SPINOZA'S MODAL METAPHYSICS

Introduction

Spinoza's views on necessity and possibility provide one of the clearest expressions of his extreme rationalism and his commitment to the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). In *Ethics* 1P29, we find perhaps the strongest formulation of these views when he writes, “In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way.”[1] Many scholars have taken this proposition to be a declaration of necessitarianism, a reading that, while well supported, makes it difficult to understand certain other passages contained in the *Ethics*. Among the most difficult passages to interpret consistently with 1P29 is 2A1. This axiom states, “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.”[2] In the first half of this axiom, Spinoza seems simply to be reminding his reader of one important difference between finite modes (of which man is an instance) and eternal substance (of which there is only a single instance). And so far there is no special difficulty. To arrive at the implication drawn in the second half of this statement, however, it seems Spinoza would have to break whatever principle underlies 1P29 and makes its claim defensible. The problem, in other words, is that 2A1 seems to imply that simply because man is not a substance that his existence is contingent, but a necessitarian reading of 1P29 precludes that anything’s existence be contingent.

The primary question this paper seeks to resolve, then, is how to properly interpret these

1 Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, edited and translated by Edwin Curley, (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 20.
2 Ibid., 32.

passages, which seem to affirm contingency, so as to preserve a necessitarian reading of 1P29. To address this problem satisfactorily, it is required that one take into account some of the underlying principles at work in Spinoza's metaphysics and how these bear on his modal views. By considering the implications of each principle in turn, we will have set the stage for the interpretive work to come.

In the following section, I discuss select Spinozistic doctrines and principles and trace out the theoretical implications of each with regard to our present inquiry. I begin each section with a thesis of how the doctrine bears on the question at hand, and then provide some defense and explication of my thesis.

Doctrine of Parallelism

Thesis: The doctrine of parallelism defies any attempt to explain modal concepts conceived under one attribute in terms of concepts conceived under another attribute.

According to Spinoza's doctrine of parallelism, “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (2P7). An implication of this doctrine is that for any entity conceived under the attribute of thought, there is parallel entity conceivable under the attribute of extension that is identical to it (and so on, for as many attributes as there might be). Similarly, the relation of entities conceived under the one attribute mirrors the relation of entities conceived under the other attribute. A tempting way of representing this doctrine conceptually might be to think of the logical connections obtaining between ideas as mirroring the causal connection that obtains between physical objects. Conceiving things in this way, however, proves to be an exceedingly difficult task for most of us, and seems to give rise to serious theoretical difficulties.

There is a strong temptation in reading Spinoza to interpret the primitive notions of one category of thought (for example, things conceived under the attribute of extension) in the concepts and terminology of another category (e.g., things conceived under the attribute of thought). This tendency

manifests itself most strongly in attempts to explicate the type of existence unique to substance. In 1D1 Spinoza writes, “By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, *or* that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.”[3] In 1P7, we are told that substance alone satisfies this description. To understand the modal classification of substance is to acquire all the theoretical resources one might need to understand the modal status of every other existent thing within Spinoza's system. For this reason, many scholars have looked to Spinoza's account of substance as the key to understanding Spinoza's larger modal system.

In the contemporary literature devoted to the subject, we find several different strategies for making sense of Spinoza's account of substance and resolving the difficulties inherent to it. These strategies typically focus on the Spinozistic notion of self-causation. Recall that substance for Spinoza is by nature both infinite in extension and infinite in thought (by 2P1 and 2P2). There is a burden, then, not only to explain what it is in virtue of which the one eternal substance is *conceptually* necessary (i.e., why it is primary to all other concepts such that it precludes them) but also what it is in virtue of which it is *ontologically* necessary (i.e., why it must physically exist and produce the effects it does). What we tend to find in the literature, however, are lopsided explanations of substance: accounts that seek to explain the actual in terms of the conceptual, or accounts that seek to explain the conceptual in terms of the actual. As an instance of the first kind of account, Samuel Newlands writes,

