

# Eight Questions about Spinoza

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## 1. Two questions about the definition of ‘attribute’

Perhaps the biggest radically unsolved problem about Part II of the *Ethics* is something that occurs in Part I, namely the definition of ‘attribute’ as ‘that which intellect perceives of substance as its essence’ (1d4). The term ‘intellect’ brings in just one of the attributes, namely thought, raising the question:

**A.** What special privilege does thought have that entitles it to figure in the explanation of the concept of attribute generally?

There is also the more specific question:

**B.** If Spinoza doesn’t think that attributes are essences, what does he think about them, and why does he explain the term ‘attribute’ in terms of something that isn’t true of attributes though it is perceived as being true of them?

The flip side of this question is, of course: If Spinoza holds that an attribute is an essence of any substance that has it, why doesn’t he say so outright, instead of saying only that it is ‘perceived as’ an essence? Or perceived as if it were an essence—the much debated difference between ‘as’ and ‘as if’ is of no importance. By bringing in what ‘intellect perceives as’, Spinoza powerfully suggests that attributes are not really essences. Suppose you knew nothing about parachutes, and

were authoritatively told that they are ‘perceived as’ devices for getting safely from the sky down to the earth, would you trust one?

In this paper, which is based on material in my book *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, I shall offer to solve both of those problems. The solution to **B** will arise from an hypothesis of mine about Spinoza’s thought. The hypothesis attributes to Spinoza a certain philosophical doctrine which he did not ever state in so many words though it is heavily hinted at in the definition of ‘attribute’. I shall try to satisfy you that this hypothesis is right, all the same. The rest of my interpretation of Spinoza is well supported by the texts, and when my hypothesis is added to it the result solves a number of textual and philosophical problems for which I know of no other solutions.

Two of them are the problems concerning the definition of ‘attribute’, but I was not thinking about those when I developed my hypothesis. The solution of them came as an unexpected bonus out of work I had been doing on a different part of *Ethics*, namely 2p7s, the extraordinary scholium in which Spinoza explains his ‘parallelism’ doctrine that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.

## 2. What happens in 2p7s

In that scholium, Spinoza does the following four things in the following order.

(1) He reminds us that there is only one substance, so that the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same. The actual wording is interesting: ‘Whatever can be perceived by an infinite intellect as constituting an essence of substance pertains to one substance only, and consequently. . . the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that.’ The subject of the verb ‘pertains’ uses eight words of Latin, whereas two words meaning ‘all attributes’ would have meant the same. Spinoza is evidently taking pains to steer around the word ‘attribute’, using instead the definiens that is assigned to it in 1d4 (plus the qualification ‘infinite’). He seems to have 1d4 on his mind at this point. Notice also the possibly psychologistic wording when Spinoza speaks of a single substance that is ‘comprehended’ under different attributes.

(2) He goes straight on to say that any mode of extension is identical with the idea of it, that is, with the corresponding mode of thought. For example, a circle and an actual idea of the circle are ‘one and the same thing which is explained through different attributes’. (Notice the psychologistic word ‘explained’.) The transition from (1) substance monism to (2) the mode-identity doctrine is effected with the phrase ‘*Sic etiam*’: Spinoza is not saying that (2) follows from (1), I think, but merely implying that they are similar in some way, as indeed they are. Just as there is only one substance that is comprehended under this or that attribute, *so also* any thought-extension complex is only one mode, which can be explained through this or that attribute.

(3) Having asserted (1) and (2), Spinoza says that ‘that is why’ [*ideo*] we shall find one and the same order and connection of causes, no matter which attribute we investigate Nature under. What he has said up to here is offered as explaining the parallelism that he has asserted in 2p7. He is not explicit about whether (2) alone provides the explanation or whether (1) has a role in it also.

(4) Spinoza then says something of the form ‘When I said that P, this was for no other reason than because Q’, which I take to mean: ‘When I said that P, what I meant was Q’. What is P? It is his thesis about the separateness of the causal chains under the different attributes, i.e. that God is the cause of a circle only insofar as he is an extended thing and is the cause of an idea of a circle only insofar as he is a thinking thing. And here is Q:

‘The intrinsic being of the idea of the circle can be perceived only through another mode of thinking, as its proximate cause, and. . . so on to infinity. Hence, so long as things are considered as modes of thinking, we must explain the order of the whole of nature. . . through the attribute of Thought alone. And insofar as they are considered as modes of Extension, the order of the whole of nature must be explained through the attribute of Extension alone.’

