



THE SUFFICIENCY OF SPINOZISTIC ATTRIBUTES FOR THEIR FINITE MODES

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ABSTRACT

Some passages throughout Spinoza's body of works suggest that an attribute in its absolute nature provides a sufficient condition for all of its modes, including the finite ones. Other passages suggest that an attribute in its absolute nature fails to provide a sufficient condition for its finite modes. My aim is to dispel this apparent tension. I argue that all finite modes are ultimately entailed by the absolute nature of their attribute. Furthermore, I explain how the Spinozistic positions that appear incompatible with this view are in fact compatible. As I see it, we should read those passages where Spinoza says that no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute as saying merely that no finite mode ultimately follows in one-by-one fashion, independent of an infinite series of other modes, from the absolute nature of its attribute.

Keywords: Spinoza; Attribute; Mode; Necessitarianism; Explanatory Rationalism.

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1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

There are strong reasons to believe that, for Spinoza, no finite mode is ultimately entailed by the absolute nature of its attribute. In other words, and as several commentators have argued,² there are strong reasons to think that an attribute, considered in its absolute nature (that is, as ontologically prior to its modes: see 1p5d), is not sufficient for its finite modes (see 1p21-23, 1p28, 1p28d, 2p30d, 4p4d; KV 1.2 I/34).³ On the other hand, and as several commentators have also argued,⁴ there are strong reasons to believe that an attribute, considered in its absolute nature, does in fact provide a sufficient condition for all of its modes (including the finite ones) (see 1p17s, 1p25s, 1p29, 1app II/77; KV 1.3.2, KV 1.4.8; KV 1.6.3 I/41/23, CM 1.3 I/243; Ep. 12, Ep. 21, Ep. 43, Ep. 81, Ep. 83). My aim in this paper is to dispel this

² See also Dea 2008, 603-628; Donagan 1973, 241-258; Friedman 1986, 371-401; Fullerton 1894, 254; Miller 2001, 779-814. For helpful background see, especially, Curley 1969, 101-118. For a statement of the difficulty concerning whether Spinozistic attributes are sufficient for their finite modes, see Curley 1988, 48-50. For a hint of how this issue is tied up with the issue of Spinoza's necessitarianism, see Curley-Walski, 1999.

³ All Spinoza citations are from Gebhardt's Latin critical edition *Spinoza Opera* and use the following format: abbreviated work title followed by *Opera* volume number, page number, and line number. The title abbreviations are standard: *Letters and Replies* (Ep); *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TdIE); *Short Treatise* (KV); *Metaphysical Thoughts* (CM); *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP); *Political Treatise* (TP); *Hebrew Grammar* (HG); *Descartes's Principles of Philosophy* (DPP). So, for example, "DPP 1/263/5" is *Descartes's Principles of Philosophy*: volume 1, page 263, line 5 of the *Opera*. Following standard practice, citations from the *Ethics* usually refer only to the formal apparatus of the *Ethics* itself—the first Arabic numeral indicating the *part* of the book and the following letter abbreviations indicating the *type* of passage: "a" for *axiom*; "app" for *appendix*; "c" for *corollary*, "d" for *definition* (when it comes right after the part numeral) or *demonstration* (for most, but not all, of the other positions); "lem" for *lemma*; "p" for *proposition*; "pref" for *preface*; "s" for *scholium*; "exp" for *explication*. Hence "3p59sd4exp" is the explication of the fourth definition of the scholium to the fifty-ninth proposition of *Ethics* part three. With exception to the occasional modification of my own, translations are from Curley. For Letters 29-84 I refer to Shirley's translation.

⁴ See Carriero 1991; Deleuze 1988, 93-94; Della Rocca 1996, 95-96; Della Rocca 2008, 69-78; Garrett 1999, 103-130; Griffin 2008, 71-93; Hampshire 1970; Huenemann 1999, 224-240; Koistinen 1998, 66; Koistinen 2003, 283-310; Lovejoy 1964, 151-157; Nadler 2006, 84-121; Newlands 2007; Steinberg 1981, 35-68; Viljanen 2008, 412-437.

apparent tension, thus attempting to avoid the conclusion, tempting to some commentators,⁵ that Spinoza is guilty of contradiction on the matter.

After a few quick points of clarification (Section 2), I make two general moves. First, I argue that the evidence for the view that an attribute in its absolute nature provides a sufficient condition for all of its modes is stronger than the evidence for the view that an attribute in its absolute nature does not provide a sufficient condition for its finite modes (Sections 3 and 4). As I make clear, Spinoza states that an attribute in its absolute nature provides a sufficient condition for all of its modes more frequently than he seems to state that an attribute in its absolute nature does not provide a sufficient condition for its finite modes. Perhaps more importantly, the view that an attribute in its absolute nature does not provide a sufficient condition for its finite modes conflicts with one of the core features of Spinoza's philosophical vision: thoroughgoing explanatory rationalism. Second, I propose how we might explain away those passages suggesting that finite modes are not ultimately entailed by the absolute nature of their attribute (Section 5). I suggest that we read those passages where Spinoza says that no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute as saying something more specific: that no finite mode ultimately follows in one-by-one fashion (as opposed to as part of an infinite series of finite modes) from the absolute nature of its attribute.

2. POINTS OF CLARIFICATION

First, here is what I mean when I speak of one thing, A, being a sufficient condition or reason or cause for another thing, B. A is the sufficient condition for B if the being or truth of A is sufficient for (or enough to have) the being or truth of B. That is to say, A is the sufficient condition for B if B is or is true whenever A is or is true. In this case, if A is the sufficient condition for B, then if A obtains, happens, has being, is true, or whatever, then B must necessarily—is guaranteed to—obtain, happen, have being, be true, or whatever.⁶

Second, when I say that a mode is or is not ultimately entailed by x, I mean (as perhaps goes without saying) that a mode—in its completeness, in its being entirely what it is—is or is not ultimately entailed by x. So say that mode y is ultimately entailed by x. I am saying, in this case, that x only if y; that is, if x, then y.

⁵ See Bennett 1984, 111-124; Jarrett 1978, 55-56; Matson 1979, 76-83.

