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The notion of substance in Spinoza's *Ethics* and a problem with its interpretation

ABSTRACT: Spinoza searched for a language that could help him to create a monistic system of ethics. Latin was in the 17th century a fairly malleable medium of communication. In its philosophical use it was largely a creation of Descartes. Spinoza wanted to use it in a way that would resemble Euclid's treatment of geometry. He needed a language that would clearly and precisely describe the process by which a man could liberate himself from the power of affection that hamper natural propensity for social peace and mental equanimity. He decided to begin by describing nature, which was responsible for man's proclivities and abilities. Consequently he needed a new conception of substance which on the one hand could be defined by some initial axioms, and on the other hand would sufficiently flexible to include various aspects of human thought. It is interesting that when Spinoza had to make a choice between flexibility and content, he resolved to adopt a strict method of reasoning at the cost of the received understanding of substance. It is possible that these linguistic considerations led him to adopt the view that substance is identical with God and as such encompasses all principles of operations of the human mind and premises for the deriving of all fundamental notions popular in his times.

KEYWORDS: Spinoza • Descartes • *Ethics* • language • definition • substance • nature • God • understanding

Before writings and treatises written in vernacular languages gained acceptance in the modern European philosophical tradition, Latin was the universal means of communication between scholars. Although Descartes tried to address his *A Discourse of a Method* to a less educated reader, yet in *Meditations* he came back to terminology far more precise than contemporary French could offer him. His argument of the existence of God would not work without the old differentiation between the objective, the formal and the eminent way of existence¹, i.e. without notions developed in the scholastic tradition. They are not the only ones that determine the content of Descartes's thought and its possible elaborations, which his successors tried to achieve independently.

¹ Cf. R. Descartes, *Medytations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Veitch, frgm 16, <http://www.wright.edu/cola/cartes/meditation1.html> (18.11.2010)..

In the era dealt with in this work, in Europe, interest in light was in full bloom, as was reflected not only in theology and art, but most of all in science and entertainment. Observation tools, various kinds of optical glasses, combined in arrangements magnifying a picture or bringing it closer to the human eye, available at reasonable prices, brought a pleasant change to the repertoire of popular ways of spending leisure time. However, the use of the tools brought to mind many not-easy-to-answer questions. What can a human eye see when looking into the telescope tube? Why does a picture, brought closer to an eye by such a tool, seem detached from the object and brought from a big distance, although the object stays far away, a few miles from the observer?

Descartes presented evidence that mind is unique in its ability to perceive, name and understand what it perceived; it must have a given idea (*imago*, image), because, as a thinking thing, although unextended, it cannot take over anything from the sphere of extended things. Thus, in this case, there is no separation of image from object in space since they have never belonged to each other. In minds, movement of ideas takes place, corresponding with the movement of the extension, performed by God. The reasons for noticing a small point, moving on the road somewhere far away, and immediately after that, when putting a telescope to the eye, noticing a carriage drawn by a pair of bays in a cloud of dust, and again the small point, now in a different part of the road, can be explained by a change of the idea in the observer's mind, a change made by God "on the occasion" of causing a change in the position of objects in space. The explanation may be, as a matter of fact, reassuring, however, it does not account for the secret of image. Does it exist in the telescope, in the air, in the light, in the eye, or perhaps in God? A dismantled telescope, differently from e.g., a kaleidoscope, does not contain anything inside which could create the image. All the pieces of glass in the telescope are transparent and smooth. What about the rainbow? What is it? Is it a sign of reconciliation given by God or perhaps a thing far away and therefore unclear, in colours more subtle than those used by artists in the previous epoch when painting their canvases?

Optics, understood not only as the art of making glasses and constructing with them tools aiding the human eye, but, most of all, as the science of light, which is the area in between thinking and extended substance, the science of rules governing them, will define its object. Research into the nature of light understood as a wave would be completed by Huygens after Descartes's death. During his life, however, a conviction about the necessary substantialism of the examined beings² was a certainty, which can be illu-

² "[...] whatever is real may exist independently of any other subject; whereas whatever may exist in this manner, is a substance and not an accidents". R. Descartes, *Meditations...*, Reply to the Sixth Criticism, excerpt 434, Kęty 2001, p. 324.

strated, as proved in *Meditations*, by the necessity for the presence of *ego*, a thinking thing. As much as Nature hates a vacuum, speech hates opinions without at least an implied subject. Descartes can deliberate carefully on subjects of geometry and present them in the algebraic way, on condition that both triangles and values on coordinate axis are “something” – ideas in the human mind, things in extension, moved by God. Thinking of light as a wave is *horror*, unless we clearly define what waves.

