Spinoza is famous – or rather notorious – for his contention that there is only one substance, namely God. Everything else is but a mere property of this substance, that is, a property of God. Spinoza presents this view in 1p14: ‘Except God, no substance can be or be conceived’. Now, it is certainly an interesting question whether or not the proof that Spinoza adduces for this claim is valid. But even if it is, the reader may still be at a loss. For the premises of this proof are by no means evident or uncontroversial. No shrewd Aristotelian or Cartesian would have any trouble denying their truth and replacing them with other principles more suitable for their own purposes.¹ So the question about Spinoza’s motive for his substance monism still remains. One might approach the question by pointing out that in his *Principia Philosophiae* Descartes defines ‘substance’ in such a way that only God could possibly be a substance in the strict sense.² Descartes, however, is unwilling to draw the conclusion that there is after all only one substance. He instead maintains the ambiguity of the term ‘substance’; in a weaker sense it can just as well be applied to creatures of God, viz., to *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, both of which depend on nothing apart from God.³ Spinoza, one could argue, is more consistent here: he avoids this ambiguity and uses ‘substance’ in a univocal sense. Monistic consequences follow immediately from

¹ Or so it seems. For a different view see Viljanen’s contribution in this volume.

² ‘By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance that can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God’s concurrence’ ([*Principles of Philosophy* 1.51; AT VIII/1, 24; CSM I, 210]).

³ ‘Hence the term “substance” does not apply *univocally*, as they say in the Schools, to God and to other things; that is, there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures... But as for corporeal substance and mind (or created thinking substance), these can be understood to fall under this common concept: things that need only the concurrence of God in order to exist’ ([*Principles of Philosophy* 1.51–2; AT VIII/1, 24–5; CSM I, 210]).
this move. But this is surely not sufficient to explain the motive for Spinoza’s monism, for why should a univocal use of the term ‘substance’ be preferable? Why not acknowledge degrees of substantiality? In looking for Spinoza’s motive it will be advisable to pay closer attention to the consequences of his monistic thesis. For instance, monism provides him with a simple and ready explanation for why our clear and distinct ideas are always (and even necessarily) true: these ideas are ultimately divine ideas, and hence are identical to what they represent. In addition to this epistemological advantage, substance monism offers new perspectives on the relationship between body and mind. If there is only one, divine substance and if we retain the Cartesian dictum that the difference between thinking and extension is irreducible, then it is natural to regard them as different attributes of one and the same substance. If this idea can be fleshed out in a consistent way, an attractive nonreductive identity theory of the mind–body relationship could be developed – from the very same resources that would explain the necessary truth of our clear and distinct ideas.

In the first part of this chapter I will outline Spinoza’s proof for substance monism in Part 1 of the Ethics and argue that Spinoza makes implicit use of the scholastic premise that God is absolutely simple. This, however, will lead to an intricate problem that already bothered the scholastic philosophers: how can divine simplicity be compatible with the multiplicity of divine attributes? In the second part of this chapter I will contend that this problem can be solved by means of the concept of a ‘formal distinction’ as it can be found in Duns Scotus, and I will suggest that a similar concept is at work in Spinoza’s theory. In the third part I will finally try to outline how Spinoza applies the solution of this theological problem to his philosophy of mind in order to develop his theory of the mind–body relationship.

I. THE ARGUMENT FOR SUBSTANCE MONISM

Spinoza assumes that nothing has being apart from ‘substances’ and ‘modes’, for, as he says in an axiom, ‘[w]hatever is, is either in itself or in another’ (1a1). But what is in itself is a substance (1d3), and what is in another is a mode (1d5). In addition, Spinoza’s ontology contains ‘attributes’. Attributes are essential properties of substances. As essential properties they are constitutive of the substances that they

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4 See for example Feuerbach 1847 [1833], 300–316. Feuerbach even sees a contradiction here in Descartes: it is impossible that something (res extensa, res cogitans) can be ‘conceived through itself’ and at the same time be dependent on something else for its existence. This argument, however, already presupposes Spinozistic premises concerning the relation between causality and conception.
characterise, and therefore Spinoza does not mention them separately in his list: if a substance is given, the attributes are given without further ado. We will even see later that substances are identical to their attributes. Modes are properties of substances, too, but they are only accidental properties; that is, they are not constitutive of the substances in which they inhere, and in this sense they can be said to be distinct from them. They relate to attributes as determinates do to determinables. Spinoza’s concepts of substance and attribute have been the subject of a lively debate, but it seems to me that there is, in fact, nothing especially surprising in Spinoza’s classification of what there is; it is part and parcel of the standard Cartesian ontology.

What is surprising, however, is that Spinoza contends that there can be only one substance, that is, God. For this contention Spinoza offers a proof that comprises two steps. In the first step (1p1–p8), it is shown that there can be at most one substance per attribute; that is, there cannot be several substances that have the same attribute in common. In the second step (1p9–p14), it is shown that there is only one substance for all attributes. Spinoza’s argument for the first thesis reads as follows:

If there were two or more distinct substances, they would have to be distinguished from one another either by a difference in their attributes, or by a difference in their affections (by p4). If only by a difference in their attributes, then it will be conceded that there is only one of the same attribute. But if by a difference

5 The fact that modes are accidental properties will be of some importance for the interpretations of 1p5. However, some might object that according to 1p16 the modes follow from the definition [and hence from the essence] of the substance. This suggests that the modes are essential properties or parts of the essence of the substance. This cannot be right, however, as becomes evident in 2p10, where Spinoza argues as follows: [1] x belongs to the essence of y only if the definition of y [expressing that without which y neither can be nor be conceived] includes x – and vice versa. [2] Now the definition of a mode includes God [whose mode it is and on whom it depends], but not vice versa: the definition of God does not include the modes; he can be conceived without them. [3] Therefore, God, according to the definition given above, does not belong to the essence of a mode. What is crucial for us is step [2]: God can be conceived without modes; the modes are therefore accidents of God, not essential properties. If Spinoza asserts that they follow from the essence of God, this can only mean that they are propri of God: necessary properties that are, however, not contained in the definition or the essence of a thing and are, therefore, only accidental properties. Propria are necessary accidental properties. Spinoza is well acquainted with this terminology. In the Short Treatise I.1 he says about ‘propria’: ‘God is, indeed, not God without them, but he is not God through them, because they indicate nothing substantive, but are only like Adjectives, which require Substantives in order to be explained’ (G I, 18; C I, 64; see also the almost identical passage in I.3 of the same work [G I, 35]).

