

Spinoza and the Deification of Existence (03.21.06)

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*Ego sum qui sum, Ait: sic dices filiis Israel; qui est misit me ad vos (Exod. III, 14)*

*In die illa erit [Dominus] unus, et erit nomen eius unum (Zach. XIV, 9)*

Introduction<sup>1</sup>

What is, for Spinoza, the relation between God's existence and the divine attributes? Given Spinoza's claims that there are intimate connections between God's essence and his existence – "God's essence and his existence are one and the same" (E1p20) – and between God's essence and the attributes – "By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence" (E1d4), we would naturally expect that by transitivity, there is a significant relation between God's *existence* and *the attributes*. Yet, as far as I know, there is little, if any, attempt in the existing literature to explicate such a relation, and it is one of my aims in this study to fill this lacuna. In this paper I will suggest and examine the claim that for Spinoza God is nothing but existence, and that the divine attributes are just fundamental kinds of existence (or the fundamental ways by which the intellect perceives existence).

Another topic, which is commonly neglected in the existing literature on Spinoza, is the metaphysics of Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise*. Since, to my mind, Spinoza's claims in the TTP are carefully formulated in order to avoid political problems, one can understand the tendency to avoid a text in which Spinoza intentionally uses equivocations in order to communicate his views. Yet, I do believe that there are quite a few metaphysical issues that are indispensably illuminated by the claims of the TTP, and quite a few metaphysical issues that are not adequately treated in the

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<sup>1</sup> NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS USED \*\*\* I am indebted to Josef Stern and Lukas Muehlethaler for several helpful conversations on the topic of this paper, and to Hillel Braude, Lukas Muehlethaler \*\*\* for their helpful comments on this paper.

*Ethics*, and are either elaborated in some detail in the TTP or are clarified by comparison with the TTP. One such an issue is Spinoza's view of laws of nature. Professor Curley's work is clearly the most important exception to the common neglect of the metaphysics of the TTP.<sup>2</sup> Given the importance of laws of nature to Professor Curley's interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics, we can easily understand why he is has been so attentive to this text. But Curley's discussion of Spinoza's metaphysical views at the TTP go much beyond the issue of the laws of nature, as one can see from a highly important two-part study which he published about fifteen years ago.<sup>3</sup> This is a *very* helpful and rich study. Naturally, there are some further connections between the metaphysical doctrines of the TTP and the *Ethics* that need to be explored, such as, (i) Spinoza's claim in the TTP that effects are *propria* of their causes, and (ii) the change in Spinoza's view of the way human beings, and in general, finite things, can imitate God. In the current paper I will explore one such connection, i.e., Spinoza's identification of God's essence and existence.

In the first part of the paper I provide some background for Spinoza's brief discussion in the TTP of God's essence and name by studying the claims of Maimonides in the *Guide of the Perplexed* that God's true essence is necessary existence, and that this essence is denoted by the ineffable divine Hebrew name of God, the Tetragrammaton (YHVH). In the second part of the paper I point out similar claims Spinoza present in the TTP, and show his implicit, but clear, reference to Maimonides' discussion in the *Guide*. In the third part, I examine Spinoza's conflicting claims in the *Ethics* about the relationship between God's essence and existence. In some places Spinoza claims that God's essence and existence are fully identical, but in other passages he makes the apparently much more tame claim that God's essence *involves* existence (E1p7d and E1p11d), which seems to

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<sup>2</sup> Another notable exception Miguel Beltrán's article, "The God of the TTP", *North American Spinoza Society Monograph* 3 (1995), pp. 23-33.

<sup>3</sup> See Curley, "Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece: Spinoza and the Science of Hermeneutics" in Graeme Hunter (ed.), *Spinoza: The Enduring Question* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. \*\*, and Curley, "Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (II): The *Theological-Political Treatise* as a Prolegomenon to the *Ethics*" in

imply that there is more to God's essence than mere existence. I show that Spinoza's talk of God's essence involving existence does not exclude the identification of essence and existence, and that identifies God's essence with self-necessitated existence, or eternity. In the fourth part I turn to the relation between the divine attributes and God's existence. I will argue that for Spinoza the attributes are ways of conceiving (eternal) existence. Finally, I will attempt to explain what brought Spinoza to *deify* existence.

Part I: "In that Day shall God be One, and his Name One"- Maimonides on God's Name and Essence.

1.1 Before we delve into the texts, let me suggest a few distinctions between various views on the issue of the relation between essence and existence in God. The view I suspect both Maimonides and Spinoza subscribe to can be termed the divine essence-existence Identity Thesis.

Identity Thesis (IT): *God's essence is existence and nothing but existence.*<sup>4</sup>

We should distinguish the Identity Thesis from a much more common view according to which God's essence *contains* existence, or (which I take to be roughly the same) that existence *belongs to*, or *is part of*, God's essence. The latter view allows for the possibility (though does not demand) that there is more to God's essence than bare existence (e.g., God's essence *may* include omniscience, omnipotence, etc.). I will term this view divine existence in essence Containment Thesis.

