



A Defense and Evaluation of Spinoza's Ontological Argument

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Abstract

Proofs for the existence of God have undergone many forms. However, the tradition surrounding the Ontological Argument is unique in that it is typified by the search for a purely *a priori* method of arriving at God's necessary existence. Spinoza's Ontological Argument is well worth the attention, given its uniqueness with respect to the traditional Anselmian variations. Moreover, within the greater context of Spinoza's "Ethics," the argument advances a wholly foreign notion of a self-contained pantheistic God. In this paper, I shall simplify Spinoza's Ontological Argument and evaluate its integrity against the many critiques raised against it.

Keywords: Metaphysics

The Ontological Argument for the existence of God has had a lengthy history, undergoing many different variations throughout the ages. One such variation is present in Baruch Spinoza's "Ethics," in which God, or "substance," is "that which is in itself and is conceived through itself."¹ The self-determinate nature of God is unique to Him alone, and given that all other things are not "in themselves" nor are conceived through themselves, the necessary existence of God is said to follow as the sufficient reason for the existence of all determinate things. In this paper I shall first introduce Spinoza's version of the Ontological Argument, providing a seven-step reconstruction of the first eleven propositions in Spinoza's "Ethics." Afterwards, I shall next address the Leibnizian objection which affirms the logical possibility of two substances existing alongside each other. Then, I shall defend Spinoza's version of the Ontological Argument from Immanuel Kant's famous critique of the standard versions of the Ontological Argument, paying great attention to Spinoza's conception of essence. I shall also provide a defense of Spinoza's *Necessitarianism*, which is often taken to be a drawback rather than a crucial feature. Finally, I will evaluate whether Spinoza's Ontological Argument stands its ground in the face of compelling objections, making use of David Hume's causal anti-realism in concluding that the reliance upon the Principle of Sufficient Reason was not sufficiently argued for, but was naively assumed *a posteriori*, thereby undermining the purely a priori nature of the Ontological Argument.

1. Benedictus De Spinoza and Seymour Feldman. "The Ethics." (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992).

The Ontological Argument

The Ontological Argument of the “Ethics” works by defining substance in a certain way such that only one substance, God, could possibly exist. According to Spinoza, God is infinite, and an infinite substance containing all attributes is not compossible with any other substance’s affections since such affections are already contained by the infinite scope of God. Moreover, the infinite nature of substance is said to entail existence, because all things (affections/attributes) have substance for their ground. If there is only one substance, and if substance is necessarily self-determinate, it follows that substance/God necessarily exists. Below, I condensed Spinoza’s Ontological Argument in part 1 of the “Ethics”, covering propositions 1–11:

1. Substance is that which grounds its affections (and so is prior to them). (I5d) (Ip1)
2. Particular affections/attributes of substance are unique to the substance from which they are generated, so no two substances can share the same affections/attributes (and there is no intersection between substances of alien natures). (Ip5)
3. “One substance cannot be produced by another substance.” (Ip6)
4. Substance “is necessarily infinite,” for limitation could only occur via another existing substance “having the same attribute” (which is impossible). (Ip8)
5. There is only one substance, because infinitude entails the containment of all attributes, and “There cannot be a substance that has no attributes.”² (Ip8s2)
6. “Existence belongs to the nature of substance” (a substance “necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents its

2. Don Garrett. *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*. (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 64.

existence,” while a substance is necessarily non-existent if there is a reason or cause within its nature which prevents its existence); substance is self-determinate. (Ip7) (Ip11)

7. Therefore, “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.” (Ip11)

The approach undertaken by this argument is to first conceive of something—substance—which is “in itself” and whose essence is “conceived through itself.” Using these parameters, one can easily deduce whether something is a substance through the investigation of its concept. For instance, a unicorn cannot be a substance, because its idea is conceived through a corn, a horse, and a two-dimensional plane. Nor can the most perfect island be a substance, because it is conceived through surrounding water, the surface that grounds it, etc. In other words, the essence of substance must be independent of anything apart from itself. If two substances have no common attributes (being particular instantiations of the essence of a substance), it is evident that “one cannot be the cause of the other,” for they are completely alien to one another. However, one might wonder why two substances cannot share the same affections or attributes.

For the latter, the answer lies within the definition of an attribute. As for the former, substances cannot be distinguished by their affections because, being prior to them, modes can only provide an inadequate conception of the substance through which they exist; substance is conceived “through itself,” through the attributes that instantiate its essence, not through its modes.