Notice that P is stated purely in the terminology of cause, whereas Q uses ‘perceive’, ‘consider’ (twice) and ‘explain’ (twice). The only use of ‘cause’ in Q is in the form ‘perceive as [a] cause’; Q doesn’t use ‘cause’ in direct application to the world at all.

## 3. Five questions arising out of 2p7s

What is supposed to be going on here? Why does Spinoza say these things in this place, in these words, and in this order? More specifically:

**C.** Why does Spinoza in this scholium use the definiens for ‘attribute’ in place of the word itself? (This is the only place in the *Ethics* where he does so.)

**D.** What content is there to **(1)** Spinoza’s substance monism? The statement that thought and extension are attributes of a single substance doesn’t imply that they interact causally, Spinoza tells us, so what difference does it make?

**E.** What does Spinoza mean by **(2)** the mode-identity thesis, and why does it occur just here?

**F.** Is **(3)** the parallelism thesis meant to follow from **(2)** alone or from **(1)** and **(2)** together, and, either way, how is it supposed to follow?

**G.** Why do we get so much mentalistic emphasis in **(1)**, **(3)**, and **(4)**?

**H.** Why does Spinoza close off the scholium with a re-explanation of his thesis that causal chains don’t cross the boundary between attributes?

Question **D** is raised not just by this scholium but by many things in the early parts of the *Ethics*. It has been often asked with justifiable anxiety; we need an answer to it if we are to view Spinoza’s substance monism with understanding and respect. Questions **C**, **E**, **G** and **H** are needed at least for a decent understanding of this scholium, though we shall see that the answers to them go much further than that.

It is immediately obvious that question **F** has significance for the *Ethics* as a whole. We know why Spinoza needed the parallelism thesis: it was so that he could deny mind-body interaction while admitting the prima facie evidence for it. But Spinoza was not the man to have such a doctrine as that without being able to explain why it is true, saying what it is about how the one substance is structured that makes it the case that physical causal chains map onto mental ones.

No answer to that can be dug out of Spinoza’s official arguments for parallelism—namely the ‘demonstrations’ of 2p3 and 2p7—so that his explanation in the scholium to 2p7 stands alone as our only clue to how Spinoza saw parallelism fitting into his over-all metaphysic. An answer to my question **F** is needed, therefore, for much more than the local purpose of understanding this one scholium; on it rides the question of whether the parallelism doctrine is sober metaphysics or a mere shot in the dark.

In this paper I shall offer a unified account of this part of Spinoza’s thought, an account that will answer all of the questions **A** and **C** through **H**. My account will need the hypothesis that I mentioned earlier—the one that has the pleasant side-effect of answering question **B** as well.

#### **4. How finite things are modes**

I shall also need something else that is not universally agreed to among students of Spinoza, namely a certain view about what he meant when he said that particular finite things are modes. My view about this is very different from the hypothesis to which I have referred. Although the hypothesis does not clash with anything in Spinoza’s text, involving no strained interpretations or semantic special pleading, it is not directly supported in the text either. It credits Spinoza with accepting a certain doctrine which he simply does not ever explicitly state; its presence in his thought has to be picked up from a hint in 1d4 and inferred from its power to solve problems that seem otherwise insoluble.

In contrast with that, my view about Spinoza’s use of the term ‘mode’ and his meaning for the doctrine that finite particulars are modes is strongly, directly evidenced in the text of the *Ethics*. Indeed, it is the view that one is forced to if one assumes that Spinoza was using ‘mode’ in what was its dominant sense at the time when he wrote, and that

when he said that finite particulars are modes he meant this literally. That is, to get my interpretation of his views about modes, all that is needed is a conservative approach to what is written on the pages of the *Ethics*. I shall now explain this.

