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Apr 1st, 2:15 PM - 2:45 PM

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How to Interpret Spinoza's Theory of Attribute: The Subjective and Objective Interpretations Revisited

'Attribute' is one of the most important theories in Spinoza's philosophy. Scholars have divided themselves into two camps, according to how they interpret 'attribute'. The first one is known as the subjective interpretation, which was first proposed by Hegel and then received 'paradigmatic expression' from Harry Wolfson.¹ The other is known as the objective interpretation, and its proponents include scholars such as Jonathan Bennett. The reason behind this divergence lies in the ambiguities in the definition of attribute, which is that, 'By attribute I mean that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence'.² Scholars disagree with each other regarding two terms in this definition: the first is 'intellect', which can refer to either finite or infinite intellect; the second is 'as', in Latin *tanquam*, which can mean either 'as if' or 'as in fact'.³ The subjective interpreters take 'intellect' to be finite intellect and 'as' to mean 'as if'; therefore, according to the subjective interpretation, the definition of attribute can be rephrased as, 'By attribute I mean that which the finite intellect perceives of substance as if, but not as in fact, constituting its essence'. On the other hand, the objective interpretation goes in the opposite direction by taking attribute as that which the infinite intellect perceives of substance as in fact constituting its essence. Due to their different understandings of attribute, the subjective and objective interpreters further disagree on three other questions related to Spinoza's ontology: whether there is any ontological difference between substance and attribute; how many attributes there are; and

¹ Noa Shein, "Spinoza's Theory of Attributes," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/spinoza-attributes/>, Section 1.8.

² Baruch Spinoza, "Ethics," in *The Essential Spinoza: Ethics and Related Writings*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 4, D4 I.

³ Shein, "Spinoza's Theory of Attributes," Section 1.8.

whether there are real distinctions between attributes. As I shall demonstrate through this essay, despite being sophisticated, both the subjective and objective interpretations misunderstand Spinoza's ontology in one way or another, as revealed by the conflicts between their answers to some of the aforementioned questions and the original text, the *Ethics*. In my opinion, a better interpretation of attribute should assert that the infinite and finite intellects are equally able to perceive substance as in fact constituting its essence.

There are three key terms in Spinoza's ontological structure: substance, attribute, and mode. Spinoza defined substance as 'that which is in itself and is conceived through itself'; the conception of substance does not need any other conceptions apart from itself.⁴ According to Spinoza, there is only one such substance in the entire universe: God, which is defined as a substance 'consisting of infinite attributes' and is eternal and infinite.⁵ Attribute, as mentioned in the introduction, is that which the intellect perceives as the essence of substance, i.e. the essence of substance is revealed to the intellect through its attributes. Spinoza named two such attributes: thought and extension.⁶ Finally, by mode, it is 'the affections of substance'; they are in the substance and need to be conceived through the substance, and since substance is God, so this is also to say that modes exist within God and can only be conceived through God.⁷ There are two kinds of mode. The first one is infinite mode. Its existence follows from 'the absolute nature of some attribute of God'. Since attribute, which expresses the essence of God as being infinite, must be infinite, so the modes that follow from God's attribute must also exist 'necessarily and as infinite'.⁸ The second

⁴ Spinoza, "Ethics," 4, D3 I.

⁵ Ibid., 4, D6 I.

⁶ Ibid., 30, P1, P2 II.

⁷ Ibid., 4, 10-11, D5, P15 I.

⁸ Ibid., 16-17, P21, P22 I.

kind is finite mode. All individual things that exist in this world, such as humans (their minds and bodies), animals, and all other kinds of things, are being classified as finite modes.