The very “what”, the substratum of the change, the substance, was understood by Descartes in two ways, as thinking and extended substance, differentiated from that, which “exists in such a way as to stand in need of nothing beyond itself in order to its existence”³, that is God. Since we are not able to discover the existence itself (“for existence by itself is not observed by us”, explains Descartes⁴), we discover the substance (or rather its essence or nature) “from any attribute of it, by this common notion, that of nothing there are no attributes, properties, or qualities”⁵. Whether corporeal⁶ or thinking substance, it cannot be defined as the one which, for its existence, does not need any other thing – this is an attribute of substance-God, therefore “the term [substance] is not applicable to God and the creatures in the same sense”⁷. Also, because of the fact that “God, who is the author of things, is infinite, while we are wholly finite”⁸, “We will thus never embarrass by disputes about the infinite, [...] And, for our part, looking to all those things in which in certain senses, we discover no limits, we will not, therefore, affirm that they are infinite, but will regard them simply as indefinite”⁹. We refer to created things in this manner, because “we do not in the same way positively conceive that other things are in every part unlimited, but merely negatively admit that their limits, if they have any, cannot be discovered by us”¹⁰. Hence, infinite can be applicable only to God, and indefinite to substance, which for its existence needs God.

³ R. Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, § 51, in: R. Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, ed.: René Descartes, *The Method, Meditations and Philosophy of Descartes* [1637], edition used: *The Method, Meditations and Philosophy of Descartes, translated from the Original Texts, with a new introductory Essay, Historical and Critical* by John Veitch a Special Introduction by Frank Sewall (Washington: M. Walter Dunne, 1901) [18.11.2010].

⁴ *Ibidem*, § 52.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ This expression is used by Descartes in: *ibidem*, § 53.

⁷ *Ibidem*, § 51.

⁸ *Ibidem*, § 24.

⁹ *Ibidem*, § 26.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, § 27.

When discovering and accepting the philosophy of Descartes, Spinoza soon noticed that its core contains statements and notions univocal, yet ambiguous. Taking up a task of continuing the transformation of philosophical thought, initiated by Descartes, into a system based on the geometrical method, he had to start it from systematising the “philosophical matter”, i.e. from selecting the most essential notions and defining them precisely and explicitly¹¹. Undoubtedly, the notion of substance belongs to them. Intending to maintain the construction of Descartes’s thought untouched, Spinoza reports on the argument of *The Principles...*, realising however that it is impossible to respect the regime of the Euclidean method referring to the meaning of notions of the philosophy, accepted by its creator. Traces of his struggle are visible in *Metaphysical Considerations*¹², constituting a supplement to *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*. Spinoza abandoned this task as ultimately unachievable and for the needs of his own *Ethics* he selected another meaning for the term of “substance”, thinking perhaps that this way he would succeed in avoiding both the complications characteristic of Cartesian thought as well as confessional frictions.

According to a study conducted by J. Freudenthal¹³ Spinoza reached for traditional, Aristotelian-scholastic meanings of this term and used it in his *Ethics* and in letters written to his friends with whom he exchanged comments on the content of particular definitions, statements, and explanations. Descartes’s instructions concerning reliance on the universality of human rationality may have seemed to him a reliable postulate, especially when compared with the world of Judaism, irrational and full of prejudices¹⁴. He therefore decided to base his theory on it. Learning Latin, which is a tongue governed by completely different principles from those of Hebrew, was an experience that clarified the problem of possible human cognition even more. Spinoza, who had been multilingual since childhood¹⁵, was well aware of the fact that the languages he could speak had varying potential for making statements, because – owing to the level of development of abstract concepts – some languages attribute a great level of complexity to the world,

¹¹ *Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy* (1663) are written along with the first books of the *Ethics*, in which Spinoza introduces different meanings of the basic metaphysical notions – he makes his choices deliberately, aware of the difference and consequences, which result from his proposal.

¹² Cf. Spinoza, *The Principles of Descartes Philosophy*, www.ohread.com/book/The-Principles-of-Descartes-Philosophy-43400 [21.11.2010].