In Descartes's usage, a 'mode' is a property or quality. Descartes says that he uses 'mode' to mean 'exactly the same as what is elsewhere meant by attribute or quality', though he goes on to recommend reserving 'mode' for those aspects of a substance that it may gain and lose, retaining 'attribute' for such properties of it as it must have at all times when it exists at all (*Principles* 1:56). This use of 'mode' to stand for what is predicable of a substance or possessed by or instantiated by a substance was common to Descartes, Locke, Leibniz and many other philosophers. So far as I can discover, it was standard in philosophical writing in the 16th and 17th centuries. Spinoza says nothing to suggest that he is using the term in any other way, and his definition—'By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived'—strongly points to his using 'mode' in its normal meaning.

It follows that when Spinoza said that my body (for instance) is a mode of extended substance, he ought to have meant that my body is a property or state or quality or accident of the extended substance. How could that be? Granted that it's what Spinoza committed himself to, how could he mean anything that seems so absurd? I answer this by showing that it is not absurd.

Let us start with a less controversial example. As I was writing this paper, central New York was caught in a freeze. We all know what means, namely that at that time central New York was very cold. Freezes are not items that should be listed in an inventory of the world's contents; they are states that things or regions can be in. Once we know what regions

there are, and when they have been freezing cold, we know what freezes there have been and when and where they have occurred; if we know the average length of time for which a region is freezing cold, that tells us the average duration of a freeze; the spatial shape of a freeze is the shape of the frozen region; and so on. I take it that this is all uncontroversial: freezes are not substances, but modes; they are instances of properties or qualities. Notice that I don't say that they are themselves properties, i.e. universals; the freeze that central New York was gripped in when I was writing this paper was a particular freeze, and a month later the state was caught in a second freeze. So freezes are property-instances, individual accidents, abstract particulars, 'modes' in the sense that Locke and Leibniz gave to that phrase. So also are blushes, shortages, wars, and hosts of other items. So there are some finite particulars that are modes.

The question is: How could *all* finite particulars be modes? I can answer this as it applies to extended particular things. I believe that Spinoza also thought this doctrine through in relation to extension and hoped it could be re-applied somehow under the other attributes but had no specific ideas about how this might be done. There is evidence that he did much of his basic metaphysical thinking in terms of extension, as when he put physics and biology on his route to psychology on the grounds that to understand the excellence of the human mind one must *first* understand the excellence of the human body.

As applied to extension, the story goes like this: The one extended substance is the one infinite and eternal spatial item, namely Space. What we call the existence of bodies in Space is really a qualitative variegation of Space itself: if at a given moment there are bodies of such and such sizes and shapes surrounded by empty space, the underlying fact that makes that so is that Space is qualitatively various

in certain ways—it is partly thick (so to speak) and partly thin, and the details of how it is one and how the other determines what parts of it are (as we say) occupied and what parts are (as we say) empty. When **a body moves through Space**, what really happens—the metaphysical underlay, the rock-bottom fact that we express in the convenient but superficial language of things moving through Space—is that **changes occur in which parts of Space are thick and which are thin**. Analogously, when a freeze moves across a countryside, nothing really moves; the movement of a freeze is a just a change in which parts of the countryside are freezing cold and which are not.

It's a long and complex story, and I can only sketch it here. For further details, I refer you to sections 22–3 of my *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*; and section 24 presents part of my case for attributing this view to Spinoza—the part that rests on the scholium to 1p15. This scholium, which is otherwise mysterious and puzzling, is explicable if I am right about what Spinoza meant when he said that finite extended things are modes. But that is not my whole case. I also adduce the fact that Spinoza did say that bodies are modes of the one extended substance, an assertion which—taking the words in their normal senses at the time when he wrote—did mean that bodies are something like qualities or states of the one extended substance. What I have offered is, so far as I know, the only way in which that could possibly be the case.

I would add that this metaphysic of the occupants of Space, namely that they are really modes of Space which is the one extended substance, has been sympathetically entertained by Plato, Newton, Locke, Quine, and others. In attributing it to Spinoza, I am putting him in worthy company, not representing him as a philosophical wild man. For an account of some of the philosophical merits of this metaphysical view, see section 25 of my *Study*.

