that therefore the modes of these specific attributes, Mind and Body, are not separate substances (since this would be absurd), but are rather the same substance expressing different aspects of God’s essence. This line of reasoning has been termed “parallelism” for the obvious fact that Mind and Body are united under the same substance, but represent different aspects of God’s essence, and therefore parallel each other.

The Objections to Spinoza’s Metaphysics

Now that a basic understanding of Spinoza’s metaphysical system and its implications has been developed, it is now necessary to discuss the number of apparent contradictions or inconsistencies that arise. A number of philosophers have been thoroughly influenced by Spinoza’s writings; however, an even larger number found Spinoza’s work not only extremely heretical, but also philosophically unsound. The next section is dedicated to resolving the apparent contradictions that have arisen from a variety of Spinoza’s commentators, including contemporaries of Spinoza himself, and present-day interpreters that have sought to make sense of Spinoza’s body of work. Although this essay is not intended to solely be a reinterpretation of

Spinoza’s work, the majority of the critiques that have been presented against Spinoza, I believe, largely rest upon an incorrect interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy. My goal is to summarize the criticisms of Spinoza’s opponents, offer a reinterpretation of Spinoza’s work in light of these criticisms, and then present a coherent defense of Spinoza’s metaphysics by both appealing to Spinoza as a primary source and also a small amount speculation on my part as to the defenses Spinoza would appeal to, given that not all criticisms were presented in Spinoza’s own time and therefore, Spinoza’s work may not explicitly offer a defense.

Perhaps the earliest critic of Spinoza was French philosopher and extreme skeptic, Pierre Bayle. Bayle’s most famous work, *The Historical and Critical Dictionary*, covers a number of philosophers and philosophical issues, but for some reason or other Bayle’s work has largely remained of historical interest rather than of serious philosophical interest to current-day philosophers, with a notable exception being his entry on Spinoza. To this day Bayle remains a lively voice in serious discussions in Spinozistic scholarship, and for this reason, in addition to the unique criticisms Bayle offers of Spinoza, any adequate defense of Spinoza’s metaphysics must include a response to Bayle’s objections.

One of the most obvious indicators that Bayle fundamentally fails to correctly understand Spinoza’s metaphysics emerges at the beginning of Bayle’s entry on Spinoza, in which Bayle writes, “He was a systematic atheist who employed a totally new method, though the basis of his theory was the same as that of several other ancient and modern philosophers”50. Immediately troubling is that Bayle considers Spinoza a “systematic atheist”. Quite clearly, Bayle fails to comprehend the nature of Spinoza’s metaphysics. To consider Spinoza an atheist, in the truest

sense of the word, is to completely ignore not only the language employed by Spinoza, in which Spinoza clearly references God, but also Spinoza’s treatment of the term “substance”. However, Bayle’s characterization of Spinoza as an atheist is also understandable given that Bayle, to some degree, correctly notes that Spinoza’s metaphysics shares a number of characteristics with ancient philosophers. While Bayle does not cite Aristotle as one of these ancient philosophers, Bayle does cite Confucius, which is certainly interesting. However, Bayle’s suggestion that Spinoza shares a number of characteristics with early philosophers indicates that perhaps Bayle failed to fully understand the unique sense in which Spinoza employs a number of critical terms, such as “substance”.

A number of leading scholars on Spinoza have brought attention to an objection raised by Bayle. Reinvigorated by Edwin Curley, one of Bayle’s most severe criticisms charges Spinoza with conceiving of a God that possesses contradictory properties. Although Curley elaborates on Bayle’s critique, it does little to further the argument in any truly unique sense, so an adequate response to Bayle’s original objection should be considered an adequate response to Curley’s objection as well. Bayle’s original objection rests on his claim that Spinoza’s “God cannot be the subject of inherence of man’s thoughts since these thoughts are contrary to one another”51. There are two ways to respond to Bayle’s objection: the first would require interpreting Spinoza’s metaphysics to prove that God is indeed not the subject of inherence of man’s thought (a notion that Spinoza clearly does not hold), and the second option is to prove that even though God is the subject of inherence of man’s thought, that this does not lead to the claim that God possesses contradictory properties. For the obvious reason that Spinoza actually does contend that God is the subject of inherence of mans’ thoughts, I will therefore attempt to illustrate the second