¹³ Cf. J. Freudenthal, *Spinoza und die Scholastik*, in: *Philosophische Aufsätze, Eduard Zeller zu seinen fünfzigjährigen Doctor-Jubiläum gewidmet*, Leipzig 1887, pp. 120–124.

¹⁴ Cf. on that subject: S. Nadler, *Spinoza*, Cambridge University Press 1999, pp. 42–115.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibidem*.

while others are unable to grasp it. The old dilemma of Christian Europe, as to whether general notions have their specific designates, may seem amusing from this perspective. Universals, which are shaped so differently in various languages, belong to speech instruments, yet they may not be used to indicate non-linguistic designates: they are merely "ancestral calls" of various specific names. However, is "substance" a universal or a specific name indicating only one designate? This issue shows its own importance, when one is willing to use the term in question in a text written with the use of the "geometric" method. In Cartesian-Scholastic tradition, the ambiguity of this term may be an important advantage that proves to be a fundamental flaw if it is to be reduced to a clear, unambiguous form that can be expressed in a definition. Spinoza, forced to make a choice, reaches for an Aristotelian concept¹⁶, while making Cartesian "dependent" substances (thinking and extended) attributes of that being. Having then referred to the only criterion of assessing the appropriateness of his choice, i.e. to the human intellect (*intellectus*), he will deduce "geometrically" that the designation of "substance" may be parallel to an "individual" being, i.e. as much single as indivisible, or unique.

The "geometrical" line of reasoning in according to the way Spinoza understood it implies the need to introduce axioms, i.e. sentences expressing principles of activity universal for all human minds. Among them one may find statements, such as: "Everything which exists, exists either in itself or in something else"¹⁷, or "That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself"¹⁸. Used in relation to the definition of substance, i.e. the sentence stating: "By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself [per se – annotated by J. Ž], in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception"¹⁹, they show that it refers to an object which is not "in something else" and consequently it should not be understood by referring it to "the other". Additional clarification (as well as a warning against the possibility of confusion of conceptions) may be definition II of the book cited, stating that: "A thing is called finite after its kind, when it can be

¹⁶ „[...]for everything that is common indicates not a 'this' but a 'such', but substance is a 'this'." <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.3.iii.html> [21.11.2010], *Metaphysics* by Aristotle Wirten, 350 B.C.E. Translated by W.D. Ross, Book III, 1003a ; "no universal attribute is a substance"; *ibidem*, Book VII, 1038a.

¹⁷ *The Ethics (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata)* by Benedict de Spinoza, Translated from the Latin by R.H.M. Elwes, Part I, ax. I; www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm [21.11.2010]: Everything in it self or in something else.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, ax. II. That which cannot be conceived through anything else be conceived through it self.

¹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. I, prop. III.

limited by another thing of the same nature”²⁰. If we follow Aristotle in assuming that “substance” is the name of an individual and not of a kind, it could thus be limited (*termino*) only by an object of the same nature that at the same time would make it a finite thing (*res finita*). If a substance is to be an individual “in itself” and not “in its kind” (the latter assuming that ‘in it’ “things of the same nature” that limit each other may be found, i.e. finite according to Spinoza), then our mind, not being able “within the limits of the kind” to compare it with “any other substance of the same nature” and not being able to find (apart from permitted meaning of the concept of “substance”) another term with the use of which it could grasp the meaning of “substance”, denies this notion the meaning of a “finite thing”, for it is forced to assume that substance is understood as something that is necessarily infinite²¹. The assumption that substance may have the above definition in addition to a clearly defined conception of “a thing finite after its kind” allows Spinoza to exclude the possibility of differentiation of substance, or in other words its multiplication.

According to Spinoza, being infinite (*infinitem esse*) is an absolute affirmation of existence of the given nature, as it is so in the case of being finite – a partial negation²² – negation, because finite things after their kind may, as we know, put an end to one another and mutually stop expansion. Extended things share space among themselves; only when one ends, another one may begin. The second is an end for the first one, which is a kind of negation of existence of it in this place. However, if the substance “is in itself” and not “in its kind” or “in something else”, then our reason does not know the reason or cause that would in itself take or limit its existence. It assumes that

Of everything whatsoever a cause or reason must be assigned, either for its existence, or for its non-existence, [...] this reason or cause must either be contained in the nature of the thing in question, or be external to it [thus the conclusion – note by J. Ż.] [...] that it follows therefrom that a thing necessarily exists, if no cause or reason be granted which prevents its existence²³.