Having shown that one substance cannot be causally related to another substance, Spinoza’s next step is proving substance to be necessarily infinite. He reasons that to be finite is to be constrained in some way that prevents infinity, but the only way for a substance to be limited is by another existing substance “having the same attribute”, and this has already been proven impossible. If substance is infinite, then it contains

all possible attributes, having no limitation apart from logical impossibility (i.e. an attribute that renders all other attributes inactive, or anything that is impossible with the other attributes of substance). This entails that there is only one possible substance because a substance must have at least one attribute. Spinoza then utilizes the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), stating that a substance “necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents its existence,”³ and conversely, that a substance is necessarily non-existent if within its nature lies an internal contradiction that prevents its existence. Since it is within the nature of a substance to be self-determinate, the state of existence a substance occupies is unchangeable. If a substance does not exist then it could not possibly ever exist, due to lacking the requisite condition of actualized self-causation required of substance; an existing substance is that “whose nature can be conceived only as existing.”⁴ Finally, the argument concludes that there is a substance whose independent essence involves existence—God.

How does Spinoza’s version of the Ontological Argument differ from the typical variations in which God is defined into existence simply by being *Ens Perfectissimum*? In exclusively focusing on the concept of substance, the domain of possible conceptual inserts for God within the Ontological Argument is massively restricted. A standard Ontological Argument can prove the existence of just about anything, from the most perfect island to the existence of a maximally evil being!⁵⁶ However, none of these concepts are truly conceived through themselves. Moreover, the standard Ontological Argument treats existence as a predicate; if there is a perfection greater than all others, *x*, then existence must be included within the concept because *x* would be imperfect to lack existence. This strategy is incomparable to Spinoza’s Ontological Argument, having evaded the substitution problem (also known as the “Perfect Island” objection of Gaunilo), and in

3. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 43, Ip11.

4. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 38, 1d1.

5. R. Kane. "The Modal Ontological Argument." *Mind* 93, no. 371 (Jun 1984): 336–50.

6. Michael Tooley. "Plantinga’s Defence of the Ontological Argument." *Mind* 90, no. 359 (Jul 1981): 422–27.

doing so it simultaneously discounts the possibility of a non-monistic conception of reality given the infinitude of substance. Rather than treating existence as a property, Spinoza's argument aims to identify the unity of self-determinate essence with existence. I shall next elaborate on the validity of the 'No Shared Attribute' thesis.

The Leibnizian Objection

The Leibnizian Objection against Spinoza's Ontological Argument is as follows: if no substance can share all its attributes with another, it remains to be seen why two substances with entirely different attributes, with the exception of one hypothetical attribute, is an impossibility.⁷ If this critique is granted, then Spinoza's argument for monism fails. To resolve this objection, it is necessary to point to two things: the definition of an attribute as "that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence,"⁸ and the 10th proposition in Part I, which states that "Each attribute of one substance must be conceived through itself."⁹ According to Michael Della Rocca, if two substances shared the same attribute that would entail that each substance can be conceived through the other.¹⁰ The argument below shall clarify this position:

1. Substances are "conceived through themselves" (Id3).
2. An attribute is a particular essence of a substance (Id4).
3. Attributes are conceived through themselves, whereas modes are conceived through another; attributes bear no relation to other attributes (Ip10) (Id5).

7. Jason Waller. *Spinoza, Benedict De: Metaphysics*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. n.d.

8. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 38, Id4.

9. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 43, Ip10.

10. Michael Della Rocca. "Spinoza's Substance Monism." *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes* (Feb 2002): 17–22.

4. There exists two substances, A and B, each having entirely different attributes apart from the attribute x. [reductio premise]
5. A and B have x in common. [from 4]
6. x constitutes the essence of both A and B. [from 2 and 5]
7. There is a conjunction in essence between A and B; since attributes are conceived through themselves, the difference in attributes between A and B has no bearing on x, being independent of them. [from 3 and 6]
8. A and B can be conceived through each other given the conjunction of x; A, sharing a similar nature to B through x, is not entirely conceived through itself, for x conjuncts with B, and vice versa. [premise]
9. A and B are modes, because they are not conceived through themselves, but are rather conceived through another; A is conceived through B via x, and B is conceived through A via x, so both A and B depend upon x, making them modes. [from 1 through 8]

I can make this argument simpler by limiting the attributes of A and B, such that A is ((q)(r)(x)) and B is ((x)(y)(z)). The Leibnizian argument would hold that A and B are truly separate from one another, for x accompanies different attributes in each substance, such that the result is a distinguishable entity. However, since attributes are conceived through themselves, it is incorrect to conceptualize the sets in the following manner: A(qrx); B(xyz). Spinoza is quite clear that an attribute is an independent essence of a substance. Given this, the sets should appear like so: A(q,r,x); B(x,y,z). In this arrangement, A and B conjunct in x, consequently making it impossible that they are substances, for A and B are no longer conceived through themselves.