Containment Thesis (CT): *God's essence contains existence.*

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J.A. Cover and Mark Kulstad (eds.), *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), pp. 109-59.

<sup>4</sup> A variant of the identity thesis may state the God's essence is *necessary* existence. For a brief discussion of that version, see note \* below.

The Identity Thesis entails the Containment Thesis but not the other way around, i.e., if God's essence contains existence, it seems to be equally possible that God's essence contains other attributes as well (in which case IT would not obtain), or that it does not contain any such attributes (in which case, IT would obtain).

What is common to IT and CT is that they make God's existence due to its own essence and independent from any other fact. The Identity Thesis is much bolder than the Containment Thesis, since it rejects the inclusion of traditional attributes (such as omniscience and omnipotence) in God's essence. Furthermore, the Identity Thesis seems to be on the brink of pantheism. If God *is* existence, it would seem that whatever exists is, in some way, God, or in God.<sup>5</sup> The Containment Thesis which is more likely to appeal to religious orthodoxy runs into a different risk. If God's essence includes, in addition to existence, some other attributes, we may have to compromise the *simplicity* of God's essence. For most medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers, the concern for divine simplicity was of utmost importance insofar as it clearly distinguished them from Christianity and the trinity.<sup>6</sup>

1.2 According to Maimonides we can adequately ascribe attributes to God only by one of two ways.

Every attribute that we predicate of Him is an attribute of action, or if the attribute is intended for the apprehension of His essence and not of His actions, it signifies the negation of the privation of the attribute in question. (GP I 58 | P I 136)

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<sup>5</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 3, 4: "Since unspecified existence [*esse cui nulla fit additio*] is existence in general [*esse commune*] and belongs to everything, the word 'God' would mean an existent in general, and would name anything. Now this is false, as the book of *Wisdom* shows: *they invested stocks and stones with incommunicable name*" (English translation by the Blackfriars (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964-80). See the end of the article for Aquinas' response to this objection.

<sup>6</sup> On the simplicity of divine essence in Maimonides, see *Guide* I 60 (P I 146-7).

We may ascribe to God attributes of action that indicate God's relation to the world, but not his essence (e.g., 'the Creator', 'the Lord'), or we can use grammatically affirmative sentences if we mean by them only to deny the privation of an opposite attribute (such as in saying that "God is one" to signify the denial of multiplicity). In either case, we do not attain any positive knowledge of God's essence, even not by analogy.<sup>7</sup> Yet, for Maimonides, the understanding that certain attributes cannot belong to God's essence is an important intellectual achievement, and thus the philosopher who is able to advance in negating attributes of God is getting closer to the knowledge of God by this negative process (GP I 59 | P I 137-9). Ultimately, says Maimonides, the most adequate praise for God is silence, as the Psalmist says: "Silence is praise to Thee" (Ps. LXV, 2).

In this context, Maimonides addresses the issue of God's existence:

It is known that existence is an accident attaching to what exists. For this reason it is something that is superadded to the quiddity of what exists. This is clear and necessary with regard to everything the existence of which has a cause.... As for that which has no cause for its existence, there is only God, may He be exalted and glorified, who is like that. For this is the meaning of our saying about Him, may He be exalted, that His existence is necessary. Accordingly, *His existence is identical with His essence and His true reality, and His essence is His existence*. Thus His essence does not have an accident attaching to it when it exists, in which case its existence would be a notion that is superadded to it. For His existence is necessary always; it is not something that may come suddenly to Him, nor an accident that may attain Him. Consequently He exists, but not through existence other than His essence; and similarly He lives, but not through life; He is powerful, but not through power; He knows, but not through knowledge. (GP I 57 | P I 132)

Maimonides begins the passage with an appeal - "It is known that..." - to the Avicennian distinction between the *necessary of existence* and the *possible of existence*. Avicenna defines the necessary of existence

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas develops his account of the attributes as analogous, partly in criticism of Maimonides' more radical position which states that there is nothing in common between God and created things. See *Summa Theologiae* Ia Q. 13, articles 2 and 5.

as an entity whose inexistence yields an impossibility (insofar as its very essence is existence).<sup>8</sup> A possible of existence is an entity whose inexistence does not yield an impossibility (but is also not ruled out of existence merely by virtue of its essence). Since the necessary of existence exists by virtue of its mere essence, it is uncaused. According to Ibn Sina things that are possible of existence are in a state of a delicate equilibrium as long as only their essences are considered, since these essences neither support nor reject their coming into being. Hence, things that are possible of existence need an external cause in order to bring them into existence and break the equilibrium.<sup>9</sup>

Maimonides follows Ibn Sina in claiming that in God's case there is no distinction between essence and existence, and hence that unlike all other beings, existence is not an accident which happens to God, or is superadded to his essence. A reader who pays close attention to the very end of the passage just cited "He exists but not through existence" - might get the impression that by putting 'existence' on a par with attributes like 'powerful' Maimonides actually rejects the identification of existence with God's essence (and hence, flatly contradicts himself).<sup>10</sup> This is, however, a premature and imprecise conclusion, since the existence through which, Maimonides says, God does not exist, is the existence with which we are acquainted, i.e., the existence of things that are possible of existence. The existence of the necessary of existence is completely alien to the notion of existence with which we are familiar. That the utterly-other-existence of the necessary of existence is the essence of God, becomes clear when Maimonides turns to the issue of divine names.