⁶ See Istvan 2021a, section 2.

Technically, I do not need the term “ultimately.” But with it I make clear that when I say that *x* is sufficient for *y*, I am not limiting myself to saying that there can be no intermediate steps between *x* and *y*. It could be that *x* is sufficient for *y* in the sense that *x* is sufficient for *q* and *q* is sufficient for *y*.

Now, in addition to the term “ultimately” I also have an inclination to add the term “completely,” as in: *y* ultimately and *completely* follows from *x*. Unfortunately, adding the term “completely” has proven to cause more confusion than clarification. So unlike the term “ultimately,” I will not use it from here out. Nevertheless, it might be helpful to understand why I have this inclination. The issue under discussion in this paper is whether finite modes ultimately (and completely) follow from the absolute nature of God. I like to think of the terms “ultimately” and “completely” working together here as follows. The *ultimate* cause of a given finite mode is the absolute nature of God. So through however many intermediate steps—intermediary infinite modes (see 1p21-1p23)—there may be between a finite mode back (back or prior not temporally in this case, but ontologically) to the absolute nature, that absolute nature is the ultimate cause: the buck stops at the absolute nature; there is no cause further back (“vertically,” that is, ontologically) than that nature. Now, I am inclined to add in the term “completely” to indicate that this ultimate cause (this ultimate cause that is the absolute nature) all by itself, that is, without the help of anything else *on the same ontological level* (and also without the help of randomness), is enough for the finite mode in question. I need to make this clear because of how people sometimes speak. It is typical for one to say, for example, that striking the match was sufficient for fire to appear. The absolute nature of God is not sufficient for its finite modes in this way (in this loose sense of being sufficient). In order for the fire in question to appear it is not, technically, enough simply that the match be struck. There needs to be oxygen and various other factors in place as well. To say, however, that absolute nature of God is sufficient for a given mode is to say that the absolute nature *completely*, that is, without the help of any other factor on the same ultimate ontological level, produces that finite mode.

Why, then, do I scrap the term “completely”? Some readers have taken my claim that the absolute nature of God *completely* produces a given finite mode *o* as ruling out the possibility that *o* was produced by temporally previous finite modes. But according to how I see the term “completely” operating here, my claim that the absolute nature of God *completely* produces a given finite mode *o* is compatible with the possibility that *o* was produced by temporally previous finite modes. For example, it could be that *o* is overdetermined, having a sufficient explanation on the vertical-ontological order

(a sufficient explanation ultimately in the absolute nature of God) and having a sufficient explanation on the horizontal-temporal order (a sufficient explanation in past states of the world). Or it could be that there are two ways to look at how *o* is caused: horizontally, that is in terms of past modes, or vertically, that is, in terms ultimately of the absolute nature of God.

3. EVIDENCE FOR THE INSUFFICIENCY

Spinoza seems to deny that a finite mode can ultimately follow—that is, either directly or indirectly—from the absolute nature of its attribute. His reason is that, since whatever ultimately follows from the absolute nature of an attribute must be infinite and eternal (1p21-1p23), finite and durational modes would not be finite and durational (they would be infinite and eternal) if they did ultimately follow from, that is, if they did have their sufficient source in, the absolute nature of their attribute (1p28 and 1p28d, 1p21-23, 2p30d, 4p4d; KV 1.2 I/34). No finite mode is ultimately entailed by the absolute nature of its attribute, so Spinoza seems to suggest. Instead, each finite mode is entailed by previous finite modes *ad infinitum*.

Every singular thing, or anything which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity. . . . [W]hat is finite and has determinate existence could not have been produced by the absolute nature of an attribute of God [or by anything that has been produced by the absolute nature of an attribute of God (see 1p21-1p23)]. (1p28-1p28d)

Leibniz reads these passages in the same way. This is evident by the objection he raises against them. His objection is mainly that finite individuals are in truth sufficiently explained by the “vertical” or emanative causal order, not merely—and as he thinks Spinoza believes—by the “horizontal” chain of previous world states and their laws.

[O]ne particular thing is not determined by another in an infinite progression [as it is for Spinoza] for in that case things would always remain indeterminate, no matter how far you carry the progression. All particular things are rather determined by God.⁷

In several places Spinoza seems to corroborate the view that finite things do not ultimately follow from the absolute nature of their attribute (2p30d, 4p4d; KV 1.2 I/34).⁸ At KV 1.2, for example, Spinoza suggests that, besides the attribute itself, finite modes are needed to bring about a given finite mode. The attribute in its absolute nature does, Spinoza makes clear here, “cause” each of its finite modes, but simply in the sense that the attribute in its absolute nature is a condition *required* for each of its finite modes to be. The attribute is thus merely a *grounding* or *necessary* condition; it merely makes a finite mode *capable* of existence. The attribute in its absolute nature is not a sufficient condition, so Spinoza might be taken to suggest. Here is the KV passage in question:

[A]lthough in order that a [finite] thing may exist there is required a special modification and a thing beside the attributes of God, for all that, God does not cease to be able to produce a thing immediately. For, of the necessary things which are required to bring things into existence, some are there in order that they should produce the thing, and others in order that the thing should be capable of being produced. (KV 1.2 I/34)

Curley summarizes Spinoza’s point here as follows.

[A]lthough the finite modes are produced by other finite modes, and do not follow from the absolute nature of God, they do still depend on him.⁹

4. EVIDENCE FOR THE SUFFICIENCY

As we saw, 1p28 and 1p28d (in light of 1p21-1p23) suggest, apparently in line with a few other passages (such as the KV one just discussed), that no

⁷ Leibniz A VI, iv, 1774-75. In his 1678 *De corporum concursu*, Leibniz notes: “the entire effect is equipollent to the full cause, or they have the same power. . . . Note that, in metaphysical rigor, the preceding state of the world or some other machine is not the cause of the following [state], but God [is this cause], although the preceding state is a sure indication that the following will occur” (Leibniz 1994, 145-146).

⁸ At 2p30d, to give one of the stranger examples, Spinoza says that our body’s duration, and so (by CM 1.4 I/244/20-21) its total existence, is not determined by (or even dependent on) God’s absolute nature.