51 Bayle, Dictionary, 308.
plausible response: that Spinoza’s God is the subject of inherence and that this does not lead to contradictions. Bayle’s criticism rests on the fundamental tenet of logic: the law of non-contradiction. Bayle presents this law as the cornerstone of human knowledge: “if there is anything certain and incontestable in human knowledge, it is this proposition: two opposite terms cannot be truly affirmed of the same subject, in the same respect, and at the same time”\(^{52}\). It is fair to say that Bayle presents a fairly straight-forward and noncontroversial representation of the law of non-contradiction. With the law of non-contradiction in mind, Bayle attacks Spinoza’s concept of modes by arguing that:

if it were true then, as Spinoza claims, that men are modalities of God, one would speak falsely when on said, ‘Peter denies this, he wants that, affirms such and such a thing’; for actually, according to this theory, it is God who denies, wants, affirms; and consequently all the denominations that result from the thoughts of all men are properly and physically to be ascribed to God. From which it follows that God hates and loves, denies and affirms the same things at the same time, and this according to all the conditions required to make false the rule mentioned above.\(^{53}\)

Bayle’s objection is rather straightforward and requires little explication. For Bayle, if Spinoza is correct in asserting that all of mankind is merely a modality of God, then God violates the law of non-contradiction by affirming and denying the same thing, at the same time, and in the same respect.

Melamed also addresses Bayle’s objection, and while it is useful to consider Melamed’s response to Bayle, Melamed’s response also falls short of thoroughly refuting Bayle’s objection.

\(^{52}\) Bayle, *Dictionary*, 309.

\(^{53}\) Bayle, *Dictionary*, 310-311.
and does not fully consider the flaws in Bayle’s interpretation. Melamed views Bayle’s objection as relying on the claim that God is indivisible, and because God is indivisible, every property must belong to God entirely. Melamed responds by asserting that “finite modes are just parts of certain infinite totalities that Spinoza calls ‘infinite modes’. These infinite modes, as opposed to the substance and attributes, are divisible. Napoleon is neither a part of God, nor is he God entirely. Napoleon (and any other finite mode) is just a part of a property, an infinite mode”\(^54\). Melamed’s response recognizes something about Spinozistic modes that Bayle does not. Foremost, Melamed realizes that unlike substance or attributes, modes are divisible for Spinoza, because modes do not represent God’s essence, but are rather a part of infinite modes. Therefore, finite modes (particular things) can affirm opposing statements, since it is only infinite modes that belong to God entirely. For Spinoza, Thought and Extension are infinite attributes, but specific thoughts are merely modifications of these attributes and thus contribute to the infinite nature of Thought and Extension. Thus, Thought and Extension would not truly be infinite if they did not include the possibility of including every single, individual idea or body.

However, I believe that Melamed’s response does not deal thoroughly enough with Bayle’s misinterpretation. Foremost, Bayle is asserting the power of God, \textit{qua} God, to affirm or deny, desire or detest, any particular modes, which of course Bayle considers to be contradictory. However, this only illustrates that Bayle does not fully comprehend the implications of Spinoza’s God. Namely, Spinoza’s God cannot “will” something –that is, affirm or deny, desire or detest, anything in the sense in which Bayle seems to consider. Spinoza’s God is not free in the sense that God is able to make choices. Rather, Spinoza is clear, that God’s freedom is causal freedom from any externalities to exist. Instead, Bayle seems to consider that Spinoza’s God is free to