## 5. Question E: Spinoza's mode identity thesis

Let us start with my question **E**: What does Spinoza mean when he says that a mode of extension and the idea of it 'are one and the same thing', e.g. that my body and my mind are one and the same thing?

Well, according to Spinoza my body is a mode—that is, an 'affection' or state or quality—of the extended substance. I take this to mean that the fact that

There is a body which is. . . ,

with the blank filled by a complete account of the physical nature and history of my body, is really the fact that

Space is F

for some complex value of F. And the same applies *mutatis mutandis* for my mind. It is a mode of the thinking substance, the item that is to thought what Space is to extension, so that the fact that

There is a mind which is. . . ,

with the blank filled by a complete account of the nature and history of my mind, is really the fact that

The thinking substance is G,

for some complex value of G. Those must be Spinoza's views if he seriously and literally holds that finite particular things are modes.

Now, when Spinoza says that my body is my mind, or that a circle and the idea of it are one and the same thing, he must mean that *F is G*. That is, what it takes for there to be a physical object such as my body is for there to be an extended substance that is F, and what it takes for there to be a mind such as mine is for there to be a thinking substance that is F—for the very same value of F. My mind is a mode, my body is a mode, and my mind is my body; so the mode that is my mind is the mode that is my body; and so the 'affection' or quality or state which, added to extension,

yields the whole nature of my body is the very one which, added to thought, yields the whole nature of my mind.

That is my answer to part of question **E**: What does Spinoza mean by the mode identity thesis? He means by it just exactly and literally what his words imply. We don't have to twist or bend his words, or explain them away, or put up a smoke-screen of unclarity and evasion around them. He means that each mode is a mode under all of the attributes; we should think of the mode that constitutes my body not as a complex quality that includes extendedness but rather as a complex quality that can be combined with extendedness but can also be combined with thinkingness. The modes are trans-attribute, logically speaking; that is, each of them is combinable with thought and with extension, and with any other attributes there may be.

Spinoza usually uses the term 'mode' differently from this, taking a mode to be a complex property that includes an attribute: 'The modes of each attribute involve the concept of their attribute', he says (2p6d). So I am implying that in our present scholium he has changed his tune a little, and now uses the term 'mode' to stand for what would remain if the attribute were removed. I make no apology for that, because on any reasonable interpretation he must have changed his tune. I shall explain why.

On the one hand, the modes of extension involve the concept of extension and the modes of thought involve the concept of thought; on the other hand, a mode of extension is identical with a mode of thought. There are only two possibilities here. **(i)** Every mode involves every attribute. **(ii)** Spinoza moves in the scholium to 2p7 to using 'mode' in a special sense in which it refers not to attribute-involving modes but rather to modes from which the attribute has been deleted, the result being something which, he now says, could be combined with any attribute. Explanation **(i)** would

bring large parts of the *Ethics* to ruin, removing (for example) Spinoza's ground for saying that we cannot explain physical actions in terms of mental causes. So we are forced to accept the explanation **(ii)**, which says that in this scholium Spinoza uses 'mode' differently from how he usually does. I shall show in due course that he has good reason for adopting the special usage in this one place, and no reason to adopt it anywhere else.

## 6. Question F: How parallelism is explained

Not only are these modes trans-attribute in the sense that each of them is combinable with any attribute, furthermore each of them actually is combined both with thought and extension. That is guaranteed by the substance monism doctrine, which says that there is just one substance that instantiates both the attributes. If there were two substances, one extended and one thinking, it wouldn't follow from the fact that something is extended and F that anything is thinking and F. The potentially trans-attribute mode that combines with extension to yield my body might not be possessed by the thinking substance, in which case my mind would not exist.

Now we can answer question **F**, about how parallelism is meant to be explained by what has gone before. Spinoza's procedure here is perfectly orderly: he asserts **(1)** substance monism, then the similar but independently grounded **(2)** doctrine of the identity of modes across the attributes, and continues to say that that is why **(3)** the parallelism doctrine is true. Parallelism does indeed follow from the other two. The doctrine of mode identity says that corresponding to any extended mode (F-and-extension) there could be a corresponding thinking mode (F-and-thought); the doctrine of substance monism says that any mode that is instantiated in combination with extension is also instantiated in combi-

nation with thought; put the two together and you get the thesis that corresponding to any actual mode involving one attribute there is a mode involving the other.