Infinity (*infinitas*) means having no boundaries. The state entirely positive, whereas having them, or limitation, is a negative state. The fact that

²⁰ It is worth noting that Spinoza abandons Descartes’ finite-limited dichotomy and in his own definition he makes these two concepts equivalent, stating that a thing that is finite (*res finita*), and done (*perfekta*), has already found its limits in time and space.

²¹ *Ibidem*, prop. VIII.

²² Cf. *ibidem*, note to the proof of prop. VIII.

²³ *Ibidem*, prop. XI, another proof.

in the notion of “infinity” there is a negation is irrelevant, just as it should not be surprising that Spinoza attributes the highest perfection, or reality, to infinity²⁴. Neither does combining the conceptions of substance, infinity, perfection, and reality seem a strange endeavour, since it had already been used by philosophers of the Middle Ages as well as by Descartes himself. However the context in which combining these conceptions took place, then introduced a personal trait of God from Christian philosophy to the description of an absolute being obtained this way, while Spinoza uses these concepts in the context of the “geometrical” method and it is here that the source of problems relating to reception and interpretation of his philosophy seem to be situated. Substance – as Spinoza suggests understanding of the meaning of this term – may not in any way be “finite”: a person’s understanding of it may not include any reason or any premise which would enable us to think of any obstacle that would determine its nature²⁵. Substance, Nature, i.e. God may not be defined²⁶, in other words it may not be determined by its own kind and the differences in kinds, if it exists at all, but as a b s o l u t e being and not limited or finite. In the face of such definition no condition may be found which could deny the possibility of existence of the substance. “The potentiality of non-existence is a negation of power, and contrariwise the potentiality of existence is a power”, writes Spinoza²⁷. Finite things certainly exist. If one is limited by the other, lasting for only a certain amount of time, how could they have more power than infinite being? Could it be possible that by conditioning one another they could be more perfect than the absolute being, which is not conditioned and limited

²⁴ Cf. prop. XI, another proof.

²⁵ Such an obstacle might be defining substance as a spirit, person, matter, etc. If it is to name the absolute being, then every attributing any nature that is for example spiritual and not material to it would limit (“end”) its existence in the place where existence of another nature “would begin”, and therefore the meaning of this conception would be inadequate in relation to its definition.

²⁶ Here it seems important to remind the role that Spinoza attributes to definitions (determinations): *de-finitio*, defining the semantic area of *definiendum*, may take place (1) in the area of language, i.e. for example in a collection of other conceptions, (2) consists in a particular way of defining boundaries between the scope of meanings of conceptions of *definiens* so that (3) their common semantic area could define the limit of the meaning of defined conception either by referencing it to the conception of its “kind” and “differences in kinds”, or in the case of “genetic” definition, by giving a notion of cause, which would allow the thing, the name of which is being defined, to be formed. In the case of the concept of substance it is pointless to mention the definition formed “by indicating the thing”. Whereas, when as far as the cited definition of substance is concerned, the two ways of defining preferred by Spinoza have the same flaw: it is not possible to define their *definiendum per se*, but it always has to be done by referring to other conceptions.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

by anything whatsoever? “Therefore, either nothing exists, or else a being absolutely infinite necessarily exists also”²⁸.

The difficulty which may appear as soon as substance is not assigned with a personal or spiritual dimension²⁹ will result not only from “taking” the term *substance* out of its cultural context of Western Europe, but also from the fact that Spinoza combines its definition, or meaning, with “non-existence of a limit” defined by another thing of the same nature. Human intellect does not allow for any other possibility than that, which is *in itself*, or *in something else*. Therefore substance is non-definable (which can be observed in the sentence shown as def. III, which speaks rather of the way the intellect proceeds, as in the discourse approaching the area where the content of *definiens* may be expected rather than that of *definiendum* as such). That, which is *in se* for intellect, thus may be either intellect itself (as in Descartes, where in his *Meditations* it is closer and more familiar to itself than any other thing), or the finite human intellect would only establish that substance “is a substance”. Therefore it would fulfill the condition of “understanding” the conception without the participation of a conception of another thing, with the use of which it would be defined, and as a result without understanding what it actually is.

