

I'm pleased to see that passage from the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* is finally getting the attention it deserves. The dispute between Vere and me over how to read the passage turns on why Descartes thinks it is contradictory to assert that two principal attributes "are not opposites but merely different." The difference between us, as I understand it, is that Vere reads Descartes as inflating difference so that it amounts to opposition, whereas I read Descartes as deflating opposition (at least between attributes) so that it amounts to mere difference. On Vere's reading, Descartes is saying that if principal attribute A is different from principal attribute B, then A is opposed to B, where this means that A is the contrary of B. But if A is the contrary of B, it would be contradictory for the same subject to contain both A and B.

On my reading, the route to the contradiction is more involved. On my reading the contradiction is this: if principal attribute A is different from principal attribute B and neither attribute is contained in the other, then it follows that a subject containing both A and B has two natures or essences. But it is a contradiction that a simple substance should have more than one nature or essence. On my reading Descartes is allowing that a substance with two different (i.e. non-identical) principal attributes would not have two essences provided the concept of one was contained in the concept of the other. In such a case the attributes would be distinct by reason. I believe that some medievals would have wanted to say that God provides an example of such attributes: God has more than one principal attribute, but God has only one essence.

I would argue that while both readings of the passage are plausible, mine fits more closely to the text. Vere's reading requires reinterpretation of two key clauses. First, he tells us that when Descartes says one attribute is not the other, what he really means is that one *is a contrary of* the other. Second, he tells us that when Descartes says that "As for the attributes which constitute the natures of things, it cannot be said that those which are different, and such that the concept of the one is not contained in the concept of the other" what he really means is "As for the attributes which constitute the natures of things, it cannot be said that those which are different, *in that* that the concept of the one is not contained in the concept of the other." I don't think my reading requires any such reinterpretations.