\(^{54}\) Melamed, \textit{Spinoza’s Metaphysics}, 35.
make choices and affirm or deny as he pleases. Not only does this seem to indicate that Bayle fundamentally does not understand Spinoza, but it also commits Bayle to an extreme form of skepticism that I would guess, even he would not subscribe to. For if Spinoza’s God’s will is determined by necessity, then Spinoza’s God would have to affirm and deny the same thing, in the same way, and at the same time, by necessity. Of course, this would lead to the conclusion that the law of non-contradiction is no law of logic at all, since by necessity, opposites would be affirmed. However, Spinoza clearly affirms that his God cannot violate the laws of logic: “to say that God can bring it about that it should not follow from the nature of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles, or that from a given cause the effect should not follow, […] is absurd”\textsuperscript{55}. Of course, Bayle never indicates that he recognizes the possibility of drawing this conclusion from his argument. Clearly, since Bayle’s objection would imply that the law of non-contradiction, a law which he holds to be the clearest of all human logic, is not true, Bayle’s objection cannot be seriously entertained.

The second, and I think more serious, of Bayle’s objections centers on the mutability of God. Spinoza clearly states in EP1pr20C2, that, “God is immutable; that is, all the attributes of God are immutable. For if they were to change in respect of existence, they would also have to change in respect of essence […] which is absurd”\textsuperscript{56}. Quite clearly, Spinoza denies that any of God’s attributes are changeable. However, Bayle asserts that for Spinoza, “the immutability of God is incompatible with the nature of Extension. Matter actually allows for the division of its parts”\textsuperscript{57}. While it would appear that Bayle’s criticism is only a further extension of his previous objection to the divisibility of God (and the contradictions that follow), Bayle’s objection here is

\textsuperscript{57} Bayle, Dictionary, 307.
more fundamentally an attack on Spinoza’s attribute of extension. Bayle argues that it is in the
nature of extension to be divisible, which is in direct opposition to Spinoza’s claim that all of
God’s attributes are immutable. Yet, again though, Bayle’s criticism relies on an incorrect
interpretation of Spinoza’s metaphysics. Bayle argues that specific materials are capable of being
divided or changed, and that therefore the attribute of Extension cannot be immutable. However,
Bayle fails to recognize that his attack is really a criticism of modes of an attribute. A specific
thing only exists as a modification of an attribute (either a particular idea being a mode of
Thought, or a specific body being a mode of Extension). Although Spinoza never explicitly
prepares a response to an objection of this type, one can be inferred by combining several
different propositions. Foremost, Spinoza states in EP1pr25 that, “God is the efficient cause not
only of the existence of things but also of their essence”58. While this only seems to reinforce
Bayle’s objection, Spinoza also notes in the corollary to the proposition that, “Particular things
are nothing but affections of the attributes of God, that is, modes wherein the attributes of God
find expression in a definite and determinate way”59. Here, Spinoza strengthens my claim that
particular objects are only modifications of attributes. However, Spinoza also notes that
particular things are modes which are expressed in a definite and determinate way. More
importantly, though, in the proof to EP1pr28, Spinoza indicates exactly how a finite (read
particular) and determinate thing exists. For Spinoza:

whatever is determined to exist and to act has been so determined by God. But that which
is finite and has a determinate existence cannot have been produced by the absolute
nature of one of God’s attributes, for whatever follows from the absolute nature of one of
God’s attributes is infinite and eternal. It must therefore have followed from God or of his

attributes insofar as that is considered as affected by some mode. […] Therefore, it must have followed, or been determined to exist and to act, by God or one of his attributes insofar as it was modified by a modification which is finite and has a determinate existence.60

Here, Spinoza makes the argument that particular, changeable things can only exist or act through the modifications of other modifications. More clearly, determinate modes can only follow from the nature of other determinate modes, and that they, therefore, do not follow from the eternal immutable essence of God. Since these determinate modes, which are nothing more than particular things, which Bayle states contribute to God’s mutability, can only exist through determinate modes, there is nothing fundamentally contradictory in asserting that God is immutable and that finite modes are changeable. It is therefore obvious that Bayle’s objection is unwarranted. However, a much more serious objection arises in its place. Spinoza recognizes that the chain of determinate modes continues ad infinitum, which, of course, raises the question of how the entire chain of determinate modes acquired their mutability in the first place, given that everything has its cause as God and God is immutable. Unfortunately, I found no such place in the Ethics that offers a suitable answer to this imperative question. Therefore, while the reasoning behind Bayle’s objection does not hold weight, the question of the mutability of things, which is the heart of Bayle’s objection, does indeed provide a strong criticism of Spinoza’s metaphysics.