### 7. Question D: The content of substance monism

The famous question **D**—What content there is to the thesis that the attributes are possessed by a single substance?—can now be answered. There is in fact an enormous amount of content to the thesis: the unity of the one substance—its being one rather than two or more—is secured by the fact that the entire modal story about the whole of reality reappears under each of the attributes. The single ‘order and connection of things’ and ‘order and connection of causes’, i.e. the entire network of trans-attribute modes, runs across, through, under all the attributes, giving the one substance its integrity, its unity, its wholeness. There is no threat that Nature, just because its attributes are so disconnected from one another, will conceptually fall apart.

### 8. Hypothesis: Trans-attribute modes cannot be thought in isolation

I seem to be on a collision course with one of Spinoza’s most famous doctrines, namely that there is no causal flow across any boundary between attributes. This is vital to many of his lines of thought, e.g. his view that to explain human physical behavior we should resort not to psychology but to biology. It is in order to avoid this collision that I have to bring in the hypothesis that I mentioned earlier.

The threat of collision doesn’t result from anything controversial that I have been saying. It is manifestly there on any sane reading of Spinoza’s text. On the one hand:

The modes of each attribute have God for their cause only insofar as he is considered under the attribute

of which they are modes, and not insofar as he is considered under any other attribute, (2p6)

which entails that what happens in my mind doesn’t cause what happens in my body, and vice versa. On the other:

A mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways (2p7s). The object of the idea constituting a human mind is a human body (2p13).

These two jointly entail that my mind is my body. How can my mind be my body, and yet not be causally relevant to my body? The threat of absurdity comes straight out of Spinoza, with no exegetical help from me. Something must be done to render all this consistent.

Here is my hypothesis: **Spinoza held that the trans-attribute modes are not accessible to intellect in isolation; they can be thought only in combination with some attribute.** There is no difficulty about the thought that the one substance is extended and F, that being the whole thought about the nature and history of my body; and one can have the thought that the one substance is thinking and F, that being the whole thought about the nature and history of my mind. But not even an unlimited (‘infinite’) intellect can dismantle either of those thoughts into its attribute component and its F component, conceptually isolating the trans-attribute mode.

That would give Spinoza a reason for saying that no explanation can run from one attribute through to another. To explain something across a boundary between attributes would be to go from the premises

- The one substance is extended and F, and
- The one substance is thinking,

to the conclusion

- The one substance is thinking and F.

That would get a conclusion about my mind from a premise

about my body in conjunction with the thin premise that the universe has a mental aspect. But to conduct such a predictive or explanatory line of thought, one would have to isolate the F, detaching it from extension and combining it with thought. I hypothesize that Spinoza believed that we cannot do that, which is why he said that no legitimate intellectual operation runs from premises under one attribute to a conclusion under another.

### 9. The answers to G and H: Spinoza's dualism is intellectual, not metaphysical

If my hypothesis is right, that explains how Spinoza can believe in trans-attribute modes while also affirming that no-one could conduct or understand an explanation that crossed a boundary between attributes. Tracking such an explanation would involve thinking certain concepts in abstraction from any attribute, and (according to my hypothesis) Spinoza holds that to be impossible.

That, however, is about *following* or *conducting* an explanation. We also have the notion of there *being* an explanation for some fact, even if nobody knows what it is and perhaps even if nobody could understand it. And Spinoza seems to be using some such notion when he implies that there could not be an explanation that went across boundaries between attributes. What is it for P to explain Q if nobody could know or even understand the explanation? Well, P might logically entail or absolutely necessitate Q, or it might lead causally to Q; and either of these could be the case even if no intellect could see it. So the difficulty I have raised for myself can be put like this: My hypothesis explains how Spinoza, consistently with his doctrine of the identity of modes across the different attributes, can deny that there are followable explanations running from one attribute to another, but not how he can deny that there are entailments or causal

chains running from one attribute to another. Indeed, he seems to be committed to there being entailments across attribute boundaries: the trans-attribute modes create a system of logical relationships that do obtain between the different attributes, whether or not anyone can think them in abstraction from any attribute. Or so one might think.