6 For a detailed account of these matters, see Viljanen’s contribution to this volume.
in their affections, then since a substance is prior in nature to its affections (by \( p_1 \)), if the affections are put to one side and [the substance] is considered in itself, i.e. (by \( d_3 \) and \( a_6 \)), considered truly, one cannot be conceived to be distinguished from another, i.e. (by \( P_4 \)), there cannot be many, but only one [of the same nature or attribute], Q.E.D. (1p5)

In this proof Spinoza makes implicit use of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles: numerically distinct entities by necessity have different properties; numerical distinctness has to be, as it were, latched onto a difference of properties. \(^7\) I would argue that Spinoza reasons in the following way. We have two kinds of properties available in the Ethics: attributes and modes. The proof, therefore, runs as follows:

1. Numerically distinct substances must differ from one another either by their attributes or by their modes.
2. However, numerically distinct substances cannot differ from one another by their modes alone.
3. Thus numerically distinct substances must differ from one another by their attributes.

Why is 2 the case? Jonathan Bennett attributes the following modal argument to Spinoza: Modes are accidental properties. But no substance can be individuated by its accidental properties, because accidental properties are properties that can be lost by a substance. Therefore it could happen that two distinct substances became identical with respect to their properties and – by the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles – thus became numerically identical. This, however, would be absurd. Bennett regards this argument as invalid, because from the fact that two substances differ only in their accidental properties, it does not follow that they could become qualitatively identical: ‘From the premiss that \( \{Fx \text{ and possibly } Fy\} \) it does not follow that possibly \( \{Fx \text{ and } Fy\} \). That move is an instance of the notorious modal fallacy of inferring from \( \{P \text{ and possibly } Q\} \) that possibly \( \{P \text{ and } Q\} \): to see the invalidity, take the case where \( Q \) is not-\( P \).’ \(^8\) I think that Bennett is on the right track here: Spinoza’s argument is based on the fact that modes are accidental properties and that no substance can be individuated by its accidental properties.

But this can be shown without having to rely on the argument that Bennett rejects. Suppose that it is an accidental property that individuates a substance. An accidental property being a property that an object does not possess in all possible worlds in which it exists, there is at

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\(^7\) In formal notation: \( \forall F \; (Fx \leftrightarrow Fy) \rightarrow (x = y) \). See also Viljanen’s contribution to this volume.

\(^8\) Bennett 1984, 68.
least one possible world in which the object exists without possessing the property. In the case under consideration, however, the property is supposed to be the property by virtue of which the object is the very individual that it is. But it seems absurd to say that there is one and the same object both in the actual world and in a possible world, in which, however, it is a different individual or no individual at all. Let us call, for example, the property that individuates Socrates ‘being-identical-to-Socrates’ [however this property may be spelled out in detail]. It does not make sense to say that there is a possible world in which Socrates exists but in which he is not identical to Socrates [although there certainly are possible worlds in which he exists and is not called ‘Socrates’]. What individuates a substance must therefore be an essential property, and only attributes are essential properties in the ontological framework of Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

So there can be at most one substance per attribute and thus at most as many substances as there are attributes. No more, but perhaps fewer. And for Spinoza there are fewer indeed, because for him there is no substance besides God. So let us now turn to Spinoza’s proof for the uniqueness of the divine substance:

Since God is an absolutely infinite being, of whom no attribute which expresses an essence of substance can be denied (by d6), and he necessarily exists [by p11], if there were any substance except God, it would have to be explained through some attribute of God, and so two substances of the same attribute would exist, which [by p5] is absurd. And so except God, no substance can be or, consequently, be conceived. For if it could be conceived, it would have to be conceived as existing. But this [by the first part of this demonstration] is absurd. Therefore, except for God no substance can be or be conceived, Q.E.D. (1p14d)

9 Keeping Spinoza’s necessitarianism in mind, we must say that possible worlds in this case are worlds that are compatible with the essential properties of God.

10 The fact that only necessary properties individuate substances is to a large extent Aristotelian and scholastic common sense [see Carriero 1995, 251]. What is new, however, is that Spinoza – just like Descartes, at least in some passages – identifies these essential properties of a substance with its *summum genus*. That is a crucial step, because for an Aristotelian there are of course different substances of the same genus. For an Aristotelian the essential properties of a substance are made up of its *species infima*: the *summum genus* at the top of the Porphyrian Tree – say, being a substance – is divided into ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’, ‘material’ is divided into ‘living’ and ‘nonliving’, ‘living’ into ‘sentient’ and ‘nonsentient’, ‘sentient’ into ‘rational’ and ‘nonrational’ (or ‘brute’). Only here, on the lowest level, do we find the essence of things, as for example in the case of a human being the essential property of being a rational, sentient, living, material substance. Not so in Descartes and Spinoza, according to whom there is no hierarchy of essential properties that could be arranged in the form of a Porphyrian Tree. The *summum genus* is identical to the *species infima*: it defines the essence of a thing.
Let us suppose that God exists; then there is a substance that by definition has all attributes – according to 1d6: ‘By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence.’ Because for Spinoza infinity implies totality, this substance takes possession, as it were, of all the attributes, so that no remainder is left to individuate any further substance. It is worth pointing out that this is a ‘top down’ and not a ‘bottom up’ proof. That is, Spinoza does not proceed in such a way that he examines the attributes in order to track down something in them that points to the fact that they are all attributes of one and the same substance. Rather he proceeds from the definition of God. From that definition it follows that all the attributes are attributes of God. If we were to limit ourselves to the investigation of the attributes alone, without invoking the definition of God, we would never discover that the attributes are attributes of the same substance; we only learn this by grasping the definition of God – and by knowing that God exists. As I said before, if all attributes are attributes of the same substance, no attribute is left to individuate a substance distinct from it.

