Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza: Concept of Substance – Chapter 3 – Spinoza and Substance (Woolhouse)

Detailed Argument

- Spinoza’s *Ethics* is a systematic treatment of the substantial nature of God, and of the relationship to this of the human mind, emotions and freedom.
- The literary structure of the *Ethics* is atypical of philosophical works. It opens formally with definitions and axioms, from which propositions are deduced via demonstrations. Leibniz considered this geometrical approach an “empty pretentious device”. Others, such as Bergson, have been more impressed, and beginners are struck with admiration and terror! Understanding the style helps to understand the content.
- Mersenne had suggested it would have been a good idea had Descartes’ *Meditations* been set out in the manner of Euclid’s *Elements*.
- Woolhouse suggests there must be more to the geometrical method than simply surface form, because, as Descartes pointed out, even geometry doesn’t need to be set out in this way. Descartes’ reply to Mersenne gives a clue in distinguishing two forms of demonstration, distinguishing the analytic and synthetic, and identifying the approach of the *Elements* as synthetic.
- The view goes back to Aristotle that true knowledge or science is knowledge of causes and that firmly established is of why something must be so. We can know that the internal angles of a plane triangle add up to two right angles, but to know why is to have moved analytically from effect to cause. Some things are known before others – in this case properties of triangles are known before their causes – but this order of knowledge is the reverse of the order of things, where the cause precedes its effect, which it explains.
- This reversal is ubiquitous, as in my knowing the postman has called from the evidence of letters on the mat, but this evidence isn’t what caused him to come, rather his arrival caused the evidence.
- Synthesis is the opposite of analysis and follows the order of things, from cause to effect. From causes, whether geometrical axioms or the postman’s arrival, I can deduce effects, properties of triangles or letters on the doormat.
- Analysis, starting from what is first in the order of knowledge, is the method of discovery, whereas synthesis, starting from what is first in the order of things, is the method of proof, and which was the better method for presenting one’s ideas was debatable, but the 17th century had a taste for synthesis (witness Aubrey’s account of Hobbes falling in love with geometry on encountering the proof of...

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1 Spinoza wrote an exposition of Descartes’ *Principles* (not the *Meditations*), but I’m not clear whether this was in the geometrical manner – check up!
2 This is a different distinction than between analytic and synthetic truths. This distinction envisaged here is between whether knowledge is gained by synthesising from first principles, as in Euclid’s demonstrations, or by breaking down complex things into simples (analysis). Really, analysis has to take place before synthesis so we can know what to synthesise. This has more to do with demonstrative proof and the display of knowledge than its acquisition. Maybe Woolhouse will expatiate on these topics later.
3 In the 17th century sense, as distinct from natural philosophy.
Pythagoras’ theorem in Euclid. Meyer favoured the method as providing sure foundations for certain knowledge. Descartes admits that anyone who doubts the results of synthesis can be shown how it arose in the demonstration, and compelled to assent, however stubborn; yet Descartes prefers analysis as more instructive and satisfying than synthesis as it shows how things were discovered.

- Spinoza’s Ethics is not like Descartes’ Meditations, which is a paradigm case of analytic discovery – it doesn’t show the how Spinoza came to believe what he did. Spinoza must have gone through the process of discovery at one stage, starting from what he knew and worked backwards to explain them; but, in the Ethics, he works forward from the things that explain to the things he is making sense of.

- Spinoza admits that the synthetic method is cumbersome. However it is appropriate to his subject matter since it follows the order of things and our mind, in Spinoza’s view, reproduces completely the order of nature. The order of nature is reproduced in the Ethics, an aim of which is to “give an account of the human mind and its highest blessedness”. To do this, Spinoza thinks we must account for God, the world and the relations between them, with God having priority in the order of things. Our mind, in order to reproduce the likeness of Nature, must take as the source of all ideas that idea which represents the source of Nature. Everything depends on God, so in the Ethics, everything follows from what is said about God, with this reflected in the demonstrative order. Since in reality everything stems from God, so, in the philosophical account of reality, proofs start from God.

