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ARTICLE

SPINOZA ON THE ESSENCES OF MODES¹

Thomas M. Ward

This paper examines some aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics of the essences of modes.² I situate Spinoza's use of the notion of essence as a response to traditional, Aristotelian, ways of thinking about essence. I argue that, although Spinoza rejects part of the Aristotelian conception of essence, according to which it is in virtue of its essence that a thing is a member of a kind, he nevertheless retains a different part of such a conception, according to which an essence is some structural feature of a thing which causally explains other, non-essential features. I go on to develop an account of Spinoza's metaphysics of essence, according to which essences, what he sometimes calls *formal* essences, are produced by the divine essence prior to and independent of the creation of finite modes, and according to which essences are the formal or exemplar causes of finite modes. I then argue that finite modes, in virtue of the formal essences which they actualize, are genuine causal *relata*. Finally, I offer some speculations about Spinoza's answer to the question, 'Why, in a necessitarian cosmos filled with formal essences, should there be temporal finite modes at all?'

KEYWORDS: Spinoza; essence; causation; mode; substance

I. INTRODUCTION

The goal of the search for clear and distinct ideas, Spinoza tells us, is a 'complete definition' of the 'inmost essence of the thing'.³ As with Spinoza

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³TIE91–5 (Shirley, 25–6). I use the following scheme of abbreviation for citing works of Spinoza:

E = *Ethics*

KV = *Short Treatise*

TIE = *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*

PP = *Descartes's 'Principles of Philosophy'*

CM = *Metaphysical Thoughts*

All translations are Samuel Shirley's, from Spinoza, *Complete Works*, translated by Samuel Shirley, edited by Michael L. Morgan. Spinoza's works will be cited first from the work, and then by the page number(s) in Shirley's volume, e.g. (Shirley, p.n). References to the Latin texts

so with most philosophers who countenance essences: knowing the essence of a thing through a definition is supposed to yield understanding of the deep structure of the thing. Historically, there have been at least three ways of thinking about what essences are. First, the essence of a thing may be the *kind* to which something belongs, independent of the mind's accidental taxonomies. Knowledge that members of a particular kind have *these* causal powers, together with knowledge that *this* individual thing is a member of that kind, is supposed to yield understanding of the causal powers of this individual thing. Second, the essence could be that feature or those features of a thing which it could not lose and still be the very thing it is. This way of thinking about essence was common in the second half of the twentieth century, in relation to possible-worlds semantics and work in metaphysics that made use of possible-worlds semantics. Third, the essence could be those features of a thing that explain why there are certain other features of a thing, and that are not themselves explained by other features. On this view, a thing has some of its necessary features, traditionally called properties (a technical use of 'property' not preserved in contemporary philosophical discourse), in virtue of its essence. Spinoza shares this third basic understanding of what an essence-enquiry is supposed to yield, and thinks that the essences of things are structural features which cause there to be other features of a thing (properties). He also retains at least one aspect of the first view: while he denies that things are divided into Aristotelian kinds, he nevertheless thinks that the essence of a thing determines what sort of activity that thing is capable of. Spinoza is obviously on the side of his contemporaries in advocating a homogeneous physics encompassing the sub- and superlunar, organic and inorganic realms; nevertheless, Spinoza retains some elements of a more traditional essence-based metaphysics, according to which individuals are actualized essences and are genuine causal *relata*. In a variety of texts, Spinoza presents a metaphysics of essence according to which the divine essence produces a realm of formal essences, which are the formal or exemplar causes of actualized, causally related finite modes. Moreover, and most clearly seen in the conatus doctrine of *EIIP7*, the essence of a finite mode is supposed to explain the causal powers of that mode.

While the divine essence and its attributes have been the subject of scholarly discussion, not much attention has been given to Spinoza's understanding of the essences of modes, and passing remarks about Spinoza's view of essence have not always been correct. Harry Wolfson thought that an essence for Spinoza was simply a concept,⁴ and Jonathan

of *E* and *TIE* are taken from the editions of Carl Gebhardt, *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols, found, respectively, in Spinoza, *Die Ethik*, translated by Jakob Stern, and in Spinoza, *The Way to Wisdom*, translated by Herman De Dijn.

⁴Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. I, p. 350.