Unlike infinite modes, which follow from God's absolute nature and are thus directly produced by God, finite modes are not directly produced by God, since whatever follows from God's nature is necessarily infinite. Therefore, the only way by which finite modes exist is to follow one of God's attributes that is being modified in a finite and determinate manner.⁹

Substance, attribute, and mode formed the basic framework of Spinoza's ontology, and much of the content was filled up by their meanings, implications, and relationships to each other, whence different interpretations also emerged. The starting point of divergence and disagreement lies in the definition of attribute: 'By attribute I mean that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence'.¹⁰ In this definition, Spinoza did not specify exactly what he means by 'intellect' and 'as'. The intellect can refer to either finite intellect, which is the human mind as a finite mode, or infinite intellect, which is an infinite mode. The term 'as' (*tanquam*) can mean either 'as if' or 'as in fact'. Regarding the correct meanings of these terms, scholars have developed two different and rival ways of interpretation. The first is known as the subjective interpretation, which takes 'intellect' to be finite intellect and 'as' to be 'as if' and thus understands attribute as something that the *finite* intellect perceives of substance *as if* constituting its essence. In contrast, the second approach, known as the objective interpretation, takes 'intellect' to be infinite intellect and 'as' to be 'as in fact'. Abiding by this interpretation, attribute is that which the *infinite* intellect perceives of substance *as in fact* constituting its essence.

The significance of these two ways of interpretation lies in the fact that the way by which one interprets attribute also affects how one understands many other aspects of

⁹ Ibid., 19, P28, P28Schol I.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4, D4 I.

Spinoza's ontology, which will eventually result in two completely different accounts of Spinoza's philosophy. First, consider the subjective interpretation. According to the subjective definition of attribute, substance and attribute are not ontologically the same. Attribute is what is invented by finite intellect, i.e. the human mind, and then projected on to substance as if constituting its essence. In other words, attribute looks like the essence of substance from the perspective of finite intellect, but in fact it is not; from the perspective of substance, attribute is merely illusory. Therefore, whenever Spinoza discussed something in terms of attribute, the discussion was in regard to finite intellect, which did not reflect the situation of substance per se. For example, Spinoza defined God as substance consisting of infinite attribute and said that thought and extension were two attributes of God. Why does he speak only of two attributes when 'infinite' apparently means infinitely many attributes? As Hegel pointed out, ontologically, there is only substance but no attribute. Attribute is considered to be infinite and thought and extension are considered to be distinct only through the way by which the human mind perceives substance, which does not reflect the true nature of substance: '[Thought and extension] express the same being, God, but in a form that the understanding, so to speak, brings with it, a form that pertains to the understanding ... the distinctions are only attributes or determinations of the understanding, which is an added factor'.¹¹ The human mind is capable to grasp substance only in terms of thought and extension; they are epistemologically distinct in regard to the human intellect but not ontologically distinct in regard to substance. 'Infinite', in this case, does not refer to numerical infinity. Rather, it is 'infinite in character',¹² which means that each attribute by itself expresses substance entirely in a way that can be understood by finite intellect; it takes

¹¹ G.W.F Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6*, Vol.3, *Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Robert F. Brown, trans. R. F. Brown and J. M. Stewart, with the assistance of H. S. Harris, revised ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 125.

¹² Shein, "Spinoza's Theory of Attributes," Section 1.8.1.

the form of thinking in one case and the form of extension in another, and there are infinite ways that the finite intellect can perceive substance, when none of them truly and accurately reflect the essence of substance.¹³

There is, however, a major problem in the subjective interpretation of attribute. There are many places in the *Ethics* where Spinoza indicated that there was no ontological gap between substance and attribute. For example, in the proof of Proposition 4 of Part I, Spinoza said: ‘there can be nothing external to the intellect through which several things can be distinguished from one another except substance or (which is the same thing) the attributes and the affections of substances’.¹⁴ Also, Proposition 19 of Part I states that, ‘God [is eternal], that is, all the attributes of God are eternal’, which is followed by Proposition 20: ‘God’s existence and his essence are one and the same’.¹⁵ In these propositions, substance and attribute are replaceable, indicating that they are ontologically the same. Another way to approach this is that Spinoza said, ‘All things that are, are either in themselves or in something else’.¹⁶ By their definitions, substance is in itself and modes, regardless of their finitude, are in substance, i.e. something else, therefore ‘nothing exists except substance and modes’.¹⁷ What about attribute? It must either be in itself or in something else. Since modes are the only things in Spinoza’s ontology that are in something else, and since attribute is different from modes, so attribute cannot be in something else, so the only option left is that attribute is in itself. Now, since substance is the only thing that is in itself and there is nothing else that exists apart from substance and modes, so attribute is the same as substance –

¹³ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6*, 124-125; Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning*, Vol.1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 226.