- On God, the first part of the Ethics, starts with definitions; 1Def3 is of Substance, which Spinoza defines as (1) what is in itself and is conceived through itself; or equivalently (2) that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing from which it must be formed. Leibniz accused Spinoza of obscurity for it’s unclear whether have one or both of the properties (a) of being “in itself” and (b) of being “conceived through itself”. While Spinoza almost certainly meant both, he needs to prove it as some have thought only (a) necessary for substantiality.

- Descartes believed (a) because substances depend for their existence on nothing other than God. However, he didn’t believe (b) because he substances are known by their attributes. This interpretation connects Spinoza’s “what is in itself” with Descartes’ “depends on no other thing”. Woolhouse, however, thinks that Spinoza’s definition of substance aligns rather than contrasts with Descartes’. for Spinoza’s 1Def4 has it that an attribute is what the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of a substance, which Woolhouse takes as the counterpart of a Cartesian principal attribute, which constitutes a substance’s nature and essence.

- Without 1Def4, 1Def3 is empty, because it is only by virtue of having attributes that a substance – of a particular kind – can be conceived through itself. Part 1 assumes and Part 2 proves that thought and extension are attributes that constitute a substance’s essence. Therefore, it is only extended substance or thinking substance that is conceived through itself. Similarly, Descartes said that we can hardly understand substance on its own, ignoring the fact whether it thinks or is extended.

- For Descartes, what qualifies an attribute as something that constitutes a substance’s essence – ie. as a principal property marking out a kind of substance – is our ability to clearly and distinctly conceive of that property without reference to any other. Similarly for Spinoza, for whom an attribute is conceived in and through itself and whose concept requires no others; extension is conceived in and
through itself, but motion isn’t, as its concept involves extension. Something with a certain property is a substance if that property can be conceived by the intellect as constituting a substantial essence, conceivable through itself. This reverses the apparent order of 1P10, where the self-conceivability of substances is taken as a premise for the conclusion of the self-conceivability of attributes.

• A substance’s being conceived through itself is the test that it can exist in itself. Descartes illustrates this well in the Replies, where he says that the (alleged) fact that we can conceive of thought and extension apart is the clearest sign that they are two different principal properties and so constitute two kinds of substance.

• For Descartes, attributes are not substances, nor substances attributes. Curley said, based on a couple of pre- and post-Ethics letters, where the definitions of substance and attribute are either parallel or identical – that Spinoza doesn’t recognise this conceptual distinction. Woolhouse doesn’t find the blurring surprising since it is with this or that attribute that a substance is conceived through itself.

• Woolhouse says that Spinoza “need not be taken” to obliterate the Cartesian conceptual distinction between substance and attribute. Descartes, in any case, agreed that there’s not much difference between the substance and the principal property that constitutes its essence, and equated thought with thinking substance and extension with extended substance.

• Descartes had two principal attributes – thought and extension. Spinoza allows God an infinity of attributes, which may simply mean all possible attributes, but he does say explicitly in the Short Treatise that there are more than two, and when asked why we can’t know more of God’s attributes than thought and extension, he didn’t say there were no more to be known. Even so, there’s nothing in his metaphysics that reflects more than two.

• Woolhouse now turns to which substances exist for Spinoza, who demonstrates in 1P11 the necessary existence of a substance with an infinity of attributes. Since 1Def6 defines God as a substance with an infinity of attributes, this amounts to saying that God necessarily exists. 1P14 demonstrates that no substance other than God can exist or be conceived of. This is so because, given the necessary existence of God, a substance with an infinity of attributes, and 1P5, which states that no two substances can have an attribute in common, there are no attributes left for another substance to have. This conclusion explains the common characterisation of Spinoza as a substance monist.

• It is an important, but not straightforward, question whether there’s a contrast between Spinoza’s monism and Descartes’ dualism.