> There is no indication that Spinoza thought there was a principled reason for keeping causation as a metaphysical primitive; instead, he provides an account of causation in terms of something else. In [1D1], Spinoza defines self-causation (*causa sui*) as 'that whose essence involves existence or [*sive*] that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.'...Expanding his definition to cover causation in general, Spinoza's idea is that causation is a matter of conceptual connection. If *x* causes *y*, this fact obtains in virtue of a conceptual connection between the concept of *x* and the concept of *y*...If causal relations are grounded in conceptual relations, and conceptual relations are paradigms of explanation, then to give an account of an object's existence in terms of its causes is to explain the fact that it exists in just the way the PSR demands.[4]

3 Ibid., 1.

4 Samuel Newlands, "Spinoza's Modal Metaphysics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2010 Edition)*,

One potential worry one might have toward Newlands' reading, however, is that treating the conceptual as primitive inclines one toward a *de dicto* interpretation of Spinoza's modal claims, with substance being conceived as having the same modal character as a necessary truth. Interpreting Spinoza in this manner, however, runs the potential of leading to paradoxes.[5] As Richard Mason argues,

> If, for instance, [1P29] ("In the nature of things there is nothing contingent...") is taken in a de dicto sense, as a claim about contingent propositions, and in terms of any standard modal logic, we end up with the claim that all (true) propositions are necessary, which is inferred as equivalent to a claim that no propositions can be contingent. If we take a true proposition such as John Smith exists, this should be necessarily true. Yet, as we have seen, Spinoza said that it was absurd to claim that man (or *a* man) necessarily exists [2P10 dem.]. So all propositions are necessary but some are not.[6]

In light of this absurdity, Mason concludes,

> We can make no sense of Spinoza's views in purely de dicto terms...Not only does Spinoza omit to express his views in the *de dicto* terms of standard modal logics: his claims are uniformly and relentlessly *de re*. As Curley says, it is *things*, or 'the existing and operating' of things, [1P28] that are given modal values. We do not see propositions following from each other necessarily, and we scarcely see any mention of necessary truth. We do find things causing things – not even events or states of affairs. *Things* are the basic terms for Spinoza's logical relations, as where *A* causes *B* and where *B* is therefore "conceived through" *A*.[7]

The notion of self-causation (*causa sui*) seems to yield serious interpretive difficulties no matter what direction one comes at it (i.e., whether one attempts to conceive it *conceptually* under the attribute of thought or *ontologically* under the attribute of extension), and the lopsided accounts presented above dodge one set of difficulties only to offend their obligations to the other set. Newlands struggled to make sense of causation as a metaphysical primitive and rejected a *de re* interpretation of self-causation in favor of a conceptual interpretation. Mason, on the other hand, saw that accounting for modality in terms of facts about concept-inclusion or analyticity yielded the absurd result that all true propositions

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Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/spinoza-modal/>, sect. 2 Substances.

5 Richard Mason, "Spinoza on Modality," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 144 (Jul., 1986), 318.

6 Ibid., 318-319.

7 Ibid., 318.

are necessary truths. Ultimately, however, what is required is an account that adequately explains self-causation *regardless* of how one conceives of it. We cannot resolve the difficulties that arise in one domain by recourse to the theoretical machinery of the other (such as the application of contemporary modal logic to explain the causal connections which obtain in the physical domain). According to the doctrine of parallelism, every theoretical difficulty intrinsic to the one domain of thought parallels an identical difficulty concealed within the other. If neither domain has any metaphysical priority over the other, and if there is no interaction between them so as to permit the "explaining away" of the one's features in the terms and concepts intrinsic to the other (by 1P3), we are in a real dilemma. Until we have established a way of understanding self-causation that can reach across the boundaries of a single domain, we are stuck with the theoretical difficulties of both and the resolutions of neither.

A further implication of the doctrine of parallelism that bears on our present inquiry is that logical possibility is to be understood as coextensive with nomological possibility. One result of the PSR is that the one causal series (i.e., the one world or natural order) that actually obtains is the only possible causal series.[8] Nature, therefore, is just another way of apprehending God, and like God, it exists as it does by necessity. This is another feature of Spinoza's modal system about which lopsided interpretations abound. For Newlands, who tends toward interpretations weighted in favor of the conceptual, "contingency is grounded in the lack of certain conceptual connections. In the case of contingent existence, an object exists contingently just in case its concept is not connected to existence or to something whose concept is connected to existence, either immediately or via further conceptual connections."[9] Contrast this with Mason's view, which takes a *de re* approach to modality: "[Possible] things have to been seen as the available outcomes from the laws of nature. These outcomes are available just because nature is as it is...Issues about the existence of possible things should therefore

8 Olli Koistinen, "Spinoza's Proof of Necessitarianism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Sep., 2003), 291-95.

9 Newlands 2007, sect. 4. A New Middle Ground?

not arise."[10] Each of these interpretations has an element of truth to it, of course, but neither on its own provides the full story. If we take the Spinozistic doctrine of parallelism seriously, what *should* be said regarding possibility is that it is conditioned *both* upon natural law *as well as* conceptual connection (so far as either of these extend) – or rather, that to be conditioned upon natural law *just is* to be conditioned upon conceptual connection, and vice-versa.

The scope of possibility, then, should be understood as coextensive between the domains of thought and extension (i.e. whether the entities and relations between them are conceived under the attribute of thought or extension). This is a difficult position to maintain, and even those who acknowledge the principle in word often struggle to retain the commitments it entails.[11] Mason expresses our confusion well when he writes, "If 'The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things' [2P7], then we want to know about the object that should match the idea of things that do not exist."[12] Whatever the answer to this question turns out to be (and I will attempt to provide at least a sketch of an answer in sections to come), let us be clear about our commitments: we can rely on no interpretation that fails to satisfy the modal conditions of *both* the conceptual *and* nomological domains.

Modal Transfer Principle

Thesis: The modal transfer principle defies that there be any transition from a necessary being to a contingent being in the ontological series (i.e., no contingent being will follow upon a necessary being in the ontological series).

The demonstration of 1P33 states, "all things have necessarily followed from God's given

10 Mason 1986, 326. See also p. 341.

11 Jon A. Miller stumbles over the distinction in the following passage: "Given that the laws of nature allow more things to be the case than actually were, are, or will be the case, one important consequence of this theory is that the realm of the possible exceeds that of the actual. On the other hand, since more things are conceivable than are compossible with the laws of nature, a second important consequence of this theory is that the realm of the possible is more narrowly defined than that of the conceivable." Jon A. Miller, "Spinoza's Possibilities," *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Jun., 2001), 802-803.

12 Mason 1986, 326.

nature (by P16), and have been determined from the necessity of God's nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way (by P29)."[13] From this claim we can extract what we may call the modal transfer principle, which Newlands outlines as follows:

> [S]ubstance exists necessarily for Spinoza. Spinoza reasons that if an object necessarily follows from something that exists necessarily, that object also exists necessarily [1P21]. This sounds very much like what is now a familiar and widely accepted modal axiom: $(\Box x \ \& \ \Box(x \rightarrow y)) \rightarrow \Box y$. According to an applied version of this axiom, if God necessarily exists, and if, necessarily, God's existence entails the existence of another object, then that other object also exists necessarily. Of course, we need not (and should not) interpret Spinoza's following from relation as involving the strict logical entailment that our modern axiom uses. All we really need to see is that Spinoza thinks necessity transfers down the following-from chain. If x necessarily exists and y necessarily follows from x, then y necessarily exists.[14]

The glaring problem with this principle, however, has already been pointed out by Mason in his rejection of a *de dicto* interpretation of Spinoza's modal claims. Newlands himself acknowledges the difficulty when he considers, "If a finite mode followed from an infinite mode or from substance itself, the modal transfer principle would kick in and the finite mode would exist with absolute necessity."[15] This conclusion, of course, is adamantly denied in 2A1 and the demonstration of 2P10. What we require, then, is an interpretation of Spinoza's modal claims that closes this "gap" in the modal transfer chain. The strategies we will employ in resolving this problem will also put us in a position to provide an interpretation of 2A1 that is both balanced with respect to our conceptual and nomological commitments and consistent with necessitarianism. The resolution I want to propose will involve, first, the rejection of the ontological series model; and second, the adoption of a contextualist interpretation of Spinoza's modal terminology. To establish my basis for such a resolution, let me return to Spinoza's notion of substance.