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<sup>8</sup> "The necessary of existence is that existent which cannot be supposed non-existent without the occurrence of an impossibility" (Ibn Sina, *al-najat*, ed. M.S. Kurdi, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cairo, 1938), p. 224, translated in George F. Hourani, "Ibn Sina on Necessary and Possible Existence" *Philosophical Forum* 4 (1972), p. 79. All further quotations from Ibn Sina are from this translation by Hourani.

<sup>9</sup> "The Possible of existence enters into existence only by a cause which makes its existence outweigh its non-existence" (*al-Risala al-arshiyya* in "Ibn Sina on Necessary and Possible Existence", 77). Cf. pp. 83-4.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, some of the medieval commentators on the *Guide* suggested that the whole point of that chapter is to reject the ascription the three attributes of 'existence', 'unity', and 'being in all times' to God's essence. See *Shem Tor* and *Efodi* (Profiat Duran) ad loc.

## 1.3

All the names of God, may He be exalted, that are to be found in any of the books derive from actions. There is nothing secret in this matter. The only exception is one name: namely, *Yod, He, Vav, He*. This is the name of God, may He be exalted, that has been originated without any derivation, and for this reason it is called the *articulated name*. This means that this name gives a clear unequivocal indication of His essence, may He be exalted (GP I 61 | P I 147).<sup>11</sup>

In the lines that follow Maimonides explains that all the other names of God, even the name that is uttered instead of the Tetragrammaton due to the prohibition on pronouncing the latter (a name which is commonly translated as ‘the Lord’ or the Latin, ‘*Dominus*’), signify only God’s actions or relation to the world, but not God’s essence. What is then the essence signified merely by the Tetragrammaton? Maimonides answers,

There can be no doubt about the fact that this great name, which as you know is not pronounced except in the *Sanctuary* by the *sanctified Priests of the Lord* and only in *the benediction of the Priests* and by *the High Priest upon the day of fasting*, is indicative of a notion with reference to which there is no association between God, may He be exalted, and what is other than He. *Perhaps it indicates the notion of necessary existence*, according to the [Hebrew] language, of which we today know only a very scant portion and also with regard to its pronunciation. Generally speaking, the greatness of this name and the prohibition against pronouncing it are due to *its being indicative of the essence of Him, may He be exalted, in such a way that none of the created things is associated with him in this indication* (GP I 61 | P I 148. Italics mine)

Maimonides’ initial hesitance (“perhaps it indicates...”) to claim explicitly that the Tetragrammaton indicates necessary existence is overcome at the end of his discussion of the topic. Here he states briefly and clearly:

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. GP I 61 (P I 149): “Thus it has become clear to you that *the articulated name* is the *name having four letters* and that it alone is indicative of the essence without associating any other notion with it. For this reason the Sages have said of it that is the name *that is peculiar to Me [sbmi ba-meyubad li]*”.

He, May He be exalted, has no *name* that is not derivative except the *name having four letters*, which is *the articulated name*. This name is not indicative of an attribute but of simple existence and nothing else. Now absolute existence implies that He shall always be, I mean He who is necessarily existent. Understand the point at which this discourse has finally arrived (GP I 63 | P I 156).

The view of the Tetragrammaton as indicating simple existence<sup>12</sup> has an intuitive grammatical appeal. There is no doubt that this name comes from the Hebrew verb ‘*Hayab*’, whose meaning is being. (In fact, this is the precise Hebrew equivalent of ‘to be’).

In this context one would expect Maimonides to explain God’s response when he is asked by Moses what should Moses say to the children of Israel were they to ask him what is the name of God. God’s answer “*Eheye asher eheye*” (Ex. III 14) is translated in the King James version as “I am that I am” (probably, following the Vulgate’s “*Ego sum qui sum*”), a translation which is at least questionable since the verb “*Eheye*” appears to be either in the future or in the conjunctive, rather than in the present.<sup>13</sup> Be that as it may, Maimonides does not fail to seize the opportunity and explain this expression precisely as we would expect him to do: “*Eheye asher eheye*” indicates the *strict identity of essence and existence in God*. It is, *existence being predicated of existence*.

[T]he first word is *I am* considered as a term to which a predicate is attached; the second word that is predicated of the first is also *I am*, that is, identical with the first. Accordingly, scripture makes, as it were, a clear statement that the subject is identical with the predicate.