¹⁴ Spinoza, “Ethics,” 5, P4 I.

¹⁵ Ibid., 16, P19, P20 I.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4, A1 I.

¹⁷ Ibid., 11, P15 I.

substance or the attribute of substance is in itself. Therefore, Spinoza treated substance and attribute as ontologically the same, contradicting the subjective interpretation.

Now, turn to the objective interpretation. According to the objective definition of attribute, which takes attribute to be that which the *infinite* intellect perceives substance *as in fact* constituting its essence, the difference between substance and attribute is just like the difference between a property-bearer and its property. For example, extension is a property of an extended thing; similarly, attribute is a property of substance. The difference only lies in the logical form but not in content, that is, ‘we use the concept of substance to think of what has the attribute, and we use the concept of attribute to think of what the substance has’.¹⁸ Therefore, by this definition, there is no ontological difference between substance and attribute, thus avoiding the problem faced by the subjective interpretation. An implication from here is that whatever is perceived by the infinite intellect regarding the substance is necessarily real and belongs to the essence of substance. Therefore, when the infinite intellect sees thought and extension as two attributes of God, both attributes and their distinctness belong to the essence of substance and are not mere illusions projected by the human mind; as Bennett phrased it, ‘[Substance] really has extension and thought, which really are distinct from one another’.¹⁹ This in turn indicates that each attribute alone cannot express the reality of substance comprehensively and the term ‘infinite’, in the definition of God as being a substance consisting of infinite attributes, does not mean ‘infinite in character’, as the subjective interpreters have claimed. Rather, it means ‘totality’, i.e. ‘all logically possible things’, which means that infinite attributes should be understood as all the attributes there

¹⁸ Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1984), 62-63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

are;²⁰ if there happens to be only two attributes in total, then infinity in this case is two; if there happens to be more than two, infinity is whatever that number is.

Although the objective interpretation successfully avoids the problem faced by the subjective interpretation by taking substance and attribute to be ontologically the same, there is still a problem associated with its claim that there are real distinctions between thought and extension. Spinoza argued that the only way by which we can distinguish one thing from another is through their different attributes; two distinct things having different attributes should have nothing in common.²¹ Therefore, since God is a substance consisting of infinite attributes, there cannot exist anything that does not share one or more of God's attributes. Having something in common with God does not make the thing distinct from God, so God is the only substance that exists in the entire universe. However, according to the objective interpretation, thought and extension are distinct, indicating that they have nothing in common, so why they cannot take the existence as being two distinct substances? In addition, given that attributes are ontologically the same as substance, which is God, the conclusion is likely to be that God can be divided into two distinct parts: one as a thinking substance corresponding to the attribute of thought, another as an extended substance corresponding to the attribute of extension. This directly contradicts the original text, in which Spinoza repeatedly emphasised the uniqueness and indivisibility of substance.

The objective interpreters may respond by saying that Spinoza confirmed that the numbers of substance and attribute can be different: 'although two attributes be conceived as really distinct, that is, one without the help of the other, still we cannot deduce therefrom that they constitute two entities, or two different substances'.²² This response, however, is

²⁰ Ibid., 75-76.

²¹ Spinoza, "Ethics," 4-5, P2, P4 I.

²² Ibid., 8, P10Schol I.

problematic itself. If substance and attribute are ontologically the same, then there should be the same amount of substance and attribute. If they differ in numbers, this indicates that there is still an ontological gap between them, which goes back to the view of the subjective interpretation that has been proved to be defective. In addition, later in the text, Spinoza denied that there could be any substantial distinction between thought and extension. In Proposition 7 of Part II, Spinoza said: ‘The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things’, which means, ‘the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance’.²³ As far as Spinoza was concerned, extension, which pertains to an extended substance, and thought, which is the very idea of that substance, are one and the same. The same holds true regarding human beings as finite modes. ‘Man thinks’ and ‘We feel a certain body to be affected in many ways’;²⁴ that is, humans have mind and body, corresponding to thought and extension. However, ‘The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body – i.e., a definite mode of extension actually existing, and *nothing else*’.²⁵ Similar to the case regarding substance, the human mind and body form an ontologically undistinguishable united whole; thought is nothing but the idea of the extended body.