This looks like deep trouble for my interpretation, though I would remind you that, as I pointed out a few moments back, it is trouble for Spinoza on any interpretation except for ones according to which he wasn't using 'mode' in its full normal meaning. Anyway, I still think that Spinoza meant what he said, and that he didn't contradict himself in this matter. In explaining why, I need not discuss the logical and causal possibilities separately, because Spinoza, famously, doesn't distinguish them; he has no concept of absolute or logical necessity stronger than his concept of causal necessity. So the difficulty I have been presenting can be put like this: My hypothesis reconciles the mode identity doctrine with the denial that there are followable explanations that go across boundaries between attributes, but not, apparently, with the denial that there are causal chains that go across boundaries between attributes.

Here is something that evaporates this difficulty: When Spinoza says that there are no causal chains across attribute boundaries, he means only that there are no followable explanations that run across those boundaries. His declaration that this is all he means is given just where it is needed, namely at the point where the alert reader might be starting to suspect that there is an inconsistency in the doctrine. Listen again to that nearly final episode in the scholium (the emphases are mine):

When I said that God is the **cause** of the idea. . . of a circle only insofar as he is a thinking thing, and the **cause** of the circle only insofar as he is an extended



thing, this was only because the intrinsic being of the idea of the circle can be **perceived** only through another mode of thinking as its proximate cause, and . . . so on to infinity. Hence, so long as things are **considered** as modes of thinking, we have to **explain** the order of the whole of nature, or the connection of causes, through the attribute of Thought alone. And insofar as they are **considered** as modes of Extension, the order of the whole of nature has to be **explained** through the attribute of Extension alone.

What is the point of this performance? It is to pick up the doctrine about the causal insulation between the attributes and to explain that it means something about how things must be explained, perceived, considered—that is, to psychologize it.

And why is this done just here? That is my question **H** (and in answering it I also answer **G**). Spinoza goes into the matter here because he has just finished explaining why the parallelism obtains; the explanation asserts the identity of modes across the attribute boundaries, which seems to offer a basis on which there could be a logico-causal flow across those boundaries; and Spinoza needs to explain why it doesn't. He does this by psychologizing the notion of causal flow, preparing the way for this repeatedly throughout the scholium (question **G**) and then explicitly saying it at the scholium's close (question **H**).

Let me be clear about what is going on here. My answers to the questions I have raised about the scholium rely on three supports. **(i)** An account of what Spinoza means by 'mode' and thus by his mode identity thesis. **(ii)** My hypothesis that Spinoza believed that trans-attribute modes cannot be thought in abstraction from any attribute. **(iii)** The claim that when Spinoza asserted the causal separateness of the attributes, all he meant was that intellect cannot follow

any explanation running from one attribute to another. I contend that I have strong, direct textual evidence for both **(i)** and **(iii)**. We get **(i)** as an automatic consequence of reading Spinoza's text literally, and not as some kind of metaphor or abuse of language; and **(iii)** is something that he says, in so many words, at the end of the scholium to 2p7. But **(ii)**, the attribution to Spinoza of a view about the unabstractability of the trans-attribute modes, has no direct textual support. My principal case for it is that it fits in with so many other things to yield a comprehensive explanation of what is happening in the scholium to 2p7, and, above all, to explain how Spinoza can reconcile his assertion of the identity of modes across attribute-boundaries with his denial that any causal chains extend across those boundaries. Notice that although **(iii)** is supported—incontrovertibly, it seems to me—by the last part of the scholium, my explanation of why Spinoza says those things in that place requires that **(ii)** be true as well.