This makes it clear that He is existent not through existence. This notion may be

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<sup>12</sup> According to the passage just cited the Tetragrammaton signifies “simple existence”, whereas the previous passage claim that it signifies “necessary existence.” Since the Tetragrammaton is said to indicate God’s essence, it would turn out that if this essence is “simple existence”, then God would be necessary of existence, whereas if this essence is “necessary existence” God would be *necessarily* necessary existent. In most (but not all) modern modal logics the two claims are equivalent (in those which accept that  $(p \rightarrow p)$ ). I doubt, however, that Maimonides really meant to stress that God is necessarily necessary existent (since in such a case the process of adding necessity operators should proceed infinitely) or that he even considered the notion of contingent necessity to be intelligible.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Jerome’s use of the present tense was meant to communicate eternal existence.



summarized and interpreted in the following way; the existent that is the existent, or the necessary existent. This is what the demonstration necessarily leads to: namely, to the view that there is a necessary existent thing that has never been, or ever will be, nonexistent (GP I 63 | P I 154-5).

The boldness of the claim that God is “the existent that is the existent” is astonishing. Maimonides claims explicitly that the predicate “is existent” is strictly identical with its subject. *Maimonides’ God is simple and necessary existence*. This bold view of Maimonides becomes all the more fascinating when he turns to expound the apocalyptic biblical verse which promises that at the end of days “God shall be one and His name one”(Zech. XIV 9). Maimonides explains this verse as envisioning a period in which human beings will be able to conceive God by his unique name – which indicates simple existence – and not through any other name or attribute which are mere products of the popular imagination.<sup>14</sup>

1.4 Let us stop here for a brief summary. We have seen that Maimonides adopts the Avicennian view that God is the only being whose essence is existence. According to Maimonides, this unique essence of God is indicated by the Tetragrammaton. From the passages we have studied so far we can, I believe, conclude that Maimonides endorses the strong identity thesis, i.e., that God’s essence is simple and undifferentiated existence.<sup>15</sup>

## Part II: “*Et revera*”: Spinoza on the Tetragrammaton and God’s Essence

2.1 The thirteenth chapter of Spinoza’s *Theological Political Treatise* aims at showing that scripture demands not the acquisition of intellectual knowledge of God, but obedience. In order to support this claim Spinoza cites Exodus VI, 3, in which God tells Moses that he was not known to

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<sup>14</sup> *Guide* I 61 (P I 148-9).

<sup>15</sup> Since for Maimonides there is no analogy between the existence of things which are possible of existence and that of the necessary of existence it is not clear to what extent we may render the latter notion intelligible. There is some indication (\*\*\*) that Maimonides understood the existence of the necessary of existent as

the patriarchs by the name *Jehovah*, but only as *El Shaddai*. Spinoza notes the difference between the two names – the former, but not the latter, indicates God’s essence – and argues that the case of the patriarchs shows that piety and obedience are not dependent upon achieving precise knowledge of God (since the patriarchs lacked such knowledge). Let us have a closer look at Spinoza’s claims about the denotation of the Tetragrammaton.

[I]t should be observed that in Scripture no word but ‘Jehovah’ is to be found to indicate the absolute essence of God [*Dei absolutam essentiam*], as unrelated to created beings. That is why the Hebrews contend that this is, strictly speaking, God’s only name, the other names being forms of address [*appellativa*]; and it is a fact [*et revera*] that the other names of God, whether substantive or adjectival, are attributes belonging to God insofar as he is considered as related to created things, or manifested through them. For example, take *El* ... which signifies nothing other ‘powerful’, as all agree and belongs to God only through his pre-eminence, in the way that the term ‘Apostle’ belongs to Paul. The qualities of his potency are explicated by additional adjectives, such as the great, the awful, the just, the mighty one *El* [*ut El magnus, tremendous, Justus, misericors*].<sup>16</sup>

Two observations seem to be in place here. First, Spinoza’s concurrence (“and it is a fact”) with the claim that only the Tetragrammaton indicates God’s essence is not demanded by his polemical objectives. His argument would have held even had he not endorsed “the Hebrews” claim, i.e., had he just showed that according to the biblical authors God’s essence was not known to the obedient and pious patriarchs. Therefore, I suggest that we should take the “*et revera*” seriously as communicating Spinoza’s genuine agreement with this interpretation of the Tetragrammaton, especially, if the ensuing view of God’s essence would turn out to be in agreement with Spinoza’s exposition of his metaphysics in some other texts.

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atemopral and as taking such an existence to be beyond the limits of human reason insofar as temporality is an essential feature of human thought.

<sup>16</sup> G III/169/7-18 (Shirley 154-5). Cf. Spinoza’s claim in the second chapter of the *Theological Political Treatise* (G III/38/25) that the Tetragrammaton “expresses the three tenses of ‘to exists’ in Hebrew.”