Bennett thought that a Spinozan essence was its necessary features,⁵ but neither of these are accurate presentations of Spinoza's view. Émile Bréhier, in a paper focused on Descartes, noticed similarity between Descartes's and Spinoza's view of God's production of essences, as well as similarity between their views and those of some medieval theologians.⁶ More recently, Don Garrett has shown that Spinoza is indebted to a traditional Aristotelian understanding of the distinction between essence and properties, but his comments on Spinoza's understanding of essence are made in the broader context of explicating Spinoza's necessitarianism, and his comments, therefore, do not plumb all that Spinoza has to say about essence.⁷

This paper is, therefore, an attempt to highlight some important but overlooked aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics. In what follows, I first provide, in section II, some general background to Spinoza's understanding of substance, mode and individuals. In sections III and IV, I examine the ways in which, of the three views of essence, described above, Spinoza diverges from the first two and adopts the third. In section V, the heart of the paper, I attempt to present a Spinoza who thinks of essences, or what he sometimes calls *formal essences*, as produced by the divine essence prior to and independent of the creation of finite modes, and who thinks of these essences as the formal or exemplar causes of finite modes. I then argue that finite modes, in virtue of the formal essences which they actualize, are genuine causal *relata*. Finally, in section VI, I offer some speculations about Spinoza's answer to the fundamental question about why, in a necessitarian cosmos filled with formal essences, there should be temporal finite modes at all. Also in sections V and VI, I contrast my interpretation of Spinoza's understanding of the role of essences in metaphysics with Edwin Curley's attribution to Spinoza of what Curley calls the 'model metaphysic', according to which not essences but nomological facts are the subjects of genuine causal power and explanation.⁸ This contrast underscores a more general historical conclusion of this paper, namely, that the rise of mechanism in the seventeenth century did not entail, at least in Spinoza's mind, that the things described by nomological statements were passive subjects of laws.

II. BACKGROUND METAPHYSICS: SUBSTANCE, MODES AND INDIVIDUALS

'By mode', Spinoza tells us in *EId5*, 'I mean the affections of substance, that is, that which is in something else and is conceived through something else'.

⁵Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 114.

⁶Bréhier, 'The Creation of the Eternal Truths in Descartes's System'. Most of the ideas of this paper were developed before I read Bréhier's paper, and naturally I have more to say about Spinoza's views than Bréhier, focused as he was on Descartes.

⁷Garrett, 'Spinoza's Necessitarianism'.

⁸Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation*, 50–74.

John Carriero has shown that Spinoza's basic picture of the relation between substance and mode is the Aristotelian picture of the relation between substance and accident, according to which accident *inheres* in substance.⁹ Thomas Aquinas, writing about the essences of accidents, says, 'They have an incomplete definition, since they cannot be defined unless the subject is posited in their definition'.¹⁰ Thus, the definition of the essence of being six feet tall requires reference to a subject – a substance, say, Socrates – who is six feet tall. If we are to think correctly about Spinoza's understanding of modes, we will have to think of them as modes of the one substance (= *Deus sive Natura*), and if we are to think correctly about Spinoza's understanding of the essences of modes, then, we will have to think of them as definable only with reference to a subject – Spinoza's one substance.

This is an important preliminary note, for Spinoza writes of bodies or of individuals or of particular things without always explicitly identifying them as modes. It is therefore easy to think of these in terms of the familiar substances of a more homespun ontology, and lose sight of Spinoza's canonical formulation that whatever is and is neither the one substance nor its attributes, is a mode of substance.

Additionally, the notion of an individual thing is a very plastic one in Spinoza's metaphysics. In *EIIP13d*, he writes,

When a number of bodies of the same or different magnitude form close contact with one another through the pressure of other bodies upon them, or if they are moving at the same or different rates of speed so as to preserve an unvarying relation of movement among themselves, these bodies are said to be united with one another and all together to form one body or individual thing, which is distinguished from other things through this union of bodies.

(Shirley, 253)

Spinoza makes it clear that the bodies composing an individual thing in the above passage are to be thought of as 'the simplest bodies' (*EIIP13s*, Shirley, p.254). Spinoza goes on to say that an individual thing can also be composed of bodies that are themselves individual things, and even that Nature itself is an individual thing composed of all the individual things.¹¹

⁹Carriero, 'On the Relationship Between Mode and Substance in Spinoza's Metaphysics'.

¹⁰Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, c. VI, translated by Robert P. Goodwin, 62.