A third and very powerful objection to Spinoza’s metaphysics is offered by Beth Lord. A present-day interpreter of Spinoza, Lord certainly offers the most unique objection to Spinoza’s metaphysics out of any contemporary interpreters on the sheer fact that no other scholarly

literature on Spinoza even seems to conceive of Lord’s objection. Lord’s primary concern is centered on Spinoza’s relationship between the mind and the body⁶¹. Lord accurately notes that for Spinoza, “the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body – i.e., a definite mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else”⁶². Lord and I understand this proposition as implying the same thing: that for Spinoza, the human mind is the idea of the body. With this understanding of the relationship between mind and body, Lord appeals to EP2pr12 to construct her objection. EP2pr12 asserts that “If the object of the idea constituting the human mind is a body, nothing can happen in that body without its being perceived by the mind”⁶³. For Lord, the combined conclusions of EP2pr12 and EP2pr13 result in the claim that since the mind is only the idea of the body and that nothing can happen in that body which is not understood by the mind, then the mind must necessarily understand everything that happens in the body. However, Lord appeals to the common experience of all humans to prove that this is fundamentally not the case: “our experience suggests this is not the case. We don’t have direct mental awareness of what goes on in our inner organs, for instance, and we don’t truly understand how our DNA replicates itself”⁶⁴. The obvious conclusion of Lord’s argument is that since humans clearly do not perceive all the inner workings, as Spinoza would suggest as a form of necessary knowledge if the mind is to exist, then clearly Spinoza is incorrect that the mind perceives everything in the body. However, it is important to note that Lord does not seem to reject Spinoza’s claim that the mind is the idea of the body, but only that she rejects the claim that the mind perceives everything

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⁶¹ The reason Lord’s objection is of particular importance to a metaphysical conception of God is because, for Spinoza, the mind and body both exist within and through God. Therefore, while a discussion of the mind-body problem might seem extraneous to a discussion of God, for Spinoza it is not. Therefore, to adequately deal with all aspects of Spinoza’s metaphysics, and to properly present a defense, it is important to address a critique of Spinoza’s God which deals with God’s role in the mind-body relationship.
⁶³ Ibid.
⁶⁴ Beth Lord, Spinoza’s Ethics (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 59.
about the body. Indeed, Lord even attempts to offer a possible solution to the dilemma she has constructed, yet she only succeeds in further convoluting the issue. Lord goes on to suggest that humans alone do not possess minds, but instead that all modifications of Extension (modes) possess minds. While Lord is not guilty of a slippery slope fallacy, she certainly walks a fine line when she states, “the minds of cats, stones and sewing machines are therefore part of the infinite intellect, and those minds, like our own, comprehend everything that happens in their bodies”\textsuperscript{65}. Of course Lord recognizes that Spinoza does not advocate for a view that holds that a stone and a human possess similar kinds of minds. Since Lord is cognizant of this perplexity, she offers a solution which is predicated on the belief that certain modes possess more “reality” and are therefore capable of doing more. Since certain modes possess more reality and are capable of doing more, and a mind corresponds to the object of its idea, then a mind of a more active body is itself more active, and thus Lord is able to differentiate between the mind of a stone and the mind of a human. However, Lord’s apparent solution to her initial problem only seems to skirt around the real issue of comprehending the inner workings of modes. By Lord’s own logic, a stone, which is simpler than a human body, is more easily comprehended by its own mind, and therefore a stone has a better understanding of its mind than a human has of its own mind. This solution is unacceptable not only for its obvious absurdity, but also since it deviates from Spinoza’s body of work.