3.2 The second observation which we should not miss is the strong similarity between Spinoza's and Maimonides' claims about the meaning of the Tetragrammaton. Although many medieval commentators with whom Spinoza was acquainted adopted similar explanations of the meaning of the Tetragrammaton and of "*Ebeye asher Ebeye*" (such as, Ibn-Ezra, Gersonides, and Aquinas<sup>17</sup>), there is little doubt that Spinoza relates here primarily to Maimonides' discussion in *Guide* I, 61. Spinoza's claims that the Tetragrammaton "is, strictly speaking, God's only name" and that all "other names of God...are attributes belonging to God insofar as he is considered as related to created things" are just restatements of Maimonides' claims in *Guide* I, 61. In this context Spinoza also explains that the name "*El Shaddai*" means in Hebrew 'the God who suffices' [*Deum, qui sufficit*]" (Shirley 154 | G III/169/4). Compare this with Maimonides' claim that the meaning of the same name is "*He who is sufficient*" (GP I 63 | P I 155). Finally, the examples of "qualities of potency" which Spinoza brings – "the great [*magnus*], the awful [*tremendus*]..." are just the attributes which start the daily Jewish prayer of *Shmone Esre* ("the eighteen benedictions") of which Maimonides' says that he would have prohibited the use of such a language were it not inserted into the prayer by "the men of the Great Synagogue" whose authority he does not wish to challenge (GP I 59 | P I 140).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Ibn Ezra's *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, Exodus III 14-15, *Gersonides Commentary on the Pentateuch*, Exodus III 13-15, and Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia Q. 13, 11. Cf. Warren Zev Harvey, "Spinoza's Metaphysical Hebraism" in Heidi M. Ravven and Lenn E. Goodman (eds.), *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 110 and 114 (n. 23). For Christian interpretations of Exodus III 14, see Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. By A.H.C Downes (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1936), 51f. The view of the Tetragrammaton as indicating God's self-necessitated existence appears also in Avraham ha-Kohen Herrera's *Beit Elohim [The House of God]* (Immanuel Benvebishti; Amsterdam, 1755), p. 33. This is a Hebrew translation (from the original Spanish) which was done by Yitzhak Aboav who was one of the rabbis of the Amsterdam community at Spinoza's time and might have been one of Spinoza's teachers. The question of Herrera's possible influence on Spinoza is still unsolved.

<sup>18</sup> "The men of the Great Synagogue" are the figures who bridged between the late biblical period and the very beginning of the *Mishnaic* period (the early Hebrew layer of the Talmud), roughly in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE.

Part III: “...*quatenus idem concipitur infinitatem et necessitatem existentiae, sive aeternitatem exprimeret*” - God’s Essence as Eternal Existence *or* Necessary of Existence.

3.1 In several places in the *Ethics*, Spinoza asserts that in God’s unique case essence and existence are one and the same. Consider, for example, E1p11d (II/54/25):

[W]hatever perfection substance has is not owed to any external cause. So its existence must follow from its nature alone; hence its existence is nothing but its essence [*nihil aliud est, quam eius essentia*].

or, even more explicitly in E1p20:

God’s existence and his essence are one and the same [*Dei existentia eiusque essentia unum et idem sunt*].<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, the definition that opens the *Ethics* states:

E1d1: By *cause of itself* I understand that whose essence involves existence, *or* that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing. [*Per causam sui intelligo id, cuius essentia involvit existentiam, sive id, cuius natura non potest concipi nisi existens*]

What does Spinoza mean by saying that the essence of the “cause of itself” *involves* existence? For twentieth century ears the claim might imply that the essence of God is not strictly identical with existence; it *involves* existence, but it *also involves* other things (or qualities). In other words, the Latin “*involvit*” (through its English cognate “involves”) might give us the impression that if  $x$  *involvit*  $y$ , then  $x$  is not identical with  $y$  (or that there is more to  $x$ , than being merely  $y$ ).

As far as I can see, this is not the case. The Latin “*involvit*” is used very frequently in the *Ethics* (about 40 times), and yet I am not aware of any attempt to clarify the semantic field of the term.<sup>20</sup> Presumably, this is so because it does not appear to be a technical term. This is not the place

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Short Treatise* I, i (I/15/17) - “God existence is [his] essence”, *Cogitata Metaphysica*, I, ii (I/238/28) – “...in God essence is not distinguished from existence”, and II, i (I/252/7) – “God cannot be said to enjoy existence. For the existence of God is God himself, as his essence also”.