⁹ Curley 1985, 433n59.

finite mode is ultimately entailed by the absolute nature of its attribute.¹⁰ This is puzzling in the larger context of Part 1 of the *Ethics*. On several occasions Spinoza claims that everything—and so even each *finite* individual—ultimately follows from the *absolute nature* of its attribute (see 1p17s, 1p25s, 1p29, 1app II/77; KV 1.3.2, KV 1.4.8; KV 1.6.3 I/41/23, CM 1.3 I/243; Ep. 12, Ep. 21, Ep. 43, Ep. 81, Ep. 83).

This is definitive in the following passage from the Appendix to Part 1. “[A]ll things have been predetermined [(*praedeterminata*)] by God . . . from God’s *absolute nature, or infinite power*” (my emphases, 1app II/77). Notice here that Spinoza cites God’s *absolute nature* as the cause of its finite modes. Here he does not mean, by the way, that the absolute nature is a cause in the mere sense of a grounding or necessary condition. After all, he explicitly says that each mode has been *predetermined*, literally fixed beforehand, by that absolute nature. A mere necessary condition for x does not predetermine x. Only a sufficient condition for x can predetermine x.

We see something very close to this in the TTP, where Spinoza says that the eternal decree of God has predetermined all things. “The eternal decree of God, by which he has predetermined all things.” (TTP 16.20 III/199/18) The key is noting not only that the eternal decree predetermines *all* things, but also that the eternal decree must ultimately follow from the *absolute nature* of God. The eternal decree must ultimately follow from the absolute nature of God either in that it is one of the infinite-eternal modes (whether mediate or immediate) that ultimately follow from the absolute nature of God or in that it is the absolute nature of God itself.

Another passage, from earlier in Part 1 of the *Ethics*, is equally definitive:

From God’s supreme power . . . all things have necessarily flowed . . . by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles.” (1p17s2)

That this passage is as definitive as the previous one is clear so long as we attend to the fact that its phrase “God’s *supreme power*” (*summa Dei potentia*) is but a stylistic variant of—but nonetheless equivalent to—“God’s *absolute nature*” (*absoluta Dei natura*). That the one is a stylistic variant of the other makes sense in itself and is in fact guaranteed by the following

¹⁰ We must be careful to note the possibility that the two following assessments should not be conflated: (1) finite modes do not follow from an attribute considered in its absolute nature and (2) the attribute, considered in its absolute nature, is not sufficient for finite modes.

equations when taken together (as premises): (a) God's supreme power equals (*sive*) God's infinite nature (1p17s II/62/15-16); (b) nature equals (*sive*) power (5p25d); (c) God's infinite power equals (*sive*) God's absolute nature (1app II/77).¹¹

The following passage is definitive as well, as comes into relief when we tease out the implications: "God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called cause of himself". (1p25s) This quote says that God causes each thing—even me—in the same sense in which God causes himself. In other words, each thing follows from God in the same sense in which God follows from himself. In what sense is God self-caused? That is, in what sense does God follow from himself? God follows from himself by his absolute nature and thus by absolute necessity.¹² Because God

¹¹ One might think that my finding so many wide-ranging equivalency claims in Spinoza is suspect. After all, Spinoza is a philosopher who seems at least to believe in, as well as want to actualize, the possibility for a clear and univocal philosophical language. My response? Spinoza uses stylistic variants of certain claims precisely for clarity. He uses stylistic variants at least partially for the same reason that teachers will define a key term using different expressions: to be clear in communicating to a wide audience and to tease out latent implications. Some phrases will draw some readers in, other phrases will better register with other readers. Using stylistic variants, moreover, is a way to clarify what the one phrase is saying. Your understanding of the meaning of "if x, then y" is heightened when you see, for example, that "if not y, then not x" means the same thing. To say what determinism is, for example, I need to use other words. Determinism is the view that the future is fixed by the past. And I might use even more words to drive the point home (say, if there is confusion about the word "fixed"): determinism is the view that the past guarantees the future. Relatedly, using stylistic variants is also a way to prevent misinterpretation. With only one way of putting something (call it "o"), the misconception that the reader may have about o might remain unchecked. But when Spinoza says that phrase A really just means phrase B, that serves as a sort of test to which the reader can subject his understanding of phrase A, an understanding that can easily be fraught with baggage. Of course, Spinoza could just keep saying "God," for example, instead of going with "Nature" at other times. But that might increase the likelihood of readers having all-too-orthodox notions in mind when they hear "God." I could give a deeper, and more specifically Spinozistic, indication of why using stylistic variants is important. But the point should be clear enough.

¹² Of course, it is awkward to speak of "God following from himself." Not only does Spinoza never seem to use that phrase, but it also risks being read as a contradiction. For that which follows from something else is typically, and in most cases, a mode. So to say that God follows from himself might suggest that a nonmode is a mode. Of course, God following from himself is one special case where the effect is not a mode. It may seem strange, for the same reason that talking about self-caused things is strange—so strange that it is typical in the history of philosophy up until the present day to ignore the self-causation option and simply say that there are two and only two options: something is either caused by an other (other-caused) or something is caused by nothing (uncaused). Just as in most cases and for most people that which follows from A is not identical to A, in most cases and for most people that which is caused by A is nonidentical to A. Nevertheless, if such talk of "God follows from himself" is a bother to readers, simply understand this to mean God causes himself, as Spinoza explicitly says (1p34d) and which is entailed by his metaphysics. For more on what it means to say that Spinoza's God is self-caused, see Istvan 2021b, section 1.2.

follows from himself by his absolute nature, each thing—even me—follows from God's absolute nature and thus by absolute necessity.

Now, one might think that this passage need not be read as strongly as I am reading it here. To say that God causes things in the same sense that he causes himself is, according to a weaker reading, to say simply that God is, necessarily, the cause of everything. Perhaps. But I have reservations. My reservations are not only because of the other passages in my paper that support the reading that each thing follows from God's absolute nature. My reservations are based on what I see in the 1p25 passages and the passages to which Spinoza refers readers in those passages. In the context of 1p25 Spinoza is not saying merely that God is necessarily the cause of everything. He is saying (i) that God is necessarily the cause of everything (including—as should go without saying, even though it is important to say—everything about everything) and, in particular that (ii) that the necessity of the divine nature is necessarily the cause of everything (including everything about everything). Before I explain why these two clarifications motivate my reservations, let me lay out the textual reasons why I seem entitled to make these clarifications. 1p25 makes clear that God is the cause not only of the existence but the very essence of everything. Since a thing is exhausted by its existence plus its essence (there is no third addition), to say that God is necessarily the cause of both the existence and the essence of everything is therefore to say that God is necessarily the cause of everything (including everything about everything) (point i). Now, at 1p25s Spinoza says that his proof for God is more clearly demonstrated simply by 1p16. At 1p16 Spinoza says that the necessity of the divine nature necessarily entails infinitely many modes (entails whatever can fall under an infinite intellect) (1p16 especially in light of 1p16d). Since everything (including everything about everything) can fall under an infinite intellect, the necessity of the divine nature is necessarily the cause of everything (including everything about everything) (point ii). Now, why might all this be relevant to supporting my reservation? Well, if we take the divine nature discussed here, that is, the divine nature in its necessity, as the absolute nature of God (which seems at least reasonable), then this means that 1p25 is indeed claiming, at least implicitly when we look to the passages cited, that the absolute nature of God is necessarily the cause of everything (including everything about everything). It should be clear why I am being fastidious here with such talk of “everything about everything.” Such talk makes clear that there is nothing in excess to anything that fails to be necessarily caused by the absolute nature of God. We arrive, therefore, back to my original reading of 1p25s. Instead of merely making the rather tame claim (tame relative to what Spinoza has already

said at this point in the *Ethics*) that God is necessarily the cause of each thing, at 1p25s Spinoza is saying that the absolute nature of God is necessarily the cause of each thing and, indeed, of every aspect of each thing. The “every-aspect” qualifier, it should be clear, undercuts the main viable alternative view: that the absolute nature of God is merely a grounding or necessary condition for finite modes. Perhaps if the absolute nature of God were the cause of each thing *but only in some respect* (say their essence but not existence), then that reading would have more traction. Spinoza is instead suggesting in these 1p25 passages, however, that no aspect of anything fails to be caused by the absolute nature of God.

In light of these passages (and further considerations to come), I take it that the following passages report the same idea, even though in them we see no *explicit* reference to God’s *absolute* nature.

[A]ll things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature. (my emphasis 1p29)

[A]ll things emanate from God by an inevitable necessity. (Ep. 43)

That every finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute is corroborated with equal definitiveness in Spinoza’s following remark to Blyenbergh.

Meanwhile I recognize something which gives me the greatest satisfaction and peace of mind: that all things come to pass as they do by the power of a supremely perfect Being and by its immutable decree. (Ep. 21).

That this remark is equally definitive is clear so long as we attend to the fact that its phrase “the power of a supremely perfect Being and its immutable decree” is a stylistic variant of either the phrase “God’s absolute nature” or the phrase “God’s absolute nature and his infinite-eternal modes.” That the one is a stylistic variant of either the first or the second is guaranteed by the following facts, taken together. (1) There is, by definition, no power greater than the power of what is *supremely perfect*, and God’s absolute nature is the only thing that is supremely perfect. Note, in line with this, that the power of a supremely perfect Being is just another way of saying God’s supreme power. That is significant because, as I explained in the above discussion of 1p17s2, “God’s *supreme* power” is a stylistic variant of “God’s absolute nature.” (2) What is immutable can be, in Spinoza’s metaphysics, only the absolute nature of God or the infinite-eternal modes that ultimately follow from that nature (recall the above discussion of the eternal decree of God at TTP 16).—Now, if the phrase “the power of a supremely perfect Being and

its immutable decree” is a stylistic variant simply of the phrase “God’s absolute nature,” then the above passage indicates that every finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute. For, in this case, the passage would say that all things come to pass by God’s absolute nature. If, on the other hand, the phrase “the power of a supremely perfect Being and its immutable decree” is a stylistic variant of the phrase “God’s absolute nature and his infinite-eternal modes,” then the result turns out to be the same. For, in this case, the passage would say that all things come to pass by God’s absolute nature and his infinite-eternal modes. Since infinite-eternal modes all ultimately follow from God’s absolute nature, to say that all things come to pass by God’s absolute nature and his infinite-eternal modes is to say simply that all things come to pass by God’s absolute nature—the first entails the second.

Consider now Spinoza’s conversation with Tschirnhaus (Ep. 81-83). Disambiguating what is meant by his claim that “everything depends on one single cause” (KV 1.6.3 I/41/23),¹³ here Spinoza explains to the incredulous Tschirnhaus how all bodies—even finite ones—are deducible from the absolute nature of Extension. Spinoza says that this follows from the fact that *true* Extension, unlike *Cartesian* Extension, is fundamentally dynamic, intrinsically containing motion and rest (see Ep. 64). Spinoza admits that the variety of bodies cannot be demonstrated *a priori* from the Cartesian conception of Extension as an inert mass.

“[F]rom Extension as conceived by Descartes, to wit, an inert mass, it is not only difficult, as you say, but quite impossible to demonstrate the existence of bodies. For matter at rest, as far as in it lies, will continue to be at rest, and will not be set in motion except by a more powerful external cause.” (Spinoza Ep. 81)

Spinoza suggests, however, that it is precisely because motion is an inherent feature of Extension—Extension as he himself understands it—that all bodies can be deduced from its absolute nature.

With regard to your question as to whether the variety of things can be demonstrated *a priori* solely from the conception of [Cartesian] Extension [as an inert mass (see Letter 81)], I think I have already made it quite clear that this is impossible. That is why Descartes is wrong in defining matter through Extension; it must necessarily be explicated through an attribute which expresses eternal and infinite essence. . . . As to what you add, that from the definition of anything,

¹³ See Koistinen 2003, 290-291.

considered in itself, we can deduce only one property, this may hold good in the case of the most simple things, or in the case of mental constructs (*entia rationis*), in which I include figures, but not in the case of real things. Simply from the fact that I define God as an Entity to whose essence existence belongs, I infer several properties of him. (Ep. 83)

Consider Letter 12 as well. Here Spinoza describes two versions of the cosmological argument: the version found in the ancients (and which Spinoza accepts), and the version that “recent peripatetics” falsely attribute to the ancients (and which Spinoza rejects). As the recent peripatetics see the cosmological argument, there must be a first cause—God—since an actual endless sequence of causes into the past is absurd. As the ancients see it, however, what is absurd is not the reality of an actual endless sequence of causes, but rather that the members of this sequence fail to be determined by that which exists by its own nature: God. Here is the passage:

“[T]he more recent Peripatetics have . . . misunderstood the demonstration by which the Ancients tried to prove God’s existence. . . . [T]he force of this argument does not lie in the impossibility of there being an actual infinite or an infinite regress of causes, but only in the supposition that things which do not exist necessarily by their own nature[, which none of the members of that infinite causal sequence do,] are not *determined* [*determinari*] to exist by a thing which does necessarily exist by its own nature.” (my emphasis Ep. 12)

What is most important to notice here is that Spinoza speaks of that which exists by its own nature, which can be nothing else than God in his absolute nature, as *determining* each member of the infinite sequence. God in his absolute nature is, therefore, not a mere grounding cause, a mere necessary condition, for each member of the sequence. After all, a mere grounding cause, a mere necessary condition, for x does not determine x. God in his absolute nature is, rather, the complete cause, the sufficient condition, for each member.¹⁴

¹⁴ Could it be that I am taking too many liberties with the term “*determinari*?” Perhaps. After all, “*determinare*” (the active infinite form) can mean *to set boundaries upon*, or *to resolve*. Nevertheless, Shirley provides a good explanation why the term “*determinare*,” in Spinoza’s thought, “is never used in the sense of to decide, resolve, and so forth. It is always used in the sense that gives rise to the philosophical term ‘determinism’” (Shirley 1992, 25-26).

In addition to these points, notice also that if no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute, then that requires the presence of chance in Spinoza's system.¹⁵ Such a consequence is repugnant to a thoroughgoing explanatory rationalist like Spinoza. After all, Spinoza holds that each thing, whether it exists or not, requires an explanation for why it exists or not. For Spinoza, there must be an answer to every why-question (and this includes why-not questions) (1a2, 1p7d2, 1p8s2, 1p11d2, 1p16, 1p17s2, 1p18, 1p29, 1p33, 1p33s1, 1app, 2p44c2d; Ep. 54, Ep. 75).

For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence. For example, if a triangle exists, there must be a reason or cause why it exists; but if it does not exist, there must also be a reason or cause which prevents it from existing, or which takes its existence away. (1p11d2)

But why exactly is it the case that if no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute, then that requires the presence of chance in Spinoza's system? It might not seem so obvious at first why the presence of chance, and thus the violation of Spinoza's thoroughgoing explanatory rationalism, would indeed result. After all, the sum of all finite modes of an attribute at a given time t_n will be entailed by the sum of all finite modes at t_{n-1} .¹⁶ Anything that happens in the infinite chain of these sums of finite modes at each moment (sums that, for the sake of brevity, I will call "world states") is guaranteed by the past to play out exactly as it does. Since any one of the world states entails all the following world states, there is in effect complete determinism.¹⁷ In light of the complete determinism of the horizontal-temporal order, there might seem to be no violation of explanatory rationalism even on the reading of 1p28 and 1p28d in question: the admittedly natural reading that no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute.

¹⁵ See Huenemann 1999, 227.

¹⁶ To be more precise (but at the expense of needlessly complicating matters) we should say that the sum of all finite modes of an attribute at a given time t_n will be fully entailed, fully explained, by the sum of all finite modes at t_{n-1} plus the absolute nature of the attribute in question. We have to say that the absolute nature of the attribute makes a contribution because, after all, the absolute nature of the attribute is, trivially, necessary for any finite mode. The absolute nature makes more specific contributions than just this, we can say as well. For the infinite-eternal modes, which do uncontroversially ultimately follow from the absolute nature of their attributes, make contributions. The contributions made by infinite-eternal modes, which are what the scholastic tradition and sometimes Spinoza as well call "*causae secundae*," are frequently described in the secondary literature as the contributions of universal laws of nature: see 3preface II/138/12-18; TTP 4.1 III/57, TTP 6.3 III/82-83).

¹⁷ Curley and Walski 1999, 243.

But here is why the presence of chance, and thus the violation of Spinoza's thoroughgoing explanatory rationalism, would result if no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute. Assume that no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute. Consider now the entire chain of world states itself, the entire sequence that extends into both the infinite past and the infinite future and where the posterior states are utterly determined by the prior. What is the full explanation for the infinite chain of world states *as a whole*, a chain that I will call "alpha"? What completely explains why alpha as a whole obtains rather than some other infinite chain?¹⁸ The explanation cannot be that alpha is self-caused. As a chain of modes, alpha is dependent on the absolute nature of its attribute. The explanation also cannot be that finite modes beyond alpha make it necessary that alpha (rather than some other chain) obtains. As the *total* chain of finite modes of a given attribute, there are no finite modes beyond alpha that could play such a role. (Any finite modes beyond alpha would belong to a different attribute and there can be no interaction between attributes: 1p10s, 2p5, 2p5d.¹⁹) The only other option that remains as to what provides the full explanation for alpha (and thus for why alpha rather than some other infinite series obtains) is that alpha ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute.²⁰ Now, if alpha ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute, then each of the finite modes that make it up must ultimately follow from the absolute nature of its attribute. For if x-y-z as a package ultimately follows from the absolute nature, then it is trivial that any given member of that package (say, y) ultimately follows from the absolute nature. We are assuming, however, that no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute. According to our assumption, then, it cannot be the case that alpha ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute. Therefore, we are compelled to say

¹⁸ Bennett asks this question (1984, 117-118) as Leibniz no doubt would as well. As Leibniz explains in his Fifth Letter to Clarke, it may very well be true that the occurrence of finite individual x is entailed by the previous world state G, such that we have the hypothetical proposition "if G, then x." But, as Leibniz asks, what about the entire chain of world states? "We must," Leibniz says, "distinguish between an absolute and a hypothetical necessity." As Leibniz puts it in *On the Ultimate Origin of Things*, in order to explain the ultimate origin of "the chain of states or series of things, the aggregate of which constitutes the world," we must move from "hypothetical necessity, which determined the posterior states of the world by the prior, to something which is absolute or metaphysical necessity." That which has absolute or metaphysical necessity is, Leibniz says in the *Monadology*, "outside the sequence or series of this detail of contingents, however infinite it may be" (37-39).

¹⁹ See Garrett 1999, 121; Della Rocca 2008, 54-58, 97-103.

²⁰ The only other option, in other words, is that either alpha immediately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute or that alpha, by immediately following from an infinite-eternal mode, mediately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute.

that alpha exists without a full explanation—and thus that chance is implicated in the existence of alpha—if indeed no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute.²¹ In other words, and to summarize

²¹ Curley 1969, 105; Curley 1988, 49. That one is compelled to take alpha as lacking an adequate cause is admitted even by Curley himself. Curley clings to the reading of 1p28 in question as the key premise to his denial of the view that Spinoza is a strict necessitarian, one who holds that all things—even finite modes—have the same degree of necessity as the absolute nature of the attributes themselves.

The issue as to whether alpha has a full explanation, which can mean only that it is fully explained by the absolute nature of the attribute in question, is of central concern in the interpretive debate as to whether Spinoza is a strict or moderate necessitarian or, in other words, whether he is a necessitarian or simply a determinist. On the strict necessitarian (or simply necessitarian) reading, which has as its key evidence Spinoza's repeated claim that everything flows entirely from the absolute nature of God, everything—even each finite mode—is as necessary as God in his absolute nature: namely, absolutely necessary. On the moderate necessitarian (or simply determinist) reading, which has as its key evidence 1p28 and 1p28d, not everything is absolutely necessary. Only the attributes themselves, and the infinite-eternal modes that Spinoza describes in 1p21, 1p22, and 1p23 as ultimately emanating entirely from the absolute nature of their attributes, are absolutely necessary. However, on this view, finite modes do not have absolute necessity, but some lesser necessity (in the literature called "hypothetical necessity"). Now, all sides in the debate agree that there is an infinite regress of causes at the level of finite modes (no causal dead-end or dead-start); each finite mode is at least partially a function of previous finite modes *ad infinitum*. As the moderate necessitarian or determinist reading uniquely holds, however, each finite mode is never *fully* a function of the absolute nature of their attribute. Since there is no buck-stopping arche temporally (as, again, everyone in the debate agrees) but also no *sufficient* buckstopping arche ontologically (as moderate necessitarian interpreters must hold, lest they be forced to concede that everything is absolutely necessary), no finite mode is ultimately fully explained by what fully explains itself and thus no finite mode can have the absolute necessity of that which fully explains itself. (Finite modes, instead, enjoy merely the necessity of the endlessly deferred buckstopping arche.) On this view, then, alpha does not have a full explanation.

The following commentators lean toward the strict necessitarian reading, which in my view is the right position (for reasons that will become evident). Carriero 1991; Deleuze 1988, 93-94; Della Rocca 1996, 95-96; Della Rocca 2008, 69-78; D. Garrett 1999, 103-130; Griffin 2008, 71-93; Hampshire 1951; Huenemann 1999, 224-240; Koistinen 1998, 66; Koistinen 2003, 283-310; Lovejoy 1964, 151-157; Nadler 2006, 84-121; Newlands 2007; Steinberg 1981, 35-68; Viljanen 2008, 412-437.

Here is a list of those who lean toward the moderate necessitarian interpretation. Curley 1969, 101-118; Curley 1988, 48-50; Curley and Walski 1999; Dea 2008, 603-628; Donagan 1973, 241-258; Friedman 1986, 371-401; Fullerton 1894, 254; Miller 2001, 779-814.

Here is a list of those who seem to hold that Spinoza is contradictory on the matter, that is, that he endorses strict necessitarianism and its denial and so, in effect, that he thinks alpha is entailed by the absolute nature of the attribute in question and that it is not so entailed. Bennett 1984, 111-124; Jarrett 1978, 55-56; Matson 1977, 76-83.

Delahunty (1985, 155-165) is the only prominent commentator, of which I am aware, that explicitly endorses the main remaining option: that a definitive decision cannot be made either way.

For more on this issue, see the following. Bussotii and Tapp 2009; Hart 1983; Leibniz 1969; Newlands 2010; Phemister 2006; Schmaltz 1997; Willis 1870, xxi.

the discussion, the violation of Spinoza's explanatory rationalism would result from the assumption that no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute. For if alpha (the entire sequence of finite modes) has a full cause, then the absolute nature of alpha's attribute provides that cause. But if the absolute nature of alpha's attribute provides that cause, then it is not the case that no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute.

5. RESOLVING THE TENSION

The evidence in favor of the interpretation that, for Spinoza, every finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute is stronger than the evidence in favor of the interpretation that, for Spinoza, no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute. What especially tips the scale, in my view, is that the interpretation according to which no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute results in a violation of the explanatory rationalism, and the rejection of chance, that is so foundational to Spinoza's vision. As I see it, then, the evidence for the interpretation that the absolute nature of an attribute is *insufficient* for its finite modes must be explained away if there is to be any resolution of the tension.²²

Now, it might be said that I cannot put much weight on the fact that alpha would lack a sufficient explanation if no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute. On what grounds? Well, according to some commentators,²³ Spinoza fails to consider the full explanation for alpha as a whole. That Spinoza "overlook[s] the hard question about the entire series" is evident, Bennett says, by the fact that Spinoza writes "as though our ability to answer the why question about any particular [finite mode in the series] is enough [to explain the entire series and thus] to meet the demands of explanatory rationalism."²⁴

It does not seem, however, that Spinoza failed to consider the full explanation for alpha as a whole. There is at least one case where Spinoza unequivocally to discuss alpha as a whole and says, in fact, that alpha as a whole

²² And of course we should try to resolve the tension. After all, Spinoza asserts that each thing follows ultimately from the absolute nature of its attribute in close vicinity to those passages where he is supposed to be denying this.

²³ Bennett 1984, 117-119; Curley 1988, 151n61.

²⁴ Bennett 1984, 117-118.

does ultimately follow from the absolute nature of its attribute.²⁵ I will discuss the passage in question before I move on to my suggestion for resolution of the apparent tension. That passage itself, in fact, provides an important clue as to how the tension is to be resolved.

The passage that I have in mind is Letter 64. Here Spinoza supplies Tschirnhaus and Schuller with some examples of those modes that, as described in 1p21-1p23, ultimately follow from the absolute nature of their attribute. When he comes to those modes that follow ultimately but not immediately from the absolute nature of their attributes (those modes known in the literature as *mediate* infinite-eternal modes), Spinoza suggests that the one under Extension (that is, the mediate infinite-eternal mode following ultimately from the absolute nature of Extension) is “the face of the entire universe”. For further assistance as to what he means, he directs his correspondent to the scholium of the 7th lemma of 2p13s. In this lemma, Spinoza explains that each body is a composite of smaller bodies and that each body can preserve its identity and individuality through various internal changes if and only if its component bodies maintain the proper pattern of motion and rest among themselves. Spinoza then says that we can keep proceeding upwards, through larger and larger composite individuals, until we reach the material universe itself as a composite super-individual (2p13slemma7s, II/101-102). So the suggestion is that the super-individual, which is presumably made up of all finite modes of Extension as they are related across time, is what Spinoza means by the face of the universe and thus the mediate infinite-eternal mode under Extension. The mediate infinite-eternal mode under Extension thus would amount to alpha under Extension. Since all infinite-eternal modes, whether immediate (1p21) or mediate (1p22), ultimately follow from the absolute nature of the given attribute, Spinoza is presumably saying that alpha ultimately follows from the absolute nature of the given attribute.²⁶ Here are the key passages in question.

²⁵ There are other, although less definitive, places as well. At TTP 3.3 and TTP 6.6 Spinoza describes the order of nature, alpha, as eternal and fixed. Alpha could be eternal and fixed only if it ultimately followed from the absolute nature of its attribute. Indeed, at TTP 3.3 and TTP 16.20 we see Spinoza say that the common order of nature, alpha, was predetermined and preordained by God’s nature. At 1p33d Spinoza also suggests that if alpha was different God’s absolute nature would be different. That implies that alpha ultimately follows from God’s absolute nature.

²⁶ It should be noted that Curley, not wanting to budge on the view that the absolute nature of an attribute is not a sufficient cause of any finite mode, interprets Spinoza’s remarks to Tschirnhaus here in a way that would not conflict with the view that the absolute nature of an attribute is not a sufficient cause of any finite mode. Curley, I believe, is wrong. That everything has as its sufficient cause the absolute nature of its attribute is corroborated from just too many directions. Nevertheless, I will quote Curley in full:

I should like to have examples of those things immediately produced by God, and of those things produced by the mediation of some infinite modification. (Schuller Ep. 63)

[T]he examples you ask for of the first kind are: in the case of thought, absolutely infinite intellect; in the case of extension, motion and rest. An example of the second kind is the face of the whole universe, which, although varying in infinite ways, yet remains always the same. See Scholium to Lemma 7 preceding Prop. 14, 11. (Spinoza Ep. 64)

So far we have conceived an individual which is composed of [the simplest bodies, that is,] bodies which are distinguished from one another only by motion and rest, speed and slowness. . . . But if we should now conceive of another, composed of a number of Individuals of a different nature, we shall find that it can be affected in a great many other ways, and still preserve its nature. . . . But if we should further conceive of a third kind of Individual, composed [NS: of many individuals] of this second kind, we shall find that it can be affected in many other ways, without any change of its form. And if we proceed in this way to infinity, we shall easily conceive that the whole of nature is one Individual whose parts, i.e., *all bodies*, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual. (2p13lemma7s)

Some may say that the face of the universe is not all bodies, but simply laws of nature or perhaps the pattern of motion and rest of the super individual in question (see Yovel 1991). Spinoza is talking about *all bodies*, however. He is talking about an individual, a super-individual, whose components include all bodies. One may say that Spinoza is talking about all bodies *at a given time*. Spinoza never says that, though. Also, Spinoza tends to speak from the perspective of the eternal. When he says all bodies, then, the default

First, the phrase “the face of the whole universe” need not refer to [the sum of all finite modes of a given attribute] but [merely] to those features of that [super composite] individual which enable it to retain its identity through change. . . . Second, if we do interpret “the face of the whole universe” as referring to that [super sum of finite modes], then we make trouble for ourselves elsewhere. The mediate infinite mode of the attribute of extension is supposed to follow from the absolute nature of the attribute of extension. . . . If the mediate infinite mode of extension follows in that way from the attribute of Extension, and if we identify the mediate infinite mode of extension with the totality of finite things, then the totality of finite things follows from the attribute of extension. I do not see how the totality of finite things can follow from the attribute of extension without its being the case that individual finite things also follow from the attribute of extension. . . . Unless [one] is prepared to attribute a grand inconsistency to Spinoza, [one] ought not to identify the mediate infinite mode with the totality of finite things. (Curley 1993, 131-132)

is to regard him as saying all bodies *ever*: “all bodies” is, literally, *all* bodies—and so across all time. The notion of temporality is indeed explicit in the very passage at hand. Spinoza describes the super-individual as being the same even as its parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways across *infinite time*. Thus the very context of the passage indicates that Spinoza is talking about all bodies across all time. Moreover, if the face was simply all bodies at a given time, that would mean that there are infinite faces over all time—one face for each slice of time. But not only does Spinoza merely talk about the *face* of the universe *singular*, the absolute nature of God produces what it produces from eternity, that is, in an eternal instant rather than at each time-slice throughout sempiternity. Lastly, even if there were these infinite faces, alpha would be the sum of these faces. And since each of these faces would follow from the absolute nature of Extension, so too then would alpha. This is all that I need here.

So I say once again, the evidence for the interpretation that no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute should be explained away if the tension in question is to be dissolved. For stronger evidence is to be found in favor of the interpretation that every finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute. 1p28 and 1p28d, in light of 1p21-1p23, is the main evidence for the interpretation that no finite mode ultimately follows from the absolute nature of its attribute. That is where I will focus my attention, then.

When we look at 1p28 and 1p28d *in isolation* from the rest of Spinoza’s writings, the natural reading, and the one that Leibniz takes, is that Spinoza denies that the absolute nature of an attribute is the ultimate sufficient cause for each finite mode. However, in light of all the evidence to the effect that everything ultimately follows from the absolute nature (such that the absolute nature is not merely necessary but also sufficient for everything), it seems that 1p28 must be read in a more restricted sense. Taking a cue especially from Spinoza’s endorsement of the fact that the *whole package* of finite modes (alpha) ultimately follows from the absolute nature (as we just saw when looking at Ep. 64 and lemma7s), and taking a cue in general from the fact that Spinoza often stresses how finite modes are inextricably imbedded, “interconnected” (TTP 3.3), within “the common order of nature as a whole” (alpha) (2p29s, 2p30d, 4p4d, 4p4c, 4p57s; Ep. 12 IV/54/10-15; TdIE 40, TdIE 55, TdIE 65, TdIE 75; CM 1.3 I/241/30ff, CM 2.9 I/266), I find it most reasonable to read 1p28 and 1p28d as denying, not that the absolute nature ultimately produces each finite mode, but merely that the absolute nature ultimately produces each finite mode *one by one*, in piece-by-piece fashion. Spinoza must mean simply that the absolute nature of an attribute does not

produce finite modes individually, in isolation from every other member of the package—piecemeal. He must mean that, since the absolute nature produces the entire package of finite modes, any given finite mode necessarily comes together with all the others, in which case it is misguided, in some sense, to single one out as if that one all on its own followed from the absolute nature. Since the absolute nature of God produces any given finite mode in the sense that it produces the whole package of finite modes, 1p28d's claim that "what is finite . . . could not have been produced by the absolute nature of an attribute of God" is not to be seen at rejecting the claim that *the absolute nature of God produces any given finite mode in the sense that it produces the whole package of finite modes*. 1p28d is rejecting something else. 1p28d is rejecting the sort of scenario where what is finite is produced by the absolute nature of God and yet does not necessarily come together with every other finite mode across all time.

According to my interpretation, each thing—even a finite mode such as me—ultimately follows from the absolute nature of God, contrary to what is suggested by the more straightforward reading of 1p28 (in light of 1p21-1p23). Since what ultimately follows from the absolute nature of God is as necessary as the absolute nature of God itself, and since the absolute nature of God is absolutely necessary, each thing—even a finite mode such as me—is absolutely necessary. As we see in the debate among Spinoza scholars as to whether Spinoza is a strict necessitarian (a debate not directly addressed in this paper), there are passages that seem to conflict with the position that each thing is absolutely necessary (and thus that Spinoza is a strict necessitarian). While such passages would have to be discussed in a place that permits more space, I think that the general strategy for explaining why 1p28 does not conflict with Spinoza's commitment to the view that all things, even finite ones, follow from the absolute nature of God serves to explain why these passages do not conflict with Spinoza's commitment to the view that all things, even finite ones, are absolutely necessary.

Take, for instance, one of the most powerful pieces of evidence for the view that finite things, such as me, are not absolutely necessary: 2a1.

The essence of man does not involve necessary existence, that is, from the order of Nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist, or that he does not exist.

By "a given man" here Spinoza means a given man, such as me, as he is all by himself, isolated from everything else. In isolation from everything else, a given man does not ultimately follow from the absolute nature of God and

thus a given man is not absolutely necessary. Indeed, since a given man, in contrast to God, does not himself involve existence, a given man considered all by himself is such that he may or may not exist. Since 2a1 is not considering a given man in relation to the grand scheme of things (according to which that given man would be absolutely necessary), the fact that Spinoza says here that a given man is not necessary poses no problem for the interpretation that, for Spinoza, each thing, including the given man in question, is absolutely necessary.

I say that by “a given man” here at 2a1 Spinoza means a given man in isolation. I say this not just because doing so explains away the tension that this passage poses to the interpretation that everything is absolutely necessary. Simply consider 2a1 itself. Here Spinoza says that even by the order of nature it is not necessary that a given man exist. According to the usual understanding of the order of nature that Spinoza himself tends to use (see 2p29s, 2p30d, 4p4c), the order of nature is the realm of modes, which as I argued above is uncontroversially (for both sides of the necessitarian debate) deterministic. According to this sense of the order of nature, I am necessary in that my existence has been guaranteed by previous states of the world, *ad infinitum*. Since Spinoza is denying here in 2a1 that my existence is guaranteed by previous states of the world, he must be thinking of a given man all by himself, in isolation. There are only two options about how Spinoza might construe a given man: (1) a given man as embedded in the entire realm of modes (and thus as guaranteed by the previous states of the world and thus, since the entire series of world states is guaranteed by the absolute nature of God, by the absolute nature of God); (2) a given man as isolated from everything else. 2a1 itself makes it clear that Spinoza is not taking the first option. He must be taking the second option, then. And the second option is itself, of course, *live for Spinoza*. Spinoza, after all, regards things as positivities, things in their own right. And thus he can talk about how a thing is its *intrinsic* structure (2p13s, 3post1), or about how a thing is what it “is and can do, *not what it is not and cannot do*” (3p54; see TdIE 101; 1p8s2). And thus he can talk about a thing “*insofar as it is in itself*” (3p6), that is, considering the laws of its nature alone (see 1d7, 3p2s, 3p56d, 4d8, 4p2d, 4p18s, 4p19, 4p24, 4p35, 4p37s2; CM 2.4 I/256).

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