Removed from the cultural context in which it was formed, definition III of the first book of *Ethics* would be more similar to the riddle of the Sphinx than to a properly formed definition. Its “expressiveness”, used so well in Latin Christian philosophy, stems primarily from describing *definiendum* by *definiens* that is formulated in a negative, without indicating the essence of the defined concept, but rather by refusing to indicate this essence directly in a discourse. Even the first element of *definiens* is formulated negatively, which says that substance is *id, quod in se est* – what in human cognition of an available object is above all given is its limit, which belongs as much to itself as to our view. A knowing human subject in his or her own “natural cognitive attitude” is directed by a primary intuition, formulated by Descartes: the subject of their cognition is an idea, or a picture of things, their external form, or shape, whereas this shape belongs to a particular thing as well as to a being watching it – it is their common limit in the act of cognition. In the act of perceiving, a being and the object belong to each other, they form the One, just as, for example, in the act of Bergson’s intuition. Also according to Spinoza, intuitive insight is the most valuable, the best way in which human

²⁸ *Ibidem*.


²⁹ They would be its “kind” or “difference of species”, and therefore it would not be possible to talk about “substance”, but about other beings, the notions of which could be defined with the use of aforementioned kinds of definitions.

cognition takes place – however in this case, at the beginning of Book I of his work, where basic conceptual instruments are introduced, referring to the intuition of the reader, who is usually involved in confessional associations of meanings of terms from Latin philosophy, seems to be a truly Sphinxian endeavour. Substance – *id, quod in se est* – such formulation requires that the reader “puts aside” his or her basic cognitive intuition: it is not the form, or shape of a substance that we are to experience, but this *id* hidden from our sight, which never reveals itself to those, who are outside of it, but always whenever it is, it is whole in itself.

Therefore, the “negativity” of definition III has two aspects: discursive (when substance is not defined by any other notions) and subjective (when “natural cognitive attitude” constitutes a significant obstacle that already at the very beginning of the book would make it impossible to grasp the content of *Ethics* by readers who, because of their trust in their own acquaintance with things, are not able to notice soon enough that before “entering” the area of the text, which is presented *modo geometrico*, they have to leave behind their knowledge acquired in “other stalls”, just as one has to leave one’s shoes before entering a mosque).

Perfection, or reality (*perfectio sive realitas*) attributed to substance is connected to its infinity and power, while all these things in his *Ethics* have nothing in common with the image of a personal God, although Spinoza seems to agree that traditionally they all belong to God. While the most fundamental reasons have been adduced above, the most straightforward, and at the same time irremovable cause is the objective itself that the books attempt to fulfill: to set man free from the bondage of affections and to make him a being as free as possible from his own nature. When living among the creations of Nature, we are exposed to its forces. We are also tormented by our own limitations, for example, resulting from the fact that we are finite beings constantly limited by other creations extended in space. Is there any reason why these natural limitations should be accompanied by obstacles resulting from ignorance and superstitions?

If, within the limits that would be possible, one were to try to consider the activities of human beings in Nature in the same way as in Euclidean geometry the motion of objects in space is examined, would it be possible that at least in this aspect we would be able to avoid unnecessary misfortunes? The objects of Nature that surround us are finite in time and limited in space, just as we are. Their reality (existence, being), as well as ours, depends on external causes and they, as well as we, do not have absolute power or perfection. That, which lies in the foundation of finite beings giving them existence, may not be finite itself, for it would be such a being itself. If the suggestion

for understanding the conception of “substance” presented in definition III was to be treated seriously, which states that something which is whole in itself and only in itself does not know, have, or allow for an ending or a limit, then it would not exist as such “beyond itself” and “outside of itself”. If there is a designate of the conception of “substance” in the sense presented in definition III, and if it is an individual and not a set, it is therefore everywhere and “beyond it” nothing else may exist or possible be grasped by human reason. Whether we call it Nature, God, or substance is merely a matter of convention. And there are as many of these as languages known to man in the past and now. Exchanging experiences between speakers of various languages results in “enriching” discourses with new, borrowed conceptions, the meanings of which sometimes overlap partially, which sometimes lead to misunderstandings – not always amusing. The principles of the human mind stated in the cited axioms of *Ethics* clearly define that it comprehends its own subjects as situated dichotomously, in themselves or in something else. Since substance is “in itself”, then it is not “in something else”; if it were otherwise, it would not be a substance. “Substance”, similarly to light, which Spinoza, the lens maker, was also interested in, makes it possible for the human mind to function. Beyond light, in darkness no images-ideas exist for him, he cannot grasp the possibility of existence of any finite being, including himself. 

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