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Alan Gabbey for drawing my attention to this issue. A clarification of the semantic field of “*involvit*” should also explain Spinoza’s use of “pertains” [*pertinet*] as in E2p10, “The being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, or substance does not constitute the form of man”.

for a thorough study of this term, but as a preliminary clarification, I would suggest that for Spinoza, for  $x$  to involve  $y$  is a certain asymmetric (though not anti-symmetric) relation, very close to the Spinozist relation of “ $x$  is conceived through  $y$ .”<sup>21</sup> Just as “ $x$  is conceived through  $y$ ” does not imply that  $x$  is conceived through some *non- $y$*  as well,<sup>22</sup> so to “ $x$  involves  $y$ ” does not imply that  $x$  involves anything apart from  $y$ . Indeed, when we check closely Spinoza’s use of this verb in the *Ethics*, we find that he uses it frequently to claim that God’s essence involves existence<sup>23</sup> (or necessary existence<sup>24</sup>), but, if I am not mistaken, he *never* claims that God’s essence involves anything *apart from existence* (or necessary existence). Had Spinoza thought that God’s essence involves anything apart from existence, it would be extremely unreasonable for him to pass over such a crucial issue in silence. Therefore, I believe we should conclude that for Spinoza God’s essence is “nothing but existence”.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See E2p5d (88/30), where Spinoza takes E1p10 (“Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself”) to imply that each attribute “involves the concept of no other attribute.” Hence, he holds that, if  $x$  is not conceived through  $y$ ,  $x$  does not involve  $y$ , or (by contrapositive), if  $x$  involves  $y$ ,  $x$  is conceived through  $y$ . In E1a5, Spinoza takes “ $x$  is understood through  $y$ ” and “ $x$  involves  $y$ ” as equivalent. Since, for Spinoza, “to conceive  $x$  through  $y$ ” and “to understand  $x$  through  $y$ ” are equivalent, it would seem that “ $x$  involves  $y$ ” is also equivalent” to “ $x$  is conceived through  $y$ ”.

<sup>22</sup> For example, an immediate infinite is conceived through its attribute, and not through anything else.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, E1p7d and E1p11d.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, E2p10d1 and E5p30d.

<sup>25</sup> Another interesting consideration that seems to support the strict identity of essence and existence in Spinoza’s God emerges from Spinoza’s understanding of essence. Spinoza considers essence as the necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of the thing of which it is the essence (E2d2: “...to the essence of anything belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be or nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing”). Were the essence of God be existence plus another element  $\zeta$ , it would mean that existence being given would not suffice for God to exist (as long as  $\zeta$  does not obtain as well). That would be that there can be existence without God, a view Spinoza undoubtedly rejects. Spinoza view of essence as the necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of a thing generates serious problems in his system since it seems to (1) make all things causes-of-themselves (insofar as their essence cannot exist without the thing’s existence) and (2) deny the possibility of non-instantiated essences (since once

3.2 We are getting closer to answering the question “What is the essence of Spinoza’s God?”, but we are not quite there. In E5p30d Spinoza claims that

Eternity is the very essence of God insofar as this involves necessary existence [*Aeternitas est ipsa Dei essentia, quatenus haec necessariam involvit existentiam*] (by E1d8).

The definition of eternity, invoked in E5p30d, states,

By *eternity* I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing [*Per aeternitatem intelligo ipsam existentiam, quatenus ex sola rei aeternae definitione necessario sequi concipitur*]

And Spinoza explains this definition by the following:

Exp.: For such existence, like the essence of a thing, is conceived as an eternal truth, and on that account cannot be explained by duration or time, even if the duration is conceived to be without beginning or end.

In the existing literature there is some debate about the meaning of E1d8e, a text which seems to suggest that eternity is completely atemporal.<sup>26</sup> This appears to be in conflict with Spinoza’s characterization of the infinite modes as eternal.<sup>27</sup> But I would like to draw the attention to the very definition of eternity. This definition not only tells us that eternity *is* existence, but it also tells what kind of existence it is - “existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing” – i.e., *the existence of a thing whose existence follow necessarily from of its own essence*. Were we to use the terminology of Ibn Sina, we should say that eternity is the existence of

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the essence is given, the thing should be given (instantiated as well). Spinoza clearly accepts the notion of non-instantiated essences in E2p8. Presumably he attempts to solve the problem by distinguishing between formal (as in E2p8) and actual (as in E3p7) essences. I doubt this distinction really solves the problems.

<sup>26</sup> Some commentators understand Spinoza’s eternity to be merely sempiternal (i.e., as indicating existence in all times). For this view, see Martha Kneale, “Eternity and Sempiternity” in Marjorie Green (ed.), *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973, 227-40, and Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 107-13. The opposite, timeless, reading of eternity is supported by Diane Steinberg, “Spinoza’s Theory of the Eternity of the Mind” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 11 (1981), 55-65.

<sup>27</sup> Since, as we shall soon see, the manner of existence of modes is duration. For the characterization of infinite modes as eternal, see E1p21.d.

being which is “necessary of existence.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in E1p23s Spinoza relies on his definition of eternity in order to identify eternity with the “necessity of existence [*necessitatem existentiae*]” which each attribute is conceived to express.<sup>29</sup>

Letter 12 is one of Spinoza’s most difficult as well as intriguing texts.<sup>30</sup> One of the central topics of the letter is the distinction between eternity [*aeternitas*], duration [*duratio*] and time [*tempus*]. In explaining the distinction between the first two, Spinoza claims,

[W]e conceive the existence of Substance to be entirely different from the existence of Modes.

