

# Spinoza's Definition of Substance

2018-02-21 22:43:58

Spinoza defines *substance* and related concepts in Part I of Ethics as:

- III. By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.
- IV. By attribute, I mean that which the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of substance.
- V. By mode, I mean the modifications<sup>[1]</sup> of substance, or that which exists in, and is conceived through, something other than itself. <sup>[1]</sup> “Affectiones”
- VI. By God, I mean a being absolutely infinite—that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality.

Explanation—I say absolutely infinite, not infinite after its kind: for, of a thing infinite only after its kind, infinite attributes may be denied; but that which is absolutely infinite, contains in its essence whatever expresses reality, and involves no negation.

- VII. That thing is called free, which exists solely by the necessity of its own nature, and of which the action is determined by itself alone. On the other hand, that thing is necessary, or rather constrained, which is determined by something external to itself to a fixed and definite method of existence or action.
- VIII. By eternity, I mean existence itself, in so far as it is conceived necessarily to follow solely from the definition of that which is eternal.

Explanation—Existence of this kind is conceived as an eternal truth, like the essence of a thing, and, therefore, cannot be explained by means of continuance or time, though continuance may be conceived without a beginning or end.

Here the most problematic definition seems *substance* as *thing in itself* and *conceived through itself*.

Any conception of human mind is conceived through *differentiation* that is by change in natural impulses, like the color, sound, etc. If one believes that there are *substances* that can be known independently of other substances, these are *by definition* infinite.

I think this is a relic from *idealistic* world view, that says, there is some kind of *idea* or *knowledge* independent of the human mind and perception.

Suppose there is such a knowledge beyond the reach of human mind. This means, there is some kind of knowledge without a *knower*. This knowledge, however it may be, exists independent of a *knower* but also has some affect in the world that some human *knowers* must discover.

These *knowers* should also know that the knowledge caused by substance is independent of their perception and mind. Otherwise, either they should identify some knowledge as *substantial* by their minds, or they should label all knowledge as *substantial* without their mind. In the first case, *substantial* knowledge is ambiguous, we can't know whether some *knowledge* is substantial, or not via human mind. In the second case, all knowledge should be *substantial* but this doesn't bring any relief to know substance.

Because, as we all know, there is no such thing as *knowledge without knower*.

Knowledge *happens* between a *mind* and *matter*. These are like two poles, one negative, one positive and knowledge is the *effect* between these two. Instead of saying *mind plus substance creates knowledge*, I prefer *substance minus mind creates knowledge*. Why so?

Because when you say  $mind + substance = knowledge$ , you assume there is some *independent* mind and *independent* substance and knowledge is the *thing* when we mix these two. No, it's not. Knowledge is like electricity, without two opposite poles, it can't happen. Without substance you can't know *what to be known* and without mind, you don't have a tool to know.

Looking at the knowledge problem this way has also another benefit: Mind cannot know itself because for it to know itself, itself should be something other. This is a contradiction. If mind knows something, the known is not mind, it's something *other than mind*.

By this *negative view of knowledge*, we can proceed to other definitions of Ethics.

IV. By attribute, I mean that which the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of substance.

The distinction between *essence* and *existence* mostly seemed as *linguistic* for me. It's not readily translated to other languages and mostly a made-up concept.

The problem is the same as we find in *substance*. If we can find a way to describe the essence from existence, it's through our minds and perceptions. *The intellect*

labels an attribute as *essential* and it is so, by circular logic. If thing  $Z$  has the essential attribute  $a$ , then a  $Z$  without  $a$  is not  $Z$  anyway. When two speakers of a language find an attribute  $a$  for  $Z$  as essential, then it is so, otherwise it is not. So, how can we differentiate an attribute as essential or existential, independent of the language?

When we look at the problem in the *negative light* we can come up with a solution: The attributes are not related with *essence* of a substance, they are possible ways for mind to *know* a substance. Suppose we have more kinds of electrical charge, other than negative and positive. Mind has a set of charges, like  $m_1, m_2, m_3, \dots$  and substance has a set of charges  $s_1, s_2, s_3, \dots$ . If we can create a *discharge* between an attribute  $s_i$  and mental faculty  $m_j$ , it's called an attribute.

We can give a crude example: Suppose  $m_i$  are five senses, like sight and hearing,  $s_j$  are attributes of a *bee*, its stripes, its buzz, its movements, etc. If  $m_1$  (sight) can related with  $s_3$  (black/yellow stripes) of a bee, we can call this an attribute of a thing.

The problem of *enumerating*  $s_i$  remains, though. Can we know how many attributes a bee has? To know this, we have to invent infinitely different mental faculties, like, *seeing infrared light* or *hearing lower frequencies*.  $m_i$  for a human mind are limited, so enumerating *essence* of a substance is beyond the human mind. It can only enumerate what it can *detect* and attributes it detects may not constitute the essence of a substance.

We may proceed to this by other definitions.