To briefly sum up, the subjective and objective interpreters provided answers to five different questions regarding Spinoza’s ontology respectively. The first two questions are about how to interpret ‘intellect’ and ‘as’, and the other three questions are related to the relationship of substance and attribute, the number of attributes, i.e. what does ‘infinite attributes’ mean in the definition of God, and the distinctions between thought and extension. The answer based on the subjective interpretation states that attribute is that which the finite

²³ Ibid., 32, P7, P7Schol II.

²⁴ Ibid., 30, A2, A4 II.

²⁵ Ibid., 36, P13 II. Italics added.

intellect perceives of substance as if constituting its essence. There is an ontological gap between substance and attribute. 'Infinite' is in regard to the character of attribute, and there are no real distinctions between thought and extension. On the other hand, the objective interpretation holds that attribute is employed by the infinite intellect to perceive the substance as in fact constituting its essence. Substance and attribute are therefore ontologically one and the same. 'Infinite' means 'totality', and thought and extension are two really distinct attributes of substance.

Now, let us leave aside the two questions regarding 'intellect' and 'as' for a moment and consider first the rest of the three questions. Based on the previous discussion, it should become clear that the subjective interpretation is right on the questions about the number of attributes and the distinctions between thought and extension, but is wrong on the question regarding the relationship between substance and attribute. The situation of the objective interpretation is just the other way around; it gets right what the subjective interpretation gets wrong and gets wrong what the subjective interpretation gets right. Therefore, combining what the subjective and objective interpretations get right while rejecting what they get wrong should give a set of right answers to the three questions, which asserts that there is no ontological difference between substance and attribute; 'infinite' means infinite in character; and there are no real distinctions between thought and extension. The only question that remains now is how to interpret the definition of attribute. The answer to this question cannot simply be chosen from one of the answers provided by the two interpretations, because once we follow one of the ways to interpret 'intellect' and 'as', answers to the other three questions will also be fixed. Therefore, since the correct answers to the other three questions combine both interpretations together, there also needs to be another way to interpret the definition of attribute that is not only supported by the original text, but can also go together with the answers to the other three questions without facing any internal conflict. In my

opinion, such interpretation should assert that infinite and finite intellects are equally capable to perceive the true essence of substance through attribute. In other words, it takes ‘intellect’ to be both infinite and finite intellects and ‘as’ to be ‘as in fact’.

It is undoubted that the infinite intellect, being an infinite mode that follows from the absolute nature of God and produced directly by God, can grasp the essence of substance via attribute, which was confirmed by Spinoza in, for example, Proposition 4 of Part II, which states: ‘Infinite intellect comprehends nothing but the attributes of God’.²⁶ The question now is whether the finite intellect can also do the same. I shall propose three different approaches to examine this question, which should all bring the same conclusion – that the finite intellect is as capable as the infinite intellect as an epistemological faculty. First, consider what Spinoza said about the ability of the human intellect. Spinoza distinguished two epistemological faculties of human beings. The first one is ‘opinion’ or ‘imagination’, using which we perceive things through senses and reflect on what has been perceived. Things being perceived in this way are in a ‘fragmentary and confused manner without any intellectual order’, and the ideas formed based on this kind of sensory perception do not differ much from imagination. The second epistemological faculty is ‘reason’, i.e. the human intellect, which brings in intellectual order and helps us to gain ‘adequate ideas of the properties of things’.²⁷ In practice, when both epistemological faculties are being employed to conceive quantity, imagination is naturally inclined to consider quantity as ‘finite, divisible, and made up of parts’, which is only to perceive quantity abstractly and superficially, whereas intellect, or reason, is able to grasp quantity substantially and find it to be ‘infinite, one, and indivisible’.²⁸ As discussed above, regarding the substance, Spinoza emphasised a

²⁶ Ibid., 31, P4 II.