The difference between Eternity and Duration arises from this. For it is only of Modes that we can explain the existence by Duration. But [we can explain the existence] of Substance by Eternity, i.e., the infinite enjoyment of existing, *or* (in bad Latin) of being.

I am not completely sure what does Spinoza mean by “*explaining*” existence, for I do not think that for Spinoza there is an existence that is neither eternal nor durational. If I understand Spinoza

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<sup>28</sup> For an insightful discussion of Spinoza’s distinction between things which are necessary by virtue of their essence and things which are necessary by virtue of their cause, see Don Garrett, “Spinoza’s Necessitarianism” in Yovel, Y. (ed.), *God and Nature: Spinoza’s Metaphysics* (Leiden; Brill, 1991), 191-218. For Ibn Sina, a thing that is possible of existence can be “either everlasting or [it] exists for a time but not all time” (“Ibn Sina on Necessary and Possible Existence”, 76). The necessary of existence is eternal, i.e., timeless. \*\*

<sup>29</sup> “So if a mode is conceived to exist necessarily and be infinite, [its necessary existence and infinitude] must necessarily be inferred, *or* perceived through some attribute of God, insofar as that attribute is conceived to express infinity and necessity of existence, *or* (what is the same, by D8) eternity, i.e. (by D6 and P19), insofar as it is considered absolutely”. I am not aware of any evidence that shows that Spinoza read Ibn Sina directly. Yet, I do not think this is impossible, since Hebrew and Latin translations of Ibn Sina should have been available in Amsterdam, and since many traditional commentators on *Guide* I, 57, begin their discussions with a note that Maimonides “followed the [*nishach achar*] opinion of Ibn Sina on this matter”. Such common notes could have made Spinoza curious and send him to consult Ibn Sina’s works. Obviously, this is a mere speculation. What is clear is that Spinoza knew about Ibn Sina’s view on the necessary and possible of existence at least through his readings of Maimonides and other medieval Jewish philosophers.

<sup>30</sup> From Letter 81 we learn that Spinoza circulated copies of Letter 12 (which was called in Spinoza’s circle “The Letter on the Infinite”) among his friends also in his last years. This suggests that Spinoza subscribed to the views expressed in this letter even in his late period.

correctly his view is that eternity is the existence of substance, or of the thing whose essence and existence are one and the same, while duration is the existence of modes, or things whose existence is different from their essence.<sup>31</sup> Whether modes – either finite or infinite – are *in some sense* eternal is an interesting question in Spinoza, but it is, I think, clear that, for Spinoza, God’s essence is eternal and immutable (See E1p20d and corollaries 1 and 2). Hence, we arrived at the conclusion that, God’s essence *is nothing but* eternal existence, or eternity.<sup>32</sup> What remains for us to do is to see how this new understanding of God’s essence illuminates Spinoza’s view of the divine attributes.

#### Part IV: The Attributes as Primitive Conceptions of Eternal Existence.

4.1 According to Spinoza, God has infinitely many attributes (E1d6), but only two attributes – Extension and Thought – are accessible to the human mind (E2a5). Even these two attributes do not resemble the traditional divine attributes. Spinoza replaces the traditional attributes of omnipresence and omniscience by infinite Extension<sup>33</sup> and infinite Thought. Why does Spinoza make this shift? One clear difference between the traditional and Spinozist attributes is that the former relate to God as a person or subject who has the qualities of being omniscient and omnipresent. Spinoza avoids this anthropomorphic language by depersonalizing the attributes. This would only be natural for someone who thinks that the main problem of traditional religion is that it casts God in its own, human, image.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Spinoza’s identification of God’s essence with self-

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<sup>31</sup> “...they have erred because they have ascribed duration to things only insofar as they judged them to be subject to continues variation and not, as we do, insofar as their essence is distinguished from their existence” (*Cogitata Metaphysica* II, i | I/251/17-19).

<sup>32</sup> ADD \*\*\*\* (possibly): Reading of E1p20d according to this conclusion.

<sup>33</sup> Spinoza seems to allude to this intentional re-conception of the divine attributes when claiming that for matter of faith it does not matter “whether one believes that God is omnipresent in essence or in potency” (TTP, Chapter 14 | Shirley). I believe that by “omnipresence in essence” he has in mind his own pantheism, while “omnipresence in potency” is a reference to the traditional conception of divine omnipotence.

<sup>34</sup> See the appendix to part 1 of the *Ethics* and E2p10s2 (II/94/1-2).



necessitated existence should be seen in this light as well; it is an attempt to avoid anthropomorphism without embracing the religion of ignorance advanced by negative theology.