But, so one might object, could it not be that God possesses all the attributes – say, the attributes $a$, $b$, and $c$ – and that there is another substance, distinct from God, that possesses only one attribute – say, attribute $a$? In this case, although God comprised all the attributes, there would be another substance that was essentially different from God.

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11 See for example 1p17s: ‘But I think I have shown clearly enough (see p16) that from God’s supreme power . . . infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things, have necessarily flowed, or always follow’ (italics mine). Spinoza could argue: if the infinite does not contain everything, then there is something outside of the infinite, that is, there is more than the infinite, which is absurd, because the infinite by definition is that which cannot be part of something larger. See Bennett 1984, 76.

12 The proof presupposes that God exists. But here arises a delicate problem: If God exists, we can grant that there can only be one substance. But if there are several substances, then God does not exist. It is therefore crucial for Spinoza to prove the existence of God. And he does so in 1p11. Unfortunately, this proof is based on the perfectly general proof that existence belongs to the essence of any substance, that is, that any substance necessarily exists (1p7). So the proof does not enable us decide whether God exists (and hence whether there is only one substance) or whether there are several substances (meaning that God does not exist). Spinoza seems to be well aware of this problem and tries to solve it by arguing that God has ‘more power to exist’ than any other substance with fewer attributes (see 1p11s). For this problem, see Kulstad 1996 and Della Rocca 2002. Kulstad tries to solve the problem by suggesting that God is a compound substance for Spinoza – a thesis that seems to me rather problematic, as will become apparent below. Della Rocca develops a quite elegant argument that is based on the Principle of Sufficient Reason and the idea of a ‘conceptual barrier’ between the attributes.
precisely in not having all the attributes but only one. The Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles would thereby be satisfied. The problem would not arise if Spinoza could use the premise that no substance, including God, had more than one attribute; but he clearly rejects this view.

The problem could be solved by inserting the premise that each attribute completely expresses the essence of its substance. But why should Spinoza accept this premise? He could easily derive it from the well-known scholastic doctrine of God’s simplicity, as John Carriero has pointed out. This doctrine, found, for example, in Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, says that God is devoid of any complexity or multiplicity of parts: neither does he have spatial or temporal parts, nor is he composed of essence and existence, form and matter, or act and potency, nor does the distinction of properties and the subject of properties apply to him. If, however, the distinction of properties and the subject of properties does not apply to him, then God is not only (e.g.) omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good – he is omniscience, he is omnipotence, he is perfect goodness. And this is exactly the premise that Spinoza needs for 1p14 (and 1p15): God does not have a complex essence resulting from a conjunction of all attributes \(a + b + c\), but his essence is, by virtue of his simplicity, identical to attribute \(a\), identical to attribute \(b\), identical to attribute \(c\), so that the attributes \(a\), \(b\), and \(c\) are each the essence of God. In this way it is impossible for two substances to have an attribute in common and to be nonetheless distinct by virtue of their essences.

The simplicity doctrine could be pressed into service for understanding 1p15 and 1p14. But does Spinoza actually adopt the simplicity thesis? There are some clear indications that this is the case. First, he explicitly

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13 This problem is already relevant to the first step of the monism argument, 1p5. Could it not be that there are several substances that share the same attribute if they have one attribute in common but differ by some other attributes? This objection can already be found in Leibniz (1999, 1768). Different attempts to solve this problem are discussed in Garrett 1990 and in Viljanen’s contribution to this volume.


15 According to Leftow (1990), the motive behind the simplicity thesis is the desire to preserve the idea that God is a totally independent being. If God is the creator of everything that is not identical to him and if God is not the creator of his essential properties then God’s essential properties have to be identical to God.

16 That follows, for example, from 2p1s, where Spinoza writes, ‘[s]o since we can conceive an infinite Being by attending to thought alone, Thought [by 1d4 and d6] is necessarily one of God’s infinite attributes’ [italics mine]. For more textual support of the thesis that each attribute is sufficient to conceive the essence of the divine substance, see Della Rocca 2002, 19 ff., and Crane and Sandler 2005.
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endorses the simplicity thesis in some early texts, viz., in the *Meta-
physical Thoughts*, published in 1663 (CM II.5, ‘Of God’s Simplicity’; G I, 257–8), and in a letter to Hudde of 16 April 1666; second, he argues in 1p12 and 1p13 that God is indivisible; third, he puts forward some claims in the *Ethics* that otherwise would be quite inexplicable, viz., the claims that substances and attributes are identical and that essence and existence are one and the same in the case of God.

But the simplicity thesis is not without difficulties. If God is simple, he is identical to his properties, which is already quite an odd consequence. Moreover, if God is identical to his properties, his properties are identical to each other by virtue of the transitivity of identity. If God is not only omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good,

17 Gueroult (1968, 233 ff., 446 ff.) alleges that Spinoza does not endorse the simplicity thesis in the *Ethics* any more, but I see no need to accept this view.

18 ‘Ostendendum itaque Deum non esse quid compositum, ex quo poterimus concludere ipsum esse ens simplicissimum’ (G I, 258).

19 ‘Id [viz. ens necessarium] simplex, non verò ex partibus compositum esse’ (G IV, 181).

20 ‘substantias, sive quod idem est [...] earum attributa’ (1p4), ‘Deus, sive omnia Dei attributa’ (1p19). This identity of substance and attribute follows already from the definition of “substance”: a substance is that which neither is in another nor is conceived through another. But a substance is conceived by its attribute. Thus the attribute is not anything distinct from the substance but identical to it.

21 ‘Dei existentia, ejusque essentia unum & idem sunt’ (1p20). See also ‘existentia attributorum ab eorum essentia non differat’ (Ep10, de Vries, G IV, 47). In the *Short Treatise* I.1 Spinoza uses this identification of essence and existence for a separate proof of the existence of God: ‘The essences of things are from all eternity and will remain immutable to all eternity. God’s existence is [his] essence. Therefore . . . ’ (G I, 15; C I, 61).

22 For Plantinga (1980, 47) this is an absurd consequence of the simplicity thesis:

There are two difficulties, one substantial and the other truly monumental. In the first place if God is identical with each of his properties, then each of his properties is identical with each of his properties, so that God has but one property. This seems flatly incompatible with the obvious fact that God has several properties; he has both power and mercifulness, say, neither of which is identical with the other. In the second place, if God is identical with each of his properties, then, since each of his properties is a property, he is a property – a self-exemplifying property. Accordingly God has just one property: himself. This view is subject to a difficulty both obvious and overwhelming. No property could have created the world; no property could be omniscient, or, indeed, could know anything at all. If God is a property, then he isn’t a person, but a mere abstract object; he has no knowledge, awareness, power, love or life. So taken, the simplicity doctrine seems an utter mistake.

The difficulty of God’s being a property might be mitigated if properties are not conceived as abstract objects but as ‘acts’ in the Thomistic sense. God would then be ‘pure act’ without there being a substance, different from it, in which that act would inhere. This is suggested in Rogers 2000, 27 ff.
but identical to omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness, then omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness are identical. But omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness do not seem to be the same. So how can the simplicity of God be preserved?

2. THE SIMPLICITY OF SUBSTANCE AND THE MULTIPLICITY OF ATTRIBUTES

Let us take a look at four attempts to show that the simplicity of God is compatible with the multiplicity of his attributes.

First attempt: It follows from the simplicity of God that all his properties are identical, which, however, seems wrong. But how do we know it is wrong? We know it – or think we know it – because we know that property instances in the case of finite creatures are not identical: Socrates's wisdom, at least, is not identical to his goodness. He could instantiate the one without instantiating the other. But perhaps, so the proposal goes, we are using these expressions equivocally: property A and property B could be different as regards finite creatures and apparently identical as regards God, because in the latter case ‘A’ and ‘B’ are nothing but different names for a third property C in God that is not instantiated in finite creatures. In this case it might be said that God has only property C (there is no multiplicity in him); this property C, however, is designated by a plurality of names that are transferred from the realm of finite creatures to God. In this way the essence of God is on the verge of becoming something unintelligible to us human beings. God's justice, for example, would be something completely different from human justice, for they would have nothing in common but their name.

Could this be an attractive way to understand the relation between substance and attributes in Spinoza? I do not think so, because for

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23 The idea that the multiplicity of divine attributes and the simplicity of God could be reconciled by rejecting univocity is to be found in, for example, Descartes: the perfections whose traces can be found in creatures do not univocally pertain to God, and so God remains ultimately unintelligible for finite minds [see Resp. II, AT VII 137–8]. As to the problem of Descartes’s attitude to univocity see esp. Goudriaan 1999, 213–19.

24 As, for example, Hegel ([1832] 1985, 101) thinks: ‘[The attributes] are for him [viz. Spinoza] not even moments [of the substance], because the substance is in itself the absolutely indeterminate, and the attributes, as well as the modes, are distinctions made by the external intellect’, and ‘As far as absolute indifference might seem the basic determination of the Spinozistic substance, it may be noted here that this is indeed the case in this respect that in both of them all determinations of being, as well as in general every further concrete difference of thinking and extension etc., are posited as vanished. If one stops at this abstraction, it is totally indifferent how
Spinoza the essence of God is intelligible to the highest possible degree. The attributes have a double function in the *Ethics*: they express the essence of God and are the determinables by means of which the modes—that is, the finite things—are conceived. The predicates that express the attributes are therefore used univocally in relation to God and in relation to the modes. When Spinoza writes that an attribute is ‘what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence’ (†4d4), this does not involve any subjectivization of attributes,25 because ‘what is contained objectively [that is, as representational content, AS] in the intellect must necessarily be in nature’ (†3p3d). So the essence perceived is nothing but the essence as it is in itself: ‘[B]y God’s attributes are to be understood what [by d4] expresses an essence of the Divine substance, i.e., what pertains to substance’ (†1p19d). If, however, the predicates are used univocally in relation to God and in relation to finite beings, then our old problem remains unsolved: either the attributes are identical both in God and in the realm of finite beings—which seems wrong—or they are not identical both in God and in the realm of finite beings—which seems to violate divine simplicity. How can simplicity and univocity be made compatible?

*Second attempt:* Perhaps one could distinguish between (abstract) properties and (concrete) property instances. So it could be argued that in God the property instances are identical, whereas the (abstract) properties are different and can be separately instantiated by finite beings.26 At least this view would have the consequence that God, although identical with a property, would not be an abstract object, but something concrete. But this attempt fails, too: First, because it is difficult to see why the property instances should be identical, if the properties are not. It seems that two property instances can only be identical if the properties are (at least) necessarily coextensive;27 but the problem is that they are not coextensive in the case under consideration. And if we limit this account to the *divine* property instances and say that the *divine* properties are necessarily coextensive and their instances therefore identical, it is hard to see how the univocity with the properties pertaining to finite beings can be preserved; for in this case, strangely, ‘God has divine F’ would not entail ‘God has F’. Second, the proposal fails because the ontological

this that has perished in this abyss looked like in his determinate being [*Dasein*]’ (ibid., 380).

25 *Contra* Wolfson 1934 I, 152.

26 See Bennett 1969, 628–37. A similar position can be found in Mann 1982; for criticism, see Morris 1987.

27 Necessary coextensivity is a necessary condition for property identity; it is not so clear whether it is also a sufficient condition, as Mann contends. See Davis 2001, 71–4.
separation of (abstract) properties and (concrete) property instances violates the principle of God’s independence. For if the essential properties of God were abstract entities that existed independent of their instances and if God existed only by virtue of instantiating these properties, then God’s existence would depend on something that was neither identical to God nor created by God. (God cannot be identical to these properties, because it is only due to this nonidentity that they could be excluded from God’s simple being.) But the idea that God depends on something that is not identical to him is unacceptable both to a traditional theist, for whom God is perfectly self-sufficient, and to Spinoza, for whom God can only be and be conceived through himself and cannot, therefore, depend on anything else.²⁸

Third attempt: Should one say instead that the different attributes are nothing but different aspects of what is actually one attribute and that the differences are only due to a conceptual distinction (distinctionis rationis) created by the intellect?²⁹ In this case it only seems to us that, for example, thinking and extension are two different attributes that are separately instantiable; if we had a sufficient insight into the nature of things, we would clearly and distinctly see that the apparently distinct attributes are actually one and the same attribute, seen from two (incomplete and therefore inadequate) viewpoints. This was indeed Spinoza’s position in his Metaphysical Thoughts: ‘And from this we can now clearly conclude that all the distinctions we make between the attributes of God are only distinctions of reason [distinctionis...rationis] – the attributes are not really [reverâ] distinguished from one another’ (CM II.5; GI, 259; CI, 324–5). In the Ethics, however, things are different: Here Spinoza says explicitly that different attributes ‘must be conceived to be really distinct [realiter distincta] [i.e., one may be conceived without the aid of the other]’ (i1p10s).³⁰

²⁸ Moreover, Spinoza rejects the existence of universals anyway (see 2p40s1).
²⁹ This is a view held, for example, by Crane and Sandler 2005, 197: ‘a distinction between attributes is a mere distinctio rationis and therefore not sufficient for metaphysical individuation.’
³⁰ ‘attributa realiter distincta concipientur, hoc est, unum sine ope alterius’ (i1p10s). The view that in the Ethics the difference between the attributes is merely subjective is criticised in Gueroult 1968, Appendices 3 and 4, 428–68. Even for those who do not see any simplicity thesis at work in Spinoza’s Ethics, i1p10s offers a problem concerning the compatibility between the unity of the divine substance and the plurality of its attributes, because according to the Cartesian view there is a distinctio realis if and only if two entities can exist separately from each other, and for Descartes that two entities can possibly exist separately from each other is sufficient for them to be two substances. So if the attributes are really distinct, there should be many substances – one per attribute. But for Spinoza there is only
Fourth attempt: An interesting proposal on how to solve the simplicity problem has been made by Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze suggests that the *distinctio realis* between Spinoza’s attributes should be understood along the lines of the Scotist *distinctio formalis*.$$^{31}$$ In the following I would like to take a closer look at this proposal. Duns Scotus, to whom we owe this term, distinguishes between a *distinctio realis* and a *distinctio formalis* as follows: $x$ is really distinct from $y$ if $x$ can exist without $y$, or $y$ without $x$, or both.$$^{32}$$ Moreover, there is a formal distinction between $x$ and $y$ if the definition of $x$ does not include the notion of $y$ or the definition of $y$ does not include the notion of $x$ or both.$$^{33}$$ Duns Scotus thinks it is possible that $x$ and $y$ are really identical (i.e., they cannot exist independently from each other) but formally distinct (i.e., their

one substance. Spinoza seems to be committed both to the singularity of substance and to the multiplicity of substances. What kind of tie could unify these substances into a single substance? If God is composed of several substances, his unity is only an accidental one and he is an aggregate conceived through its parts and not a substance conceived through itself. If, however, he is a substance, the attributes have to be essentially united in such a way that they are not capable of existing separately – and so are not really distinct. Della Rocca (2002) argues that many attributes can pertain to one and the same substance precisely because they are really distinct: if each attribute is conceived through itself, no attribute can exclude the other. But because each attribute expresses the complete essence of the substance, the question remains of how one and the same thing can have many essences.


$$^{32}$$ See Henninger 1989, 71.

$$^{33}$$ Henninger’s (actually more complex) definition is based on the following passage by Duns Scotus (1968, 766): ‘To include something formally means to include something in its essential ratio, so that, if a definition were assigned to the including item, the included item would be either its definition or a part of its definition. Just as the definition of goodness in general does not include wisdom, infinite goodness does not include infinite wisdom. So there is a certain formal non-identity of wisdom and goodness as far as their definition would be different if they were definable.’ ([I]ncludere formaliter est includere aliquid in ratione sua essenti"al, ita quod si definitio includentis assignaretur, inclusum esset definitio, vel pars definitionis. Sic autem definitio bonitatis in comuni non habet sapientiam in se: ita nec infinita infinitam. Est igitur aliqua non identitas formalis sapientiae & bonitatis, inquantum earum essent distinctae definitiones, se essent definibiles.’)
definitions can be conceived independent from each other – mutually or unilaterally). He applies this distinction of *distinctio realis* and *distinctio formalis* to the divine attributes and believes that in this way he can salvage divine simplicity from the threat that is posed to it by the multiplicity of divine attributes. He argues as follows: the divine attributes are formally distinct, that is, they can be defined independently from one another. To God, however, they only appertain to the mode of infinity and by virtue of this infinity are identical in God. Their *formal* distinction, however, remains uninvolved because ‘infinity does not destroy the formal definition of that to which it is added.’

Let us ask first, Why are the attributes, for Duns Scotus, identical by virtue of divine infinity? The reason for this lies in the fact that for Duns Scotus the simplicity of God is entailed by the infinity of God. The proof that Duns Scotus presents in the *Tractatus de primo principio* for that claim takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Assume that the infinite God is a whole constituted of parts. If so, the parts are either finite or infinite. They cannot be finite, however, because from something finite nothing infinite can be composed. They also cannot be infinite, because the part has to be smaller than the whole and an infinite is not smaller than another infinite. Thus God is not a whole composed of parts, and hence must be simple [Q.E.D.]. If God is simple, there is no real multiplicity in him. Accordingly, the infinite divine attributes cannot be parts that constitute God. So if we transpose a property, for example wisdom, into the mode of infinity – that is, if we conceive it as appertaining to an infinite being – then no second property in God would fail to be really identical to the first. Thus the divine attributes are really

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34 ‘Infinitas enim non destruit formaliter rationem illius, cui additur’ (ibid.).
35 See also 1p158: ‘If corporeal substance is infinite, they say, let us conceive it to be divided in two parts. Each part will be either finite or infinite. If the former, then an infinite is composed of two finite parts, which is absurd. If the latter [NS: that is, if each part is infinite], then there is one infinite twice as large as another, which is also absurd.’ Spinoza’s opponents want to show by the following argument that space cannot be an attribute of God: [a] space is divisible, [b] nothing that is divisible can be infinite, [c] God is infinite, [d] therefore space is not an attribute of God. Spinoza accepts [b] but denies [a]. Therefore space can be an attribute of God.
36 ‘Ex infinitate sequitur omnimoda simplicitas. Prima [simplicitas] intrinseca in essentia – quia aut componeretur ex finitis in se aut ex infinitis in se; si primum, igitur finitum; si secundum, igitur pars [non] minor toto’ [Duns Scotus 1982, 134–5]. However, the premise that a part has to be smaller than the whole and that therefore nothing infinite can be a part of the infinite seems to be a highly problematic view, as Cantor has argued: the set of all even integers is a subset of the set of all integers – but both sets have the same cardinality because there is a bijection from one set to the other.
identical by virtue of God’s infinity. But Duns Scotus emphasises that nevertheless they remain at the same time formally distinct:

I admit that the notion \([ratio]\) of [divine] wisdom is infinite, and so is the notion of [divine] goodness, and that therefore this notion is identical to that, for an opposite is not compatible with the infinity of the other extreme. Nevertheless this notion is not formally that one. For it does not follow: “It is really identical to the other, therefore it is formally identical to it.” There is, indeed, a true identity of A and B without A formally including the notion of B.\(^{37}\)

The formal difference of divine attributes is, however, not to be mistaken for a conceptual difference, viz., with differences that exist only \(in\ m\ en\ t\ e\); rather, the different predications have different ‘truth makers’ in the thing itself:

A definition does not only signify a notion produced by the intellect but a quiddity of the thing: There is, therefore, a formal nonidentity on the part of the thing. By this I mean that the intellect that composes ‘Wisdom is not formally Goodness’ does not create the truth of this composite by its act of composing, but it finds the extremes – whose composition brings forth the true composite – in its object.\(^{38}\)

The crucial question is, How is it possible that the attributes are really identical and formally distinct? Duns Scotus’s radical thesis seems to commit him to suspending the converse of the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles – the Principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals\(^ {39}\) – so that it is possible that, although \(x\) and \(y\) are identical, \(x\) has different properties from \(y\).\(^ {40}\) In this way it becomes possible that God is identical to his wisdom and identical to his goodness, and hence – by the transitivity of identity – that God’s wisdom and God’s goodness are really identical (that they are one and the same \(res\), not numerically different constituents of God), but that nevertheless wisdom and goodness are

\(^{37}\) ‘[C]oncedo, qu`od ratio sapientiae est infinita, & ratio bonitatis, & ide`o haec ratio est illa per identitatem; quia oppositum non stat cum infinitate alterius extremi: tamen haec ratio non est formaliter illa. Non enim sequitur, est ver`e idem alteri, ergo formaliter idem eodem. Est enim vera identitas A, & B, absque hoc qu`od A includat formaliter rationem ipsius B’ (Duns Scotus 1968, 770).

\(^{38}\) ‘[D]efinitio non tant`um indicat rationem causatam ab intellectu, sed quidditatem rei: ergo non est [read: est non-] identitas formalis ex parte rei. Et intelligo sic, qu`od intellectus componens istam, sapientia non est bonitas formaliter, non causat actu suo collatiuo veritatem istius compositionis: sed in obiecto inuenit extremu, ex quorum compositione fit actus verus’ (Duns Scotus 1968, 766).

\(^{39}\) In formal notation: \((x = y) \rightarrow (\forall F) (Fx \leftrightarrow Fy)\).

\(^{40}\) This step also has some benefits for Scotus’s Trinitarian theology; see Iribarren 2002.
formally distinct, because they have separate definitions. So from their real identity it does not follow that they are indistinguishable.  

I propose that we read Spinoza as endorsing such a conception of real identity and formal distinction. Let us take a closer look at Spinoza writes: ‘[A]lthough two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct (i.e., one may be conceived without the aid of the other), we still can not infer from that that they constitute two beings, or two different substances.’ Within a Cartesian framework this statement would not make any sense. If two beings can be conceived separately they are really distinct; but to be really distinct means for Descartes to be able to exist separately, and this in turn is the criterion for there being numerically distinct substances. But Spinoza's statement begins to make sense once we take ‘real difference’ to mean the same as the Scotist ‘formal distinction’: formal distinction in no way entails numerical difference among substances.

The upshot of all this is that the attributes of the substance, for example, extension and thought, are formally distinct, for each attribute is ‘conceived through itself’: its definition does not include the notion of the other. Therefore it seems as if they could exist independent of each other as is alleged in Cartesian substance dualism – as if they were really (that is, numerically) distinct. And we can indeed examine the attributes themselves as thoroughly as we like; nothing in them will reveal their identity. But if we know that they are attributes of God and that God is simple, we can conclude that the attributes are really identical – God is extension, God is thinking, etc. – without abolishing thereby their formal distinction.

But why then does Spinoza appeal to a ‘real distinction’ and not so much as mention a ‘formal distinction’ between attributes? Is our hypothesis not falsified at the outset by the wording of the text? I do not

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41 See Adams 1986, esp. 417.
42 Perhaps it might be surmised that Spinoza in fact does not reject the Principle of Indiscernibility of Identicals but only abandons the transitivity of identity. Spinoza, however, accepts the latter explicitly – at least at the time he wrote the Metaphysical Thoughts: ‘As to my saying that the Son of God is the Father himself, I think it follows clearly from this axiom, namely, that things which agree with a third thing agree with one another’ (Ep12A, Spinoza 1995, 108). It is true, however, that if Spinoza rejects the Principle of Indiscernibility of Identicals, the transitivity of identity has to be limited to establish numerical identity; it must not encroach on cases of formal identity. It should be noted, by the way, that the Principle of Indiscernibility of Identicals should not be mistaken for its converse, the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles. As we have seen, Spinoza makes use of this principle in the first step of his argument for monism (1p5).
43 See Descartes’s Meditation 3 [AT VII, 78] and Principles of Philosophy 1.60 [AT VIII/1, 28; CSM I, 213].
think so. For a formal distinction is a real distinction in the wider sense, that is, a distinction that has its foundation in the things itself and that is not only imposed on them by us. As stated already, ‘A definition does not only signify a notion produced by the intellect but a quiddity of the thing. There is, therefore, a formal nonidentity on the part of the thing.’ This is why some followers of Duns Scotus took the formal distinction as a species of the real distinction.

3. SPINOZA’S IDENTITY THEORY OF MIND AND BODY

It may seem that the question of how to bring divine simplicity into agreement with the multiplicity of divine attributes is a rather remote theological conundrum that is of little philosophical interest. Even in contemporary theology the simplicity thesis cannot be said to enjoy excessive popularity. But as a committed substance monist, Spinoza is able to derive from the simplicity thesis a theory about the relation between body and mind in finite beings that is not without interest and that I would like to address briefly in this last section. An infinity of attributes pertain to the divine substance, of which, however, we only know two: thought and extension. How are human beings related to these attributes? Human beings obviously are not substances – there is only one, viz., the divine substance. Because there is nothing apart from substances and modes, human beings must be modes: modes of the divine substance. But which attributes are they modifications of? Human beings have both physical and mental properties, and so their physical properties are modifications of the attribute of divine extension, and their mental properties are modifications of the attribute of divine thinking – portions of divine thinking, as it were. Because thinking and extension are identical in God, the same is true for the modes of thought and extension that constitute human beings: each mental property is identical with a physical property (and vice versa). So the thesis of divine simplicity, together with substance monism, entails an identity theory of mind and body – a theory that enjoys great popularity in the contemporary philosophy of mind. So the question arises of whether Spinoza could make an interesting contribution to the debate.

For identity theorists, mental phenomena, such as pain, are identical with neuronal states – say, with the firing of C-fibres. Thus, statements about pain refer to the same entity as statements about the firing of

44 ‘Definitio autem non tantum indicat rationem causatam ab intellectu, sed quidditatem rei: ergo non est identitas formalis ex parte rei’ (Duns Scotus 1968, 766).
46 On Spinoza’s identity theory of mind and body and its relation to contemporary discussions, see Pauen 2003.
C-fibres. Yet pain and the firing of C-fibres seem to be very different. This difference is explained by the identity theorists as a difference in the kind of access to one and the same thing. On the one hand, we have a direct, ‘inner’ access to the firing of our C-fibres that is not mediated by outer perceptions: this is the phenomenon of pain. On the other hand, we have access to the firing of our C-fibres via outer perception and scientific instruments – through an objectifying knowledge of our C-fibres. The identity theory has the advantage that it can solve the problem of mind–body interaction in a particularly simple and elegant way. If a mental state is identical to a physical state it is hardly surprising that it is able to cause another physical state. The dualist, in contrast, faces a serious problem here. The problem is not so much – as is often assumed – that mental and physical properties are so heterogeneous that their causal interaction becomes a mystery. That would only be a problem for someone who advocates a ‘transmission’ theory of causality according to which the causal agent literally passes on one of its properties to the object in which the effect appears – as, for instance, a billiard ball seems to communicate its movement to another billiard ball through hitting it. It is clear that the mind has no properties that the body could employ and vice versa. But there is no compelling reason to adhere to such a transmission theory of causality; even our paradigm dualist Descartes does not seem to have endorsed it. The real problem of mind–body interaction is due to the laws of conservation: if there is only a certain quantity of energy in the physical world, which remains constant, it seems impossible to add any energy from the outside by way of causal influence from the mind, or to discharge any energy to the outside by affecting the mind. For the identity theorist no such problem arises; but there are problems of a different kind to be dealt with. If we say that two representations that seemingly refer to different objects are in truth nothing but two different perspectives on one and the same object, it must be possible to explain how these different perspectives are brought about. If we say that the morning star and the evening star are in truth one and the same object, it must be possible to explain why the same astronomical object appears at one time as the brightest star in the morning sky, and at another time as the brightest star in the evening sky. In the case of the evening star and the morning star, astronomy provides us with the required explanation. But it is extremely difficult to offer a similar explanation of how pain and the firing of C-fibres are related. Because most contemporary identity theorists are physicalists, they would have to tell a physicalist story about why the firing of C-fibres, ‘seen from the inside’, is pain, that is, why pain feels like it does. That, however, seems a difficult task. Usually we proceed as follows when it comes to reductive explanations: if we want to say, for example, that water is identical
to \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \), we first determine the causal role that water has and then show that \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \) can play exactly that role. But if we say that pain is identical to the firing of C-fibres, a similar procedure does not seem to be viable, because pain cannot be completely determined by its causal role. Pain seems to have an intrinsic, qualitative aspect that cannot be substituted by some nonmental causal surrogate. As long as the identity theorist is unable to explain this qualitative aspect of mental properties by a physicalist story it seems that, after all, pain and the firing of C-fibres turn out to be two essentially different events or objects.

Spinoza’s theory can be taken as an attempt to benefit from the advantages of an identity theory without accepting its pitfalls. Mental properties and physical properties are, on this view, really identical, so the problem of how mind and body could possibly interact does not arise. Yet at the same time they are formally distinct and neither can be reduced to the other, so Spinoza can do justice to the dualistic intuition. If one and the same thing seems to be a mental item from one perspective and a physical item from another perspective, then, as was said above, something should explain how one and the same thing can appear in these two ways. If, however, it is possible that one and the same thing can have two natures, a unifying explanation need not – indeed, cannot – be given. But even if it were conceded that it is possible that one and the same thing has two natures – that something can be really one and formally multiple – the question would still remain as to why one should plead for identity, given the different natures. Whoever does not accept the simplicity of God and the modal status of human beings may still argue that the identity thesis is the best way to explain the causal interaction between mind and body.

It may be objected that Spinoza denies any such interaction, for no mode pertaining to one attribute can be the cause of a mode pertaining to another attribute, as he makes clear in 3p2: ‘The Body cannot determine the Mind to thinking, and the Mind cannot determine the Body to motion, to rest or to anything else (if there is anything else).’ The reason is as follows. If A is the cause of B, B is conceived through A. But each attribute is conceived through itself and cannot contain any conceptual reference to another attribute. Causal closure pertains to each attribute. This has as a consequence that no modes of different attributes can causally interact with each other. What the identity theory can explain, however, is their apparent interaction in the case of mind and body. If it seems that a mode of thought A causes a mode of extension B, the mode

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47 Thus for example Swinburne 1997, 45–61. A useful overview of the topic is given in Pauen 2002, 188–216.
of thought A that apparently causes the mode of extension B is actually identical with the mode of extension A.*48

The idea of applying the Scotist theory of formal distinction to the mind–body relation can already be found in Johannes Caterus, who observes in his objections to Descartes's Meditations that for Duns Scotus separate conceivability does not entail the possibility of separate existence:

His [Descartes's] proof of the supposed distinction between the soul and the body appears to be based on the fact that the two can be distinctly conceived apart from each other. Here I refer the learned gentleman to Scotus, who says that for one object to be distinctly conceived apart from another, there need only be what he calls a *formal and objective* distinction between them (such a distinction is, he maintains, intermediate between a *real* distinction and a *conceptual* distinction). The distinction between God's justice and his mercy is of this kind. For, says Scotus, 'The formal concepts [*rationes formales*] of the two are distinct prior to any operation of the intellect, so that one is not the same as the other. Yet it does not follow that because justice and mercy can be conceived apart from one another they can therefore exist apart.' (Meditations, Obj. I; AT VII 100; CSM II, 72–3)

This passage does not tell us whether Caterus would like to embrace the thesis of real unity and formal distinctness of body and mind; at least he asserts it as a possibility in order to show that Descartes's argument for the real distinction of mind and body is not conclusive. Descartes answers that for him there is no formal distinction as a distinction *sui generis.*49 Spinoza, however, whom we know to have been a diligent

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48 It could be argued that Spinoza should accept the possibility of causal interaction between body and mind if he endorses an identity theory, because in this case there is no good reason to consider this interaction as mere speciousness (see Delahunty 1985, 197). Della Rocca, however, objects that for Spinoza causal contexts are 'referentially opaque', so that coreferential expressions cannot be substituted. See Della Rocca 1996a, Ch. 7.

49 In his answer to Caterus, Descartes identifies 'formal distinction' with 'modal distinction' (*Resp.* I; AT VII, 120–21; CSM II, 85–6), that is, with a distinction between two modes, in which each mode can be completely conceived without the other, but in which neither can be conceived without a third that in its turn is completely intelligible without the modes, viz., the substance whose modes they are [Descartes's example: *figura* and *motus* of a thing]. Later on, he revises this account and identifies 'formal distinction' with 'conceptual distinction' (*distinctio rationis*), that is, with a distinction in which neither of the *distinguenda* can be completely conceived without the other [Descartes's new example: *substantia* and *duratio*]. (See Principles of Philosophy 1.62; AT VIII, 30; CSM I, 214–15 and the letter to ***, 1645 or 1646; AT IV, 349.) Descartes's views are discussed in Justin Skirry 2004, 121–44.
reader of Descartes's work, may have taken up Caterus's hint and drawn his own conclusions from it. At least this passage shows that Scotist ideas were by no means unknown in Spinoza's time, so that Spinoza may very well have been acquainted with them without ever having read any of Duns Scotus's texts.⁵⁰ ⁵¹

⁵⁰ According to Ludger Honnefelder (2005, 132), the seventeenth century was 'the “golden age” of Scotism'.

⁵¹ I would like to thank Valtteri Viljanen (and the ‘Rationalist Circle’ at Turku), Mike Stange, and Sasha Newton for help and advice.