• Broad characterised Descartes as a “differentiating attribute dualist”, where a differentiating attribute is something that makes for a kind of substance; immaterial and corporeal substances being respectively differentiated by the attributes of thought and extension. However, Woolhouse thinks “instantiated-attribute dualist” a more accurate description, since Descartes thinks that the two attributes are actually instantiated. Had he thought that God could have created a dualism, but had in fact created an immaterialist universe, he would have been an attribute dualist but not an instantiated-attribute dualist.

• Broad points out that Descartes is also an instantiation-pluralist, holding that there are a plurality of instantiations of the two attributes. Extension is instantiated only

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4 While this may be OK for Descartes, one would have thought that Spinoza, with only one substance but many attributes, can hardly equate the two.
by the created material world, but thought is instantiated both by the uncreated infinite mind which is God, but also by a plurality of created minds.

- We now ask whether Spinoza's monism is contrasted with Descartes attribute dualism, instantiated-attribute dualism or instantiation pluralism. The short answer is that there is a contrast for immaterial substance between Spinoza and Descartes' instantiation pluralism, since (1) Descartes thought that the pieces of material substance are not numerically different individual substances, and Spinoza agreed, calling them finite modes of extended substance; however, (2) there are many individual thinking substances – individual substantial minds – for Descartes, but Spinoza these are only finite modes, rather finite thinking substances.

- Spinoza's rejection of instantiation pluralism comes from 1P5, that attributes cannot be shared between substances, the foundation for the monism of 1P14. This has been taken to mean that there can be no two substances of the same secondary kind, in the Aristotelian sense, to which Oldenburg countered by saying that two men are two substances with the same attribute, reason. While, like Descartes, Spinoza denies substantiality to their bodies, being simply rearrangements of extended matter, this agreement doesn't help reject a number of different thinking substances.

- 1P5 assumes that the difference between two substances cannot be merely numerical, but must be accounted for either by a difference of attributes or of affections, ie. states. Difference in the affections already presupposes that there are two substances, so we are left with differences in attributes. Woolhouse suggests (in agreement with Leibniz) that for the argument to work, Spinoza has to assume what he later denies, that substances have only one attribute, otherwise they could be similar in one respect and different in another.

- 1P8S2 also argues for 1P5; it is not part of a thing's definition that it should be instantiated any determinate number of times, so an external explanation is required of why each instantiation exists. As Spinoza says in 1P8S2, 20 isn't part of the definition of man, so if 20 men exist, the cause for each of the 20 must lie outside each of them. This denies their substantiality, for a there can be no explanation outside a substance, which cannot be produced by anything else. Hence, men cannot be individual substances, but only modes, and there cannot be a number of instances of the (potentially) two kinds of substances – extended and thinking.

- Woolhouse doesn't think that that Spinoza's rejection of instantiation pluralism with respect to mind and body (the latter shared with Descartes) do not amount to the monism of 1P14, which depends on 1P11 as well as 1P5. Woolhouse draws up the following list of possible dualisms and trialisms, left after Spinoza's departure from Cartesianism with respect to mind, and asks which is eliminated by 1P14:
  1. Attribute dualism
  2. Instantiated-attribute dualism
  3. Instantiation dualism with respect to created substance
  4. Instantiation trialism with respect to created or uncreated substance indifferently.

Option (3) cannot be an instantiation-attribute dualism with respect to created substance because 'being created' is not a principal property or substantial attribute; the listed option is possible because 1P5 leaves created corporeal and

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5 Ie. Spinoza wouldn’t allow two peas in the pod both to be substances if they were exactly alike, simply on account of their alikeness.
immaterial substances. Option (4) is explained by the fact that besides created corporeal and immaterial substances, there is the individual uncreated immaterial substance, namely God.

- Woolhouse notes that 1P14 eliminates (4) and hence has possible consequences for (3). The reason is that 1P14 does away with the Cartesian contrast between created and uncreated substance, because for Spinoza nothing created is a substance. Either “uncreated substances” are not substances or they are not created. The latter, and favoured, alternative would mean that God and the material & mental worlds are identical, and when combined with the assumption that Spinoza’s God is instantiated, either alternative results in the usual view of Spinoza’s monism as an instantiation monism.