4.2 If God's essence is eternal existence, and an attribute is defined as "what the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence", how are we to understand the relation between the attributes and God's eternity (i.e., self-necessitated existence)? I would like to suggest that for Spinoza the attributes are primitive kinds of self-necessitated existence (or primitive conceptions of self-necessitated existence<sup>35</sup>). They are primitive insofar as each attribute cannot be conceived through another (E1p10), and they indicate self-necessitated existence since they share this essential feature of substance. In order to support the last claim, let us have a close look at E1p19. Here Spinoza proves that the attributes are eternal, i.e., that they exist by their own self-necessity. Notice how Spinoza begins with (1) showing that substance is self-necessitated or eternal. Then claiming that (2) the definition of attribute entails that the attributes must share the essence of substance, and hence (3) that just like substance, the attributes too "involve eternity, and so, they are all eternal".

P19: God is eternal, or all God's attributes are eternal.

Dem.: For God (by D6) is substance, which (by P11) necessarily exists, i.e. (by P7), to whose nature it pertains to exist, or (what is the same) from whose definition it follows that he exists; and therefore (by D8), he is eternal.

Next, by God's attributes are to be understood what (by D4) expresses an essence of the Divine substance, i.e., what pertains to substance. The attributes themselves, I say, must involve it itself. But eternity pertains to the nature of substance (as I have already demonstrated from P7). Therefore each of the attributes must involve eternity, and so, they are all eternal, q.e.d.

4.3 Do the attributes constitute separate essences of the substance? Or are they parts of self-necessitated existence that is the sole essence of substance? I believe that the answer to both questions should be negative. We cannot discuss here the issue in detail, but the outline of the view I

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<sup>35</sup> I prefer to bracket here the question of the role of the intellect in E1d4 (though I am convinced that E1d4 should not be read as indication that the attributes are illusory).

would like to suggest is rather simple. God's essence is solely self-necessitated existence; the attributes are different ways of adequately conceiving self-necessitated existence. Self-necessitated existence (as well as non-self-necessitated existence, i.e., the duration of modes) has infinitely many facets that are causally and conceptually independent from each other, but are (isomorphic) facets of one and the same being. There is no relation of aggregation between these various facets of existence, because self-necessitated extension and self-necessitated thought are numerically identical (See E1p14&d and E2p7s), and they do not constitute separate worlds (Ep.64), but this tight and indivisible unity of existence has radical plurality of infinitely many aspects.

### Part V: Conclusion

5.1 At the beginning of the paper we have studied the Avicennian and Maimonidean notion of the necessary of existence. We have seen that the necessary of existence is a simple being whose essence is nothing but existence. We also studied the Maimonidean interpretation of the Tetragrammaton as indicating God's essence qua simple existence. A close reading of a marginal passage in the TTP showed that Spinoza endorsed the view of the Tetragrammaton as indicating God's true essence, i.e., existence. We turned then to the *Ethics* in order to show that Spinoza also accepts the identification of God's essence with existence in his major work. This brief study illuminated Spinoza's enigmatic definition of eternity as self-necessitated existence (a definition which has been commonly criticized as circular). As it turned out the circularity of this definition was not a crude error, but a genuine conception of eternity. I have also argued that Spinoza ascribes the same feature of self-necessitated existence to the attributes, and that the attributes are just adequate conceptions of primitive kinds of existence.

5.2 What motivated Spinoza to identify God with existence? One obvious answer is that the notion of existence is relatively free from anthropomorphic thinking. But this answer needs to be deepened. Let me suggest one last hint at that direction. Spinoza accepts the radical epistemological

view according to which the knowledge of God is both *trivial* and the *sole beginning* of knowledge of all things (E2p10s2). The concept of existence (or being) seems to fit both characterizations.

Read:

- Altman, Essence and Existence in Maimonides.
- Stern, Grammar in Maimonides.
- Gilson, Being and Some Philosophers.
- Read the ontological argument in Anselm and Leibniz.

Questions:

- Does Maimonides identify NOE with atomical existence?

Additions:

- Add to 4.2: “The More reality – the more Attributes” – But this implies *aggregation*. Attributes as indicating reality.
- Develop the discussion of Spinoza’s attributes.
- Check Latin translation of GP (for the vocabulary of TTP, Ch. 13).
- How God as existence leads from neoplatonism to pantheism. (1) negating all other distinguishing features of God. (2) Does the fact God is “necessary of existence” suffice to block pantheism?
- Possible addition: Heideggerian undertones? (more due to Suarez).
- Possible addition: Maimon, the Kabbalists, and Mendelssohn on the Tetragrammaton. - Kabbalistic literature (which?); Maimon (Autobiography 181)- Shem ha-Etzem; Mendelssohn “Das Ewige” – Philo “ehye” as denoting God’s essence (Wolfson, Philo, I 19, 210, ii 120-1).