²⁷ Ibid., 51, P40Schol2 II.

²⁸ Ibid., 12-13, P15Schol I.

kind of oneness and wholeness and rejected any ontological divisibility of any quantitative element associated with it, such as thought and extension. Therefore, to perceive quantity as infinite and indivisible is a sign of grasping the essence of substance, which was confirmed by Spinoza to be within the capacity of the human intellect.

Another approach is to examine the finite intellect comparatively with the infinite intellect. The infinite intellect and all other infinite modes that follow from the essence of God are directly produced by God. The finite intellect and all other finite modes, on the other hand, are produced ‘through the medium of these primary things’, i.e. through infinite modes.²⁹ In other words, finite modes follow the essence of God that is being modified in a finite and determinate way, and this modification is in turn caused by the infinite modes.³⁰ Apart from being finite and having a determinate existence, it is doubtful that the modification of God’s nature by the infinite modes can damage the epistemological capacity of finite intellect, not only because Spinoza did not say or imply anything in such direction, but also due to the fact that infinite modes, each following from one of the attributes of God, cannot contain in themselves something harmful that can mutilate the capacity of the finite intellect. This was also confirmed by Spinoza when he stated that, ‘The finite intellect in act or the infinite intellect in act must comprehend the attributes of God and the affections of God, and nothing else’;³¹ their capacities as epistemological faculties are exactly the same. Therefore, the only difference between infinite and finite intellects is the way in which they exist, which has nothing to do with their epistemological capacities. If the infinite intellect can perceive the essence of substance through attribute, so does the finite intellect.

²⁹ Ibid., 19, P28Schol I.

³⁰ Ibid., 19, P28 I.

³¹ Ibid., 20, P30 I.

Finally, the third approach is simply this: by their definitions, substance is perceived through itself, and mode, regardless of its finitude, is perceived through substance. So, both substance and mode need to be perceived through substance. Therefore, to ask whether the finite intellect can perceive the essence of substance is also to ask whether the finite intellect can perceive mode; as long as it can perceive mode, it can also perceive substance, since both are perceived through the same medium. In other words, the perception of mode is not a bottom-up process, but is top-down; in order to perceive mode, the finite intellect needs to go through substance first. In addition, since the finitude of mode in this case does not matter, so, to make it simple, the question is: can the finite intellect perceive finite modes, which are the individual things in this world such as animals, tables, chairs, etc.? The answer again lies in the distinctions between imagination and intellect as two human epistemological faculties. By imagination, we are able to perceive the appearance that may or may not reflect the nature of finite mode; for example, we see that water flows and dries, ‘comes into existence and goes out of existence’. By intellect, we grasp the nature of finite mode and realise that, substantially speaking, water ‘does not come into existence nor go out of existence’.³² Therefore, the finite intellect can perceive both the appearance and nature of finite modes, so it can perceive the essence of substance as well.

In conclusion, the thesis is that infinite and finite intellects are equally capable to perceive the essence of substance through attribute can be proved by taking any of the three approaches. This thesis was also openly supported by Spinoza, who stated that ‘The human mind has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God’;³³ what I have done is to demonstrate the reason behind this proposition. Now, having demonstrated the validity of this thesis, a full account of the new interpretation of Spinoza’s ontology can

³² Ibid., 13, P15Schol I.

³³ Ibid., 55, P47 II.

finally be provided, which takes a middle path between the subjective and objective interpretations. The definition of attribute should now be rephrased as, 'By attribute I mean that which the infinite and the finite intellects perceive of substance as in fact constituting its essence'. Therefore, there is epistemological difference but no ontological difference between substance and attribute, attribute is not divisible and there are no real distinctions between thought and extension. 'Infinite' in this case means 'infinite in character', that is, each attribute by itself expresses the entire nature of substance. This, I think, is a more corrected interpretation of Spinoza's ontology.

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