- The other main premise of 1P14, 1P11, has it that there is a substance with an infinite number of attributes, but can a substance really have more than one attribute, as Spinoza explicitly says in 1P10S ? This is Spinoza’s greatest departure from Cartesian metaphysics.

- For Descartes, the reason we might have two distinct substances is that we can clearly and distinctly understand one without the other, which comes down to seeing their respective attributes as principal attributes. So, for Descartes, where we have two principal attributes, we have two substances, and no existent substance can instantiate more than one attribute, or be a substance of more than one kind.

- Woolhouse says that 1P10S can easily be read⁶ as explicitly denying this Cartesian claim. Even given Spinoza’s attribute pluralism, it looks as though it supports instantiation monism. Spinoza accepts that each attribute is conceived through itself, but then, contra Descartes, explicitly denies that this implies that if follows that the two attributes belong to two substances, claiming that it is far from absurd to ascribe two attributes to one substance.

- How can some existent be really of this kind, say extended, and yet really of that kind, say thinking, as well ? If this seemed to be the case, couldn’t we, along with Leibniz, suggest that the two attributes expressed the same things in different ways and that at least one of them might be further analysable ?

- One approach to justifying Spinoza’s approach is to pick up on Descartes point that attributing two principal properties to the same subject is to say what Descartes thinks is a contradiction – that the same subject has two different natures. Of course, Descartes allows the human being to have both thought and extension, but the human being is not a simple substance but a composite entity of two – mind and body.

- So, one understanding (due to Gueroult, not favoured by Woolhouse) is to understand Spinoza’s multi-attribute substance as analogous to man multiplied to infinity. Gueroult admits that the union in the two cases is different, because in the case of Descartes’ man, the union is only a contingent composition or juxtaposition which dissolves at death, whereas for Spinoza’s God, the union is absolutely necessary, is in one substance, and is of the nature of God.

- Another attempt is Wolfson’s ‘subjective interpretation of attributes’ which exploits a different interpretation of attributes which, for Descartes constitute the nature and essence of substance, while for Spinoza they are what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence (1D4). So, Spinoza’s view is said to be that thought the mind perceives the attributes as distinct, in fact they are

⁶ Is Woolhouse suggesting that this reading is incorrect ?
one – different words expressing the same reality – and the problem of a single substance being characterised by two attributes disappears.

- Woolhouse rejects this view as well, because Spinoza seems expressly to suppose that there are objectively many attributes, and not just subjectively so. Spinoza says that the more attributes a substance has, the more reality it has, that its attributes have always been in it together, and that an absolutely infinite being consists of infinite attributes.

- Woolhouse diagnoses both Gueroult’s and Wolfson’s explanations as explaining how a substance could have more than one attribute while simultaneously denying that it could, which Woolhouse suggests is just what Spinoza rejects. Spinoza’s radical difference from Descartes is that a substance must have all the attributes there are, not simply that it could.

- Descartes thinks that – in the case of thought and extension – these two attributes are directly incompatible and contradictory, because body is infinitely divisible whereas mind is not divisible at all; so – as in the case of any pair of contradictory properties – cannot be possessed by the same substance. Consequently, Cottingham imagines the difference to arise because Spinoza rejects Descartes’ thesis that thought and extension are incompatible notions. While Woolhouse agrees that Spinoza does deny the divisibility of extended substance, he denies there is any evidence that this is what led him to conclude that thought and extension are compatible and so can be attributed to the same substance.

- Descartes also maintains that the reason that the same substance cannot have these two attributes is that they are differentiating attributes that enable us to tell the substances apart. He says that, not only is it not the case that mind and body are merely different rather than opposite, and so capable of co-existing in the same subject, but that when attributes constitute the essence of a substance, there is no greater opposition between them than when they are different. To say that the same substance has two different natures – as would be the case if it had both the attributes of thought and extension – implies a contradiction.

- This is where Spinoza parts company from Descartes, for it is this differentiating property that for Descartes prevents the two attributes from belonging to the same subject that for Spinoza allows them to do so. Since an attribute is perceived through itself, it must be independent of any other and cannot rule out the substance’s possession of other attributes – indeed he thinks that it necessitates this possession, for he thinks that a substance must have all attributes.