Again, affirming the unique nature of Lord’s objection, Spinoza has unfortunately not explicitly outlined a defense to such an attack on his metaphysics. Instead, I must construct a suitable defense based on the text of Part II of the \textit{Ethics}. While I am critical of Lord’s objection, I must grant that she has accurately characterized certain elements of Spinoza’s metaphysics on

\footnote{\textit{Lord, Spinoza’s Ethics}, 60.}
the question of “How […] Spinoza’s claim that the *mind is the idea of the body* square[s] with the very limited knowledge we seem to have of bodies? Spinoza thinks we cannot understand these limitations of our knowledge until we understand more about the *human* mind and the *human* body”66. I believe that Lord is correct in implying that Spinoza does not seem content with a superficial understanding of the body in relation to the mind. Rather, Spinoza seems to advocate for a deeper understanding of the body, if the mind is to be understood, through EP2pr13S: “But nobody can understand this union adequately or distinctly unless he first gains adequate knowledge of the nature of our body”67. While I agree with Lord that Spinoza requires a more than superficial understanding of the body, I do not believe that Spinoza would extend this requirement to her claim that one must understand *all* the inner workings of the body in order for a mind to properly exist. Admittedly, I am faced with the overwhelming existence of EP2pr12, in which Spinoza clearly notes that “nothing can happen in that body without its being perceived by the mind”68. However, I interpret EP2pr12 differently than Lord. Namely, I do not think that Spinoza’s claim that “nothing can happen in that body without its being perceived by the mind” expressly applies to human understanding. My reasoning rests on the notion that for Spinoza, the knowledge of these “inner workings” is apparent to God, even though it may not be so for humans. In EP2pr12, Spinoza clearly states that “so whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human mind, knowledge therefore is necessarily in God insofar as he constitutes that nature of the human mind”69. The inclusion of the phrase “knowledge therefore is necessarily in God” seems to let Spinoza off the hook. My interpretation of EP2pr12 suggests that since God necessarily possesses the knowledge of the inner workings of the body, that this

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
knowledge is adequate for the existence of the mind, even though the human intellect cannot grasp it.

In the case that one does not find my defense suitable to Lord’s objection, I will also construct a response to her claim that rests solely on the powers of the human intellect or mind, without regard to any knowledge God might have. Again, I find EP2pr13S to be of importance in formulating a response. As was previously noted, EP2pr13S illustrates that for Spinoza, the relationship between the mind and the body can never be adequately understood unless one first gains knowledge of the nature of the body. Again, I am apt to agree with Lord’s assessment that Spinoza considers the “reality” of a mode to be an important distinguishing feature of the mode which allows it to be understood. However, Spinoza offers important guidance as to how the reality of a particular thing should be understood. For Spinoza, according to EP2pr13S, “in order to determine the difference between the human mind and others and in what way it surpasses them, we have to know the nature of its object (as we have said), that is, the nature of the human body. Now I cannot here explain this nature, nor is it essential for the points that I intend to demonstrate”\(^{70}\). Here Spinoza explains that in order to assess the reality of a particular thing, the nature of that particular thing must be understood, in this case, the nature of the body. Combined with his earlier claim in EP2pr13S that “nobody can understand this union adequately or distinctly unless he first gains adequate knowledge of the nature of our body”, it becomes apparent that for Spinoza, the relationship between the mind and body rests solely on an understanding of the nature of the body\(^{71}\). Here I rely on the belief that Spinoza uses the term “nature” in an equivocal sense to “essence”. At various points throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza uses the term “nature” synonymously with “essence”, in respect to God. I see no reason as to


\(^{71}\) Ibid.
why Spinoza would suddenly change the way he wishes “nature” to be understood, here. In this regard, if the body’s essence only needs to be understood to understand the relationship between mind and body, then it should be obvious that Lord’s claim that the specifics of DNA replication are simply not needed. Lord’s criticism, although unique, is ultimately unwarranted. However, critics of my response will note that Spinoza himself states “I cannot here explain this nature”\textsuperscript{72}. This would seem to suggest that Spinoza does not mean the term “nature” to be used synonymously with “essence”, since Spinoza is clearly able to explain modes. However, I would counter that, perhaps, Spinoza did not mean to suggest that it is impossible for him to explain the nature of the body, but simply non-essential for his argument. Not only does Spinoza further add “nor is [the nature of the body] essential for the points that I intend to demonstrate”, but he also states that “now I cannot here explain this nature”\textsuperscript{73}. I interpret Spinoza’s use of the word “here” as implying that he is certainly able to explain this nature, but perhaps he has not yet fully developed his proofs that would enable him to elaborate upon this nature with certainty at the current moment. This is only reinforced by Spinoza’s own sense that explaining the nature of the human body is non-essential to his broader argument.