¹¹*EIIP13s*,

If we now conceive another individual thing composed of several individual things of different natures, we shall find that this can be affected in many other ways while still preserving its nature . . . Now if we go on to conceive a third kind of individual thing composed of this second kind, we shall find that it can be affected in many other ways without any change in its form. If we thus continue to infinity, we shall readily conceive the whole of Nature as one individual whose parts – that is, all the constituent bodies – vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual as a whole.

(Shirley, 254)

Steven Barbone imaginatively suggests that a flash flood, with its water and debris, may count as an individual thing for Spinoza, since the bodies composing it are close enough to one another and move in a similar enough pattern to constitute a single thing.¹² However, the rubber tyre, tree branch and the drowned cow, each of them parts of the flash flood, are simultaneously individual things in their own right, since the bodies composing, say, the corpse of the cow, are close enough to one another and move in a similar enough pattern to constitute a single thing.

Many metaphysicians have held that an individual can be composed of proper parts, each of which is itself composed of proper parts. In contemporary metaphysics, the term ‘atomless gunk’ is used to describe a world in which every proper part is itself composed of proper parts. In *PPH5*, Spinoza writes, ‘[B]ecause the nature of matter consists in extension ... which by its own nature is divisible, however small it be ... therefore however small a part of matter may be, it is by its own nature divisible’ (Shirley, 152). Spinoza therefore appears to be committed to atomless gunk. What is less commonly held is that every individual, with the exception of the whole of Nature, is itself a proper part of some other individual. If a commitment to atomless gunk is a commitment to parts ‘all the way down’, Spinoza’s view of individuals also commits him to parts ‘all the way up’. Neither view implies nihilism about parts and wholes. Spinoza would not consider it objectionable that his view about the plasticity of individuals entails that there are infinitely many individuals. Indeed, he embraces the consequence in *EIP16* saying, ‘From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways [*modis*] (that is, everything that can come within the scope of the infinite intellect’ (Shirley, 227).

III. HOW SPINOZA DOES NOT THINK ABOUT ESSENCE

III.1. Essences are not Merely Necessary Features

Jonathan Bennett once worried that, inasmuch as Spinoza is a committed necessitarian, his talk of what is essential to a thing is vacuous. If all features of a thing are necessary, then the essence of a thing is identical with the thing of which it is the essence, such that ‘*x*’ and ‘essence of *x*’ are synonymous. Bennett’s criticism explicitly depends on the following understanding of essence: the essence of a thing is ‘those of its properties which it could not possibly lack’.¹³ It turns out, however, that Spinoza does not share this understanding of essence. He does think that essential features are those which a thing could not lack, but he does not think that this is a sufficient

¹²Barbone, ‘What Counts as an Individual for Spinoza?’ in *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*, edited by Olli Koistinen and John Biro, 101.

¹³Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 114.

condition for being an essence, for he thinks that there are necessary features, properties, in the technical sense to which I have already alluded and which I describe in more detail in section IV, which are non-essential. He also thinks that every mode is necessarily causally related to God, and yet denies that a relation of dependence on God pertains to the essence of any particular thing.¹⁴ Therefore, being that without which a thing cannot be or be conceived is a necessary but insufficient condition for pertaining to the essence of a thing.

Spinoza does write of the essence of a thing as its necessary features. In *PPIIax.2*, he writes, ‘Whatever can be taken away from a thing without impairing its integrity does not constitute the thing’s essence. But that whose removal destroys a thing constitutes its essence’, and in *PPIIP2*, Spinoza says, ‘The nature of body or matter consists only in extension’. In the proof, he says,

The nature of body is not lost as a result of the loss of sensible qualities (Prop. 1 Part 2). Therefore these do not constitute its essence (Ax. 2). Therefore nothing is left but extension and its affections (Ax. 7). So if extension be taken away, nothing will remain pertaining to the nature of body, and it will be completely annulled. Therefore (Ax. 2) the nature of body consists only in extension. Q. E. D.

Although Spinoza says that a feature which is not necessary does not constitute the essence of a thing, and consequently that necessary features do constitute the essence of a thing, nevertheless, a necessary feature is not an essential feature just by virtue of being necessary, as the essence/property distinction and the necessary relation of modes to God demonstrate.