Having shown the failure of the Leibnizian critique against Spinozistic monism, a critique formulated by the most prominent polymath of the 17th Century, Spinoza's Ontological Argument stands logically uncontested. However, one century later Spinoza's system faced

a truly worthy adversary, Immanuel Kant. I shall next elaborate on the connection between essence and existence in Spinoza's Ontological Argument given the Kantian critique of the Ontological Argument.

Explication and Defense of Essence

In its simplest form, Spinoza's Ontological Argument is, "there is an essence whose existence follows necessarily from that essence."¹¹ Thus far I have shown how Spinoza's version of the Ontological Argument evades the substitution problem common to earlier forms of the argument—which allowed for virtually any concept to be defined into existence. Spinoza's version of the argument is also distinguished from the standard versions of the Ontological Argument by its inbuilt defense against the critique raised by Immanuel Kant.

Immanuel Kant famously raised doubt over the procession of existence from essence, stating that "existence is not a predicate or a determination of a thing."¹² However, Kant's understanding of essence differs from Spinoza, who does not understand it to be a "purely logical term" nor "the mere object of any definable sign."¹³ First, existence is not a property added to God, because the essence of God is identical to God's existence. Second, essences are not mind-dependent ideas; all things are expressions of substance since there is nothing outside or apart from substance. Given this, ideas are particular positive instantiations of the power of substance possessing objective existence and not mere mind-dependent linguistic properties. To further elaborate on Spinoza's conception of essence, since every thing (object or idea) is a modification of infinite substance, modes can differ with respect to the force or vivacity with which substance is

11. William A Earle. "The Ontological Argument in Spinoza." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 11, no. 4 (Jun 1951): 549.

12. Immanuel Kant, and David Walford. "The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant Theoretical Philosophy: 1755-1770." (UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 117.

13. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 550.

expressed. So, modes have varying degrees of positive reality, given that substance is the ultimate reality that grounds all things. Essences are thus positive instantiations of substance—the only reality—and from this it follows that no essence is inherently detached from substance. However distinct Spinoza's conception of essence is, why might this matter? The idea of essence as positivity, being inextricably linked with substance, is still bound to the realm in which it is posited. Kant claimed that meaningful philosophical language must necessarily posit something existent which matches a certain set of properties. Spinoza's idea of essence has yet to escape the conceptual realm, or has it?

Spinoza distinguishes between *idea* and *ideatum*.¹⁴ The former is a "psychological state" and is mind-dependent, while the latter refers to a physically extended object independent of the mind. *Idea* is "a mode of thought," and *ideatum* is a "determinate mode of extension."¹⁵ In "The Ontological Argument in Spinoza," William A. Earle uses the example of a circle to demonstrate this dual aspect relationship between *idea* and *ideatum*:

"The idea of a circle would therefore have two aspects: it is, to be sure, an idea, a mode of thought; but it is the idea of a circle which is not a mode of thought, but a determinate mode of extension. The circle is round, and all its radii are equal, whereas it would be absurd to speak of an idea as being round or having radii. Thought and extension have distinct properties, and neither is to be understood in terms of the other."¹⁶

This distinction between *idea* and *ideatum* certainly helps Spinoza's argument against the criticism that his concept of essence is an idea in the psychological sense, for the idea of something does not necessitate a relation of dependence to a positing mind—one can conceive of ideas that are not derived from the act of conception but instead discovered through conception, such as mathematical objects or theorems.

14. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 39, Ia6.

15. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 550.

16. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 550.

The idea and ideatum distinction is also unique with respect to the two standard theories of Universals, Conceptualism and Nominalism. While Conceptualism affirms a limited mind-dependent existence to ideas, Spinoza's distinction does not reduce all the objects of the understanding to be dependent upon the very act of positing. Moreover, while the Nominalist position denies any actual existence to ideas, the Spinozist position evades the problem with the denial of universals. For instance, the Nominalist denial of the universally accepted notion of extension entails that the discoveries of physics and geometry are illusory since there are no such things as existing mind-independent facts about objects—such as the properties of triangles or circles. Both Conceptualism and Nominalism contradict much of our existing knowledge about the world and do little to clarify it, unlike Spinoza's perspective, in which the

“...distinguishability of idea and ideatum is essential to the objective and independent validity of thought. A geometer resolves the circle into its proper elements, planes, lines, and the central point; at no point need he mention the thought which is thinking all this. No geometry will be found to posit among its principles ideas as such or anything else psychological. Geometry and logic are sciences independent of psychology, studying objective relations among the things posited.”¹⁷

If Spinoza is justified in distinguishing between idea and ideatum, it still remains to be seen how essence can be considered to be mind-dependent. If this issue is left unresolved, the Ontological Argument collapses. Fortunately, this concern is not difficult to clarify.

To reiterate an earlier point, since all exists through substance, mind-independent ideas, ideatum, are particular positive instantiations of the power of substance. However, no idea is “conceived through itself” nor “is in itself,” except substance.¹⁸ For instance, “The essence of circle depends, among other things, on the essence of plane, of line, etc.”¹⁹

17. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 550–501.

18. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 39, Ia3.

19. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 551.

Since the essence of any given mode of substance depends upon other essences for its adequate conception, it follows that existing instantiations of essence likewise depend upon existing instantiations of other essences included within its nature. Put simply, the modifications of substance are existentially dependent “upon precisely those things on which their essences will essentially depend.”²⁰ From this, it follows that an essence “conceived through itself” and “is in itself” will exist through no thing other than itself, which is to say that its independent existence follows from its independent essence. The reason for the validity of Spinoza’s Ontological Argument, as argued thus far, can be succinctly put as follows:

“the existence of God...is nothing but his essence: they are one and the same thing. To assert God's existence, therefore, is to frame an analytic proposition. One is not adding an extrinsic property to an essence; ultimately the argument is simply the reaffirmation of the absolute independence of God's essence. It is analytic, and therefore requires no additional grounds.”²¹

Since Spinoza’s Ontological Argument evades the biggest critique facing all Ontological Arguments due to the distinction between idea and ideatum, it is certainly convincing given its conceptual immunity against both the Leibnizian and Kantian critiques. However, there remains one crucial issue with the Spinozist argument that has yet been explored, and it has deterred many from accepting it as a result. I shall next defend the necessity of Spinoza’s Necessitarianism, the position that denies any contingency in things whatsoever.

Defense of Necessitarianism

Any proper argument for the existence of God must at least be accepted among theists, but Spinoza’s Ontological Argument has

20. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 552.

21. Earle. "The Ontological Argument." 552.

little support among theists and atheists alike in large part due to its Necessitarianism—a necessary consequence of Spinoza's reliance upon the PSR. This proves worrisome because the convictions of atheists are such that theistic arguments would have little weight, but if a proof of the existence of God is rejected by theists, who are predisposed to accepting theistic proofs, then that could reflect poorly on the argument itself. However, Spinoza was able to arrive at a proof for the existence of God through the PSR, and what follows from its utilization is logically necessary. To reject Necessitarianism without understanding its necessity is to destroy the argument entirely. Though the PSR is not named directly, Spinoza did utilize it in stating that "For every thing a cause or reason must be assigned either for its existence or for its non-existence."²² Why might necessitarianism follow from the PSR? Consider the following argument:

1. Suppose for a *reductio ad absurdum* that there is a big conjunction of all contingent facts (BCCF) (and so the BCCF is itself a contingent fact). [reductio premise]
2. Every fact has an explanation. [PSR]
3. Therefore, the BCCF has an explanation. [from 1 and 2]
4. If the BCCF has an explanation, then the explanation of the BCCF is either contingent or necessary. [premise]
5. Therefore, the explanation of the BCCF is either contingent or necessary. [from 3 and 4]
6. If the explanation of the BCCF is contingent, then the BCCF explains itself. [premise]
7. But no contingent fact explains itself. [premise]
8. Therefore, the explanation of the BCCF is not contingent. [from 6 and 7]
9. Therefore, the explanation of the BCCF is necessary. [from 5 and 8]

22. Spinoza. "The Ethics." 44, Ip11d.

10. If the explanation of the BCCF is necessary, then the BCCF is necessary. [premise]
11. Therefore, the BCCF is necessary. [from 9 and 10]
12. Therefore, the BCCF is both contingent and necessary-i.e., both contingent and not contingent-which is absurd. [from 1 and 11]
13. Therefore, our supposition for reductio, premise (1), is false: there is no BCCF. [from 1 through 12]
14. Therefore, there are no contingent facts, i.e., there are only necessary facts. [from 13]" (Unknown, 2021).²³²⁴

The argument above proves that contingency cannot be held alongside the PSR (when unrestricted). If each fact of this universe is contingent, then the universe can be expressed as a totality of contingent facts (BCCF), and this totality must have an explanation (per the PSR). If the explanation for the totality is contingent, then the totality explains itself, being nothing more than a mere totality of contingent facts. However, "no contingent fact explains itself," so the explanation for the totality must be necessary. According to the Modal Transfer Principle, the totality (BCCF) is necessary by consequence of its necessary cause. However, Strong Necessitarianism—the position that conceives of everything as being of the exact same strong necessity—is not implied, as the necessary cause is in itself necessary, while the BCCF is necessary by consequence. Therefore, an unrestricted PSR directly entails Weak Necessitarianism, in which everything is *contingently necessary* in virtue of the first cause, while the first cause is *necessarily necessary* due to its necessary presupposition. Put differently,

23. The concept of the BCCF originates in pages 202-204 of Peter Van Inwagen 1983, was later commented upon and used in an argument for the existence of God by Alexander Pruss in the second chapter of "The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology" (William Lane Craig and James Porter Moreland 2009), and finally the argument shown in this paper originated in a blog post comment on Alexander Pruss' blog by an anonymous poster, whose citation appears below.

24. Unknown. 2021. Re: Alexander Pruss's Blog: "Why I Can't Believe in a God Other than of Classical Theism." [Blog comment]

the necessarily necessary first cause grounds that which is contingently necessary. The above clarification over Weak Necessitarianism best coincides with Spinoza's system as he had laid it out. This clarification of the necessity of Necessitarianism should dispel the doubts theists might harbor over the validity of Spinoza's Ontological Argument, but is it compelling to atheists? I shall next critically evaluate the limitations of Spinoza's Ontological Argument.

Limitations of The Ontological Argument

Though Spinoza purports to have successfully given an *a priori* argument for the existence of God, there is uncertainty as to whether the argument is even *a priori*. First, Spinoza's Ontological Argument lacks justification for using the concept of substance. It is not the case that the conception of substance is necessary at all considering the many frameworks that do without it, like the anti-realism of David Hume. The Humean position over the metaphysics of causation is one that denies the necessity of past conjunctions between events from being repeated into the future, since such a notion could only ever be inferred from observed conjunctions and is thus conceivably false.²⁵ Even if the distinction between idea and ideatum is valid, there is no *a priori* reason to accept the concept of substance as existing independently of the mind. The only people that might be convinced of Spinoza's Ontological Argument must both presuppose the validity of the concept of substance and must assume the concept to correspond to something existent—which requires *a posteriori* justification. Moreover, Spinoza's indirect usage of the PSR is problematic because he takes its truth for granted. Therein lies the second issue, as the PSR requires *a posteriori* justification; how can it be known that, logically, everything requires an antecedent cause without phenomenal experience of causal processes? The Humean skeptic can argue that

25. William Edward Morris, and Charlotte R. Brown. "David Hume." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (USA: Stanford University, 2021).

our sense-impressions give us no reason to infer future repetitions of past phenomenal patterns because such a repetition of the past is logically unnecessary. If it is logically unnecessary that the patterns of the past repeat into the future, why might it be logically necessary that everything requires an antecedent cause? Such a claim seems inductive, and if this is the case, then the argument required to justify the PSR would be *a posteriori*.²⁶

Since Spinoza's Ontological Argument is reliant upon the PSR, and since the PSR likely requires some *a posteriori* justification, a complete version of Spinoza's argument for the existence of God would not be completely *a priori*. Additionally, one cannot accept the argument without first accepting the validity of the concept of substance, which demands *a posteriori* support. Given these criticisms, a revised version of Spinoza's argument would not be Ontological, but would instead resemble the Cosmological Argument. As it stands, it is incomplete. Even if it follows from the antecedent premises that the existence of an infinite substance is necessary, such an existence is of a conceptual nature. The only thing achieved by the argument is that the concept devised by Spinoza must exist necessarily if it exists, but its actual existence is uncertain and unproven (having neglected to justify the concept of substance). Spinoza's proof for the existence of God would have fared better had it not been an Ontological Argument.

Conclusion

Spinoza's Ontological Argument was a huge deviation from the better-known versions of the Ontological Argument. Though the strategy to identify God's essence with existence was admirable, the argument was doomed to failure in neglecting to give *a posteriori* justification to the concept of substance. Moreover, Spinoza's logical refinement of the concept

26. Leah Henderson. "The Problem of Induction." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (USA: Stanford University, 2018).

of substance, through the many propositions that built upon each other, failed to evade the conceptual realm from which such concepts were spun. Without positing an existent substance (with *a posteriori* justification), the Ontological Argument could not possibly prove anything about existing things. Had Spinoza abandoned the pursuit of a purely *a priori* argument for the existence of God, the end product would have been far more compelling. As it stands, the argument is but a landmark in the history of philosophy—one that much can be learned from.

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