**Conclusion: A Personal Reflection**

I have now reached the most difficult portion of this essay: making a critical determination, given the totality of objections and refutations, whether Spinoza’s metaphysical system and conception of God is consistent enough to merit personal belief. Perhaps if this were strictly an academic paper, wherein I had no personal, life-altering beliefs at stake, I could write a brief summary of my main points and call that a conclusion. However, I undertook, at the

\textsuperscript{73}Ibid.
beginning of this project, a critical assessment of Spinoza’s metaphysics because it was a system of reality that I believed in, and because of that I owe more to Spinoza’s thought than just the average commentator.

Having weighed the evidence, I think the verdict as to the logical coherence of Spinoza’s system is fairly clear: it fails. While this may seem contrary to the objective of this paper, I gently remind the reader that I did not undergo this project with any attempt to bias the results of my rational inquiry with personal beliefs, and so being subject to reason above all else, I must declare that Spinoza’s metaphysics is ultimately incoherent, by just enough—which is all the is required, to call for a reevaluation of my beliefs.

Let me first explain why I have determined that Spinoza’s system has ultimately failed. Foremost, because Spinoza writes in the geometric method, and the *Ethics* is going to be the most straight-forward, precise and accurate representation of Spinoza’s thought that one is ever going to get. Because of the almost mathematical quality of Spinoza’s writing, one would expect fairly definite answers on some of the perceived weaknesses of Spinoza’s system. For example, in regard to Beth Lord’s objection, all Spinoza leaves us with is that the answer to our objection “cannot be explained here”. Given the rigorous and almost monotonous quality of Spinoza’s writing, to leave such an important question of how the mind understands the operations of the body, if it is truly to be an idea of the body, unanswered, is incredibly disheartening for a believer in his system. Moreover, while Spinoza adequately addresses Bayle’s concerns about the mutability of God in respect to modes, again the reader is left with the important question, “If the changeable things in the world are only modes of modes, and God creates all modes by the necessity of his essence, then how exactly is God immutable?” Spinoza’s answer seemed adequate on the surface: that the totality of changeable modes goes on *ad infinitum*. But of
course, this leaves one with the even more important question, “What caused the totality, if not God?” and unfortunately, despite the precise nature of Spinoza’s work, the reader is again left without an answer. So while I cannot say that Spinoza’s system is *not* incoherent, considered in itself, I can say confidently that with some reflection on the workings of the minor details, Spinoza’s system can be retrofitted to address some of these concerns. However, since Spinoza himself did not create such a system, I cannot say that it is *Spinoza’s* system, for if a philosopher were to adequately manipulate Spinoza’s system to solve these issues, then it would become *that philosopher’s* system.

So while I must regrettably admit that Spinoza’s system isn’t as “airtight” as I thought when I first undertook this project, I am hopeful that it can be reconstructed to address my concerns –although that would require its own dutifully administered project to complete. However, I think, when taken at large, and in a more charitable way, Spinoza’s system provides an ideal way to understand the reality that we find ourselves in. Spinoza’s system is largely compatible with contemporary understandings of physics and cosmology, it is in accordance with cutting edge research in neuroscience, and it implicitly advocates for an ethics wherein we all recognize the unity of ourselves with the world, and more importantly, with each other. I have always maintained, and I still do, that it is comforting to know that I am in God, and as such, am necessary for the perfection of the world. So while Spinoza’s *Ethics* may not be the solution to every metaphysical problem I am confronted with in the world, it is just that – an ethics, and a guide to what I believe is the Good Life.
Bibliography