- In response to de Vries’s criticism that he hadn’t demonstrated (in an early draft of the Ethics) that he hadn’t proved that two attributes necessitate two substances, Spinoza provided two arguments. (1) We conceive each being under some attribute, and the more reality or being a being has, the more attributes must be attributed to it (hence leading to an absolutely infinite being having infinite attributes). This is because substantial attributes designate ways of being or kinds of reality, so the reality of a substance is proportional to the number of its attributes. Hence God, who is the most real being, must have all the attributes there are and be real in all the ways possible to be real. God’s reality consists in absolutely unlimited being, not being of a certain type.

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7 This doesn’t seem to follow – if there were two beings, one of whom had two attributes and the other one, the one with two attributes would still be most real. An infinitely real being would need all the attributes.
• Spinoza disagrees with Descartes about what constitutes reality. For Descartes, the amount of reality something possesses is related to its degree of dependence. For Spinoza, it relates to the number of ways in which a substance is real. Even though this seems to have some plausibility, says Woolhouse, it also seems to beg the question since it means that for a substance to have twice the reality it would need to have two different natures, which is the point at issue.

• (2) Spinoza’s second argument is that the more attributes attributed to some being, the more I’m compelled to attribute existence to it and conceive it true. The more attributes we conceive of something having, the more we conceive it as having to exist.

• Woolhouse doesn’t think this will do either, because we may still feel, with de Vries, that thinking of something with more than one attribute and nature is to think of something impossible or chimerical. We need to be able to understand what it is for something to be in more than one of the ways in which it is possible to be.

• Woolhouse suggests that Spinoza’s position is that any substance must have all the attributes, in which case he holds to compatibilism rather than to Descartes’ incompatibilism. Woolhouse lists attempted proofs by Delahunty and Curley.

• Delahunty has it that Spinoza argues that (1) a substance possessing an infinite and eternal attribute must be an absolutely infinite and eternal substance and that (2) an absolutely infinite substance must possess every infinite and eternal attribute. So, since any attribute is infinite and eternal for Spinoza, this implies that a substance with any attribute has them all. However, Woolhouse argues that, though we know from 1Def6 that Spinoza would accept (2), he wouldn’t accept (1) because having an infinite attribute only involves being infinite relative to that attribute – infinite in its own kind (1D6E) – and not necessarily absolutely infinite with respect to all attribute.

• Curley’s explanation is that for Spinoza, each of the attributes is necessary and it is impossible for one of them to exist without the others. If we grant the premise that every attribute must be instantiated in a substance, then it does follow, says Woolhouse, that there will not be a substance with a given attribute without there being a substance with any other. Given this step, there is a sense in which no attribute can exist without the others, but this is a much weaker claim than Spinoza’s, which is that “all the attributes substance has have always been in it together” (1P10S), since there might be as many substances as attributes for all the argument tells us.

• Donagan asks the question how a world constituted of one substance with really distinct attributes would differ from one constituted of several substances each having one attribute.

• Collingwood thought that Spinoza gave no reason why the two attributes of thought and extension have always been together in the one substance, but just posited it as a brute fact. However, in the Short Treatise, Spinoza gives the reason that it is the unity of nature that demands this; different substances have nothing in common with one another. So the reason to prefer one substance with many

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8 Check there aren’t more authors in the list!
9 I don’t see why, nor even what this is supposed to mean! Curley’s “premise” was the necessity of the attributes, so, for each of them, some substance or other must possess them – but I still don’t understand the logic of what’s being claimed – why, given the premise, should the instantiation of one attribute make the instantiation of the others any more certain, when this was already certain, given the premise?
attributes over many substances each with one attribute is that the latter lacks the unity of the former, for the only way for their to be union between attributes – as in the unity between mind and body in human beings – is for them to belong to the same substance.

• Woolhouse now reviews where we’ve got to in the argument. We started discussing Spinoza’s doctrine of the multi-attributed substance to see how to construe the monism of 1P14. The answer previously given was that if Spinoza’s God is the instantiation of various attributes, then we have at least an instantiation monism in 1P14, as is usually understood. From then on, we looked at how a substance could have more than one attribute, and Woolhouse’s proposal is that substances cannot have less than all the attributes there are and that the nature of differentiating attributes as differentiating kinds of substance is such that they must go together. If this is correct, then, despite Spinoza positing more than one differentiating attribute, the monism of 1P14 must deny attribute dualism as normally understood, leaving us with a kind of attribute monism.

• Woolhouse contends that understanding 1P14 as amounting to instantiation monism is a mistake. The idea that Spinoza’s God is an instantiation comes from assuming that his single substance is to be identified with the extended corporeal world, which is a serious mistake. For Spinoza “there is existent substance” means that extension is a substantial attribute, something that can be conceived through itself, quite apart from there actually being extended things. If we imagine Spinoza, in talking about extended substance, as talking about possibility, the actuality which contrasts with this possibility is not that of actual extended substance. This is because, for Spinoza, anything instantiating the substantial attribute of extension would not be extended substance, but a mode of extended substance. So, the reality of Spinoza’s single substance isn’t existent instantiation, but one that makes it possible for there actual extended modes of extension.

• Leaving human thinking things aside for the time being, Woolhouse contrasts Descartes’ and Spinoza’s metaphysical systems. For Descartes, we have an uncreated thinking substance (God) and the created extended substance of corporeal world. For Spinoza, we have an uncreated extended substance, which is also thinking and which Spinoza identifies with God. Many have identified Spinoza’s and Descartes’ extended substances, thereby equating the former with the corporeal world and making out that for Spinoza the corporeal world is God.

• Woolhouse quotes from John Harris (1698) and Samuel Clarke (1704) and the more recent Joachim (1964) as supporting this (erroneous) view that res extensa is no creation of God, but is God.

• Spinoza rejected Descartes’ view that God is the transitive cause of corporeal world as a substantially different entity. For Descartes, God is clearly differentiated from the corporeal world because God is not corporeal. For Spinoza a dual fogginess arises because (i) God is seen as the immanent cause, hence making it difficult to differentiate cause and effect and (ii) God is seen as itself an extended corporeal substance, not as a purely thinking substance. Thus, it is the obscurity of the causal link between Spinoza’s God and the corporeal world that led Malebranche to complain that Spinoza had taken the universe as his God because he couldn’t see how by his power and will alone God could create the universe.

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\[10\] This is as Woolhouse writes it – but I’d have expected to see “extended” rather than “existent” here.
This misidentification of Descartes’ and Spinoza’s extended substances arises from a failure to see that they are realities of radically different sorts. Woolhouse believes that what Spinoza and Descartes mean when they say that God or extended substance exist are rather different things. For Spinoza, the reality of extended substance is not an existent instantiation of extension, but of a kind of reality that underwrites the possibility of actual extended things as initiations of extension.

It was common in the 17th century to believe in two kinds of reality or existence – of immutable, eternal natures, essences or forms and of corporeal things in the extended material world. An example is Descartes’ idea of a triangle having a determinate, immutable and eternal nature, form or essence independent both of Descartes’ mind and of whether there had been or would ever be any triangular figures existing outside his thought.

Spinoza makes the same distinction between the kind of reality enjoyed by eternal and immutable attributes and their instantiations in the physical world. In his *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Spinoza distinguishes between (1) the being of essence, (2) the being of existence and (3) the being of idea. Existence is the being of the instantiation of an essence, attributed to something after it has been created by God. Essence can be conceived apart from existence other than in the case of God. Spinoza claims that an essence differs from an idea because something that is conceived clearly and distinctly is something different from an idea.

Given that an essence isn’t an idea, what is it? In what way has it being outside the intellect? Spinoza thinks that it is its dependence on the divine essence alone, in which all things are contained, that allows us to say that the essences of things are eternal.

For Spinoza, things can be actual in two ways – (1) in relation to a particular time and place and (2) insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God, where they involve the eternal and infinite essence of God, the formal essences of modes which exist insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes.

A similar distinction is made by Leibniz, for whom propositions about the existence of things should not all be understood in the same way, some, such as a man, being existential and others, such as a circle, being essential. For the existence of a man, there needs to be a corporeal world containing a man, but for a circle to exist, there need not be corporeal world with circular things in it – all that is required is geometrical possibility.

For Descartes and Leibniz, essences, natures and forms are not ideas, but things of which we can have ideas. Leibniz points out that we can have ideas which we mistakenly think correspond to essences, as when under the delusion that two parabolas can be found that are parallel to one another in the way that two straight lines or circles can be. On the other hand, we can have ideas of already existing essences – the inventor’s idea having as its archetype a divine idea.

In the case of both God and extended substance, Descartes understands existential rather than essential existence. His ontological proof of the existence of God draws a parallel between the immutable essences of God and a triangle, and aims to show that the divine nature is instantiated at least once, differing from all others in being necessarily instantiated. Even though God’s existence is necessary, God is, for Descartes, like a corporeal triangle in being the instantiation of an immutable essence or nature. Likewise, the mode of existence of Cartesian extended substance is like that of an instantiation of an immutable essence or nature. Descartes sharply distinguishes between our having a clear and distinct
idea of extended matter and there actually existing something extended that we call matter.

- However, things are different for Spinoza, for when he says that God or extended substance exist, he means essentially rather than existentially. However, it isn’t quite correct to say that Spinoza’s extended substance or God but rather that it is what supports essences or natures, or is where they are located.

- The corporeal extended world doesn’t feature in Spinoza’s system as in Descartes’ as extended substance but as a mode, the so-called infinite mediate mode of the attribute of extension.

- Spinoza’s identification of God and nature (Deus sive natura) doesn’t mean that extended substance is after all the corporeal extended world, because it needs to be seen against the background of his distinction between natura naturans and natura naturata. The former is nature seen as active and creative the latter as passive and created. The former is God as a free cause, the latter is whatever follows from God’s nature or attributes. The former is what is in itself and conceived through itself, the latter as things which are in God and can neither be not be conceived without God. The corporeal world is part of natura naturata , a mode of the attribute of extension that can neither be nor be conceived without God as extended substance.

- Modes are the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived (1Def5). This would be simple enough for Descartes, for whom the square shape of a piece of extended substance is one of its modes, an affection or property of the thing, inconceivable without that thing both because it can only be the shape of an extended thing, but also because it can only be the shape of that extended thing. Things are more complex in Spinoza’s three-tiered modal structure.

- Modes of the topmost level are immediate, infinite modes; eternal and infinite and directly following from the absolute nature of any of God’s attributes. Those of the second level are mediate, infinite modes; also eternal and infinite, but following indirectly from God’s attributes, mediated by one of the topmost modes. There is one of each kind of mode for each attribute. At the bottom of the structure are those finite modes that have determinate existence. These follow, not from one of the levels above, but from modes of their own sort; they are called by Spinoza singular things and there are many of them for each attribute.

- This 3-fold structure in Ethics 1P21-3 & 1P28 is a development of an earlier 2-fold structure in the Short Treatise, which divides natura naturata into a universal and a particular aspect. The first aspect consists of eternal modes, immediately dependent on or created by God. The second aspect consists of singular things which are produced by the eternal modes.

- Neither the finished nor draft versions of the Ethics gave concrete examples of the infinite modes, though when asked Spinoza gave “absolute infinite understanding” and “motion and rest” as, respectively, the immediate modes of the attributes of thought and extension. It’s unclear what is the infinite mediate mode of thought, but that of extension is “the body of the whole universe”. We can conceive of the whole of nature as one individual, Spinoza says in 1P13L7S, whose parts vary in infinite ways without any change in the whole individual. Our minds are finite modes of thought, while our bodies and other material things are finite modes of extension.

- Woolhouse concludes by noting that Spinoza’s finite modes seem to be of the wrong logical types to be compared with Cartesian modes, which are properties.