III.2. No Aristotelian Species

Spinoza firmly denies that Aristotelian natural kinds characterize the deep structure of reality. Instead, the intellect’s categorization of things into kinds is a product of defective understanding. Moreover, Spinoza argues that nothing that is shared, including the attributes of extension and motion, constitute the essence of any mode. In *EIIp40s1* (Shirley, 266), Spinoza

¹⁴*EIIp10s*

my present purpose is restricted to explaining why I have not said that that without which a thing can neither be nor be perceived pertains to the essence of the thing. My reason is that individual things can neither be nor be conceived without God, and yet God does not pertain to their essence. But I did say that that necessarily constitutes the essence of a thing which, when posited, posits the thing, and by the annulling of which the thing is annulled; i.e., that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and *vice versa*, that which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.

(Shirley, 250)

offers a genealogy of the transcendentals and of universals. Transcendental terms, writes Spinoza, originate when the number of images of things formed by the body exceeds the mind's ability to form simultaneous and distinct images of them. [W]hen the images in the body are utterly confused, the mind will also imagine all the bodies confusedly and without any distinction, and will comprehend them, as it were, under one attribute, namely, that of entity, thing, etc'. The most general genera are, for Spinoza, terms which 'signify ideas confused in the highest degree'.

The origin of universals proceeds along similar lines. When the images in the body are so numerous that the mind's capacity to imagine them is surpassed, then 'the mind is unable to imagine the important differences of individuals' (*EIIP40s1*, Shirley, 267). Spinoza's idea is that we perceive a number of things that are very similar to one another, but perhaps differ in height, skin colour, and other unimportant features. As a mental economy, we form a confused idea and express this with the term 'man'. That 'man' is predicable of infinitely many things is not a piece of interesting metaphysics, but rather, a result of the mind's being 'unable to imagine the determinate number of individuals' (*ibid.*). Since the notions formed from these processes of abstraction are confused, Spinoza holds all forms of inquiry based on them in low regard, calling them 'the only cause of falsity (*EIIP41*, Shirley, p.269)', since by means of them one may have no clear and distinct perception of things. The scholastic philosophers erred in so far as they 'sought to explain natural phenomena through merely the images of these phenomena' (*EIIP40s1*, Shirley, 266). Spinoza's critique of universals is aimed at philosophers on both sides of the realist–conceptualist debate concerning universals. Clearly, Spinoza scoffs at the realist thesis that a shared nature exists independent of the things of which it is the nature, but Spinoza's critique strikes a blow against Aristotelians of a conceptualist bent who hold that only concepts are universal but who also hold that such concepts capture that which in reality is salient to scientific enquiry. On Spinoza's view, abstraction to a common nature from multiple objects will always result in a 'confused' concept and will lack 'intellectual order'. Furthermore, it is impossible to reach a consensus on what exactly constitutes a shared essence, since each person's various experiences will lead him or her to form different conceptions of what are the most important features of a thing.¹⁵

¹⁵*EIIP40s1*

[I]n the case of each person the [universal] notions vary according as that thing varies whereby the body has more frequently been affected, and which the mind more readily imagines or calls to mind. For example, those who have more often regarded with admiration the stature of men will understand by the word 'man' an animal of upright stature, while those who are wont to regard a different aspect will form a different common image of man, such as that he is a laughing animal, a featherless biped, or a rational animal.

(Shirley, 266)

While Spinoza does not deny that we do have common notions that are adequate¹⁶ with respect to the things they represent, he nevertheless seems to think that an essence is or can be the essence of just one individual. In other words, these adequate common notions do not constitute the essences of things; they are not universals which are universally exemplified. In *EIIp37* (Shirley, 265), Spinoza writes, ‘That which is common to all things (see Lemma 2 above) and is equally in the part as in the whole¹⁷ does not constitute the essence of any one particular thing’. Following Spinoza’s directions, Lemma 2 is located in *EIIp13*: ‘All bodies agree in certain respects’ (Shirley, 252). The proof of the Lemma states, ‘All bodies agree in this, that they involve the conception of one and the same attribute (Def. 1, II), and also in that they move at varying speeds, and may be absolutely in motion or absolutely at rest’. Finally, in the Definition to which Spinoza directs us (*EIIId1*), he identifies the single attribute which the conception of all bodies involves, writing, ‘By ‘body’ I understand a mode that expresses in a definite and determinate way God’s essence insofar as he is considered as an extended thing’ (Shirley, 244). Spinoza claims that things have extension and motion in common, that these are equally in the part as in the whole, but that neither of these constitutes the essence of any particular thing. Why don’t these constitute the essence of any particular thing?