As we have seen, conceptual and corporeal substance (i.e., God and nature) are for Spinoza just

13 Spinoza 1996, 22.
14 Newlands 2007, sect. 3.2 Infinite modes.
15 Ibid., sect. 3.3 Finite modes: a first pass.

two sides of the same coin. Descartes previously held the two domains separate on the basis of the distinct attributes he conceived to belong to each of them (i.e., *thought* corresponding to mind and *extension* corresponding to physical bodies). One Cartesian worry that might cause some initial trouble for us as well is this: How are we to understand God and nature as essentially identical when our conception of God is that of something unitary while nature, we are inclined to say, is composite, i.e. an infinite series of finite elements? Such differences would seem to impose different conditions on the modal status of objects within each respective domain. Spinoza addresses this worry in the second demonstration of 1P15. Here he rejects the view of nature as something finite and divisible and argues instead that "corporeal substance...cannot be conceived except as infinite, unique, and indivisible (see P8, 5, and 12)..."[16] In the scholia that follow, we find a fuller explanation and also a potential solution to our original problem:

> If someone should now ask why we are, by nature, so inclined to divide quantity, I shall answer that we conceive quantity in two ways: abstractly, *or* superficially, as we [NS: commonly] imagine it, or as substance, which is done by the intellect alone [NS: without the help of the imagination]. So if we attend to quantity as it is in the imagination, which we do often and more easily, it will be found to be finite, divisible, and composed of parts; but if we attend to it as it is in the intellect, and conceive it insofar as it is substance, which happens [NS: seldom and] with great difficulty, then...it will be found to be infinite, unique, and indivisible.[17]

In imagining corporeal substance as finite, divisible, and composed of parts, we are inclined to conceive of its content as spread out and linked together in a chain or series, and each element ontologically dependent on its predecessor in the series. This ontological series model, however, is based on an imperfect conception of reality in which substance is conceived as the origin of the series rather than its consummation.[18] Such a view leads us to think such things as, "unless we can find *something in the chain of finite causes* that exists with absolute necessity, it appears that we will have

16 Spinoza 1966, 12.
17 Ibid.
18 Spinoza himself, perhaps imprudently, refers to God as the "first cause" in 1P16 cor. 3.

no grounds for attributing full-blown necessitarianism to Spinoza" (emphasis mine).[19] But God is not *part* of the series, even as its origin (if origin is conceived as a discrete event within the series); rather he is *identical to it* as a whole. The apparent "parts" of Nature, argues Spinoza, *"*are distinguished only modally, but not really."[20] There is, then, strictly speaking, no "chain" of interrelated entities to worry us. The ontological series model only suits the "imaginative" way of conceiving reality, that in which modes are conceived *in themselves*, independently from substance. A more perfect understanding of substance both precludes this model and dissolves the modal transfer dilemma.

What it is to be a finite mode, then, is just to be an incomplete way of conceiving God. From this point Newlands concludes, "If there are true but incomplete ways of conceiving objects, Spinoza will occupy the interesting position of consistently affirming both necessitarianism and its denial, relative to these different ways of conceiving objects."[21] This contextualist reading of Spinoza's modal claims argues that the psychic transition from the state of intellection to that of imagination necessarily affects our apprehension of a perceived entity's modal quality. Put more succinctly, "the ways in which things are conceived or considered are modally significant."[22] For example, while one can discover the necessity of each man's existence insofar as it necessarily follows from God's nature (by 1P33), one cannot discover the same quality about any particular man reasoning in the opposite direction, i.e., cannot derive existence from *man's* essence.[23]

Modal transfer follows the direction of logical derivation. While every existent mode does necessarily follow from the essence of substance, very little modally follows from the essence of any particular mode: where x is substance is y is a mode, "$(\Box x \ \& \ \Box(x \rightarrow y)) \rightarrow \Box y$" is a valid inference; "y

19 Newlands 2007, 3.3 Finite modes: a first pass.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 4. A New Middle Ground?
22 Ibid.
23 The following makes it explicit that the reasoning cannot proceed in the opposite direction (i.e., from man to God) to ascertain the necessity of each man's existence: "singular things can neither be nor be conceived without God, and nevertheless, God does not pertain to their essence" (2P10 dem. 2 schol.). See also 1P8 schol. 2 IV.

→ □y" is not. In the first instance, all that is required is to ascertain the implications of a single self-evident premise (i.e., 1P11). In order to determine the modal status of any individual object, however, one would have to understand that object's relation to all other objects of its kind that might interfere with its existence (by 1A2), and for that task one would require an eternal perspective. From this perspective, the existence of all such objects would be understood to be *already* either necessary or impossible relative to the entire set. As Spinoza explains in the demonstration of 1P11:

> [T]he reason why a substance exists...follows from its nature alone, because it involves existence (see P7). But the reason why a particular circle or triangle exists, or why it does not exist, does not follow from the nature of these things, but from the order of the whole of corporeal Nature. For from this [order] it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now or that it is impossible for it to exist now.[24]

It follows, then, that contingency is only a matter of epistemic limitation: *we don't know* which of these modal descriptions is already true of the posited entity.

Note that our contextualist reading concerns the different locutions appropriately used to describe the modal characteristics of modes when *conceived through themselves* versus when *conceived through substance*: it recognizes no modally significant difference between conceiving them conceptually versus nomologically. Contextualism, therefore, does nothing to assuage the concerns brought up in the first half of our discussion. The solution it provides, rather, works by relocating the locus of the modal problem from the apparent modal peculiarities of the two domains of thought to the different epistemic situations one is in when one conceives of substance imaginatively versus intellectually (i.e., *modally* rather than *really*).

Contingency Revisited

Returning now to 2A1, let us consider how we may apply our conclusions toward providing an interpretation. The first part of our passage reads, "The essence of man does not involve necessary

24 Spinoza 1996, 7.

existence …" Let us first note that this axiom concerns the explication of "the essence of man." The conceptual context is thereby established as *imaginative* (i.e. man conceived in himself), and our sole premise by which to derive modal data is either y (if the man presently exists) or ◊y (if he does not presently exist). Recall that the modal transfer principle does not allow us to derive necessary existence from either of these premises. Furthermore, because one's mind is occupied in the act of imagination, one cannot acquire the premises otherwise available concerning substance, e.g., □x or □(x → y).[25]

Moving on, we read, "… that is, from the order of Nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist or that he does not exist." According to our conclusions above, we know this passage is *not* making the argument □x & (x → ◊y), since this would contradict 1P33 and result in the conclusion ◊y. Our interpretation, rather, takes this statement to be a further elaboration on the essence of man – namely, the assertion that it involves nothing pertaining to existence. This reading is consistent with the corollary to 1P24, which says, "whether the things [produced by God] exist or not – so long as we attend to their essence, we shall find that it involves neither existence nor duration."[26] Every bit of this passage, then, concerns our inferential possibilities from the initial datum of man's essence, and asserts nothing about the fundamental modal character of individual men.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in at least one respect, both existence and non-existence are *compatible* properties – namely, with respect to different times. In this light, the statement, "from the order of Nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist or that he does not exist," can be interpreted in any of the following manners without offending necessitarianism:

(1) □y at t_1 & □-y at t_2

25 y and ◊y are provided by *imagination*; □x, □(x → y), and □y are provided by *intellection*. One cannot simultaneously entertain the set of premises ◊y, □x & □(x → y).

26 Ibid., 18.

(2) □y at every t

(3) □-y at every t

Translating each of the above into their equivalent locution with respect to substance, we see that contingency drops out entirely: (1) and (2) both say *y is necessary*; (3) says *y is impossible*.