### 10. Questions A, B, and C: Spinoza's definition of 'attribute'.

My hypothesis also lets me explain Spinoza's definition of 'attribute'. Why does the definiens say that an attribute is 'perceived as', rather than that it is, an essence of the substance that has it? Because according to Spinoza it *isn't* an essence of the substance that has it. The relevant sense of 'essence', I contend, is the one given by Descartes:

Each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred. Thus extension in length, breadth and depth constitutes the nature of corporeal substance, and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. Everything else which can be attributed to body presupposes extension, and is merely a mode of an extended thing; and similarly,

whatever we find in the mind is simply one of the various modes of thinking. (*Principles* 1:53)

According to my hypothesis, Spinoza's attitude to this could be expressed as follows:

Setting aside the bit about 'one principal property', which is just a mistake, the rest of this account of the 'nature and essence' of a substance reports accurately on how the situation must be perceived by any intellect. If you start with the various specific features of an extended thing, and ask what they all have in common—what they are all specifications of—the answer will inevitably be *extension*. In fact, each of them consists of something of the form 'F and extended', where F could be combined also with other attributes; but that fact is not accessible to any intellect, and so extension will be *perceived by any intellect* as a Cartesian essence or nature of the substance that has it. It isn't really a Cartesian essence or nature, however; it is not the most basic thing that is predicable of the substance. On the contrary, the trans-attribute modes are in a clear sense more basic, in that they can spread across all the attributes.

So what the definition of 'attribute' does is to permit us to treat the attributes as basic in the way that Cartesian 'essences or natures' are said to be, while including a hint ('what intellect perceives. . .') that what makes this a safe procedure is a limitation on what intellect can do rather than a fact about how things stand in the rest of reality. Spinoza explains 'attribute' in this way because he has no other way of explaining it. That answers question **B**, about why Spinoza proceeds as he does in 1d4. It also presents 1d4 as offering a flicker of direct textual support for my hypothesis.

Question **A** demanded to know why one attribute should be implicitly mentioned in a definition of 'attribute' in general, that being what Spinoza does through his allusion to what 'intellect perceives'. I answer that the definition implies an asymmetry among the attributes, and a privileged status for one of them, because there really is such an asymmetry and privilege deep in the doctrinal structure: Spinoza's account of attributes in general involves the concept of causation, which he ultimately cashes out in terms of thought, as he explains at the end of 2p7s.

There remains question **C**: Why does Spinoza, in this scholium and nowhere else, use the definiens for 'attribute'

*quod quicquid ab infinito intellectu percipi potest  
tanquam substantiae essentiam constituens*

where he could more smoothly and naturally have used the one word

*attributum*

itself? Answer: This is the one place in the *Ethics* where the full force of 1d4 is relevant to what is going on. Throughout the rest of the work, we can proceed as though the attributes were basic, i.e. were Cartesian 'essences'; it is safe for us to do this, and indeed we have no alternative because our intellects are bound to perceive them as basic. Only here, where trans-attribute modes have to be introduced in Spinoza's metaphysical explanation of parallelism, does he need to admit that as a matter of sheer metaphysics the attributes aren't really basic after all.

### 11. Appearance and reality in 1d4

When Spinoza puts 'what intellect perceives' into the definition of 'attribute', he is invoking the distinction between appearance and reality. That is what Wolfson said too, and refuting him has become a standard five-finger exercise for Spinoza scholars. But he took Spinoza to hold that the

attributes are not really distinct from one another though they are perceived by intellect as being so. That shows great insensitivity to the actual wording of the definition of 'attribute', and I wouldn't be seen dead with it. What I am saying is different from that: not that the attributes are not real or are not really distinct from one another, but that they aren't really basic, aren't really 'essences' in Descartes's sense. That is the reading that most closely fits the actual wording of the definition, and it is also the one that harmonizes with my cluster of explanations surrounding 2p7s.

If you still think that Spinoza held that an attribute is an essence of the substance that has it, what do you make of the fact that he repeatedly says that each attribute *expresses*

the (or an) essence of God? (See, for example, 1d6, 1p16d, 1p19d.) I explain it as follows: The nearest Spinoza will come to using the concept of essence in a metaphysically serious way involves him in saying that the system of trans-attribute modes is the essence of God. We can get at this only in its combination with some attribute or other. So the role of the attributes is to combine with the trans-attribute modes to get the latter into a form in which we can think them. The attributes let the modes come through. It is as though the modes were words written in a script to which intellect is blind, and the attributes make the message of the modes accessible to intellect by reading them aloud, expressing them.