In the proof of *EIIp37*, Spinoza writes,

If this [i.e., that extension and motion do not constitute the essence of any one particular thing] is denied, conceive, if possible, that it does constitute the essence of one particular thing, B. Therefore, it can neither be nor be conceived without B (Def. 2, II). But this is contrary to our hypothesis. Therefore, it does not pertain to B’s essence, nor does it constitute the essence of any other particular thing.

(Shirley, 265)

EIIId2 states,

I say that there pertains to the essence of a thing that which, when granted, the thing is necessarily posited, and by the annulling of which the thing is

¹⁶By a notion that is ‘adequate’ (*adaequatae*), Spinoza may be taken to echo a longstanding tradition, represented by Aquinas, that truth consists in the adequation of the mind and the thing (cf. Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Textum Leoninum (Rome, 1970), q.1, a.1, corp., *Hoc est ergo quod addit verum super ens, scilicet conformitatem, sive adaequationem rei et intellectus*. ‘This therefore is what truth adds to being, namely conformity, or adequation of the thing and the intellect’.) On this picture, adequate notions are *accurate* notions, rather than *sufficient* notions, the latter of which is what the English transliteration of the Latin *adaequatae* connotes in contemporary English. Moreover, in *EIIp36*, Spinoza compares, on the one hand, ‘inadequate and confused ideas’ to ‘adequate, or clear and distinct, ideas’, on the other (Shirley, 264).

¹⁷By ‘equally in the part as in the whole’, I take Spinoza to mean that any part of an extended object is just as extended as the whole of which it is a part, and for that matter, just as extended as the whole extended universe. Moreover, any arbitrarily isolated part of the whole of extension exhibits all of the relationships of Euclidean space.

necessarily annulled; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and, *vice versa*, that which cannot be or be conceived without the thing.¹⁸

(Shirley, 244)

If an essence is or can be common, then an essence can be or be conceived without the thing of which it is the essence. (One might deny that the essence can be or be conceived without *something* of which it is the essence, but this is somewhat beside the point.) Similarly, if an essence is or can be common, then an essence can be granted without positing¹⁹ the thing of which it is the essence (though, again, perhaps one will want to deny that the essence cannot be granted without positing *something* of which it is the essence). Spinoza thinks both that the essence cannot be or be conceived without the thing of which it is the essence, and that to grant the essence is to posit the thing. Clearly, to adopt this view is to deny that essences are common, as Spinoza's thought experiment in *EIIP37* aims to show. All essences, therefore, are individual essences.²⁰

Spinoza elsewhere says that the essence of an individual body is extension (*PPIIP2*, Shirley, p.151), apparently contradicting his *EIIP37* claim that while all things have extension and motion in common, these do not constitute the essence of any particular thing. The contradiction is apparent but not real, however, since Spinoza draws a distinction between extension in general, *res extensa*, and particular or determinate modes of extension²¹ – of which more in section V.

¹⁸For an earlier statement of this view about essence, cf. *KVII*, Preface,

That belongs to the nature of a thing, without which the thing can neither be, nor be understood; not merely so, however, but in such wise that the judgment must be convertible, that is, that the predicate can neither be, not be understood without the thing.

(Shirley, 62)

¹⁹What is it for the granting of one thing *to posit* another? I take it that if *x* posits *y*, then some causal or entailment-like relationship holds between *x* and *y* such that the conditional, *if x then y*, is true. For example, Thomas Aquinas, speaking of the category relation, held that the *ratio* of a relation did not *posit* an inherent relative form in the *relatum* itself; that is, he held that *Rab* did not entail *there is a relative form in a*. *Rab* might be true even if no such form inheres in *a*. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis Liber I* (Parma, 1856), d.20, q.1, a.1, corp.

²⁰Spinoza's definition of essence in *EIIId2* does not entail that the only essences there are, are essences of existing modes. In several texts, Spinoza makes a distinction between formal essences, which exist 'as comprehended in the attributes of God', and the essences of modes that exist 'with duration' (*EIIP8*, Shirley, 248), where the former exist prior to and independent of their determination to exist as the essences of modes existing with duration. When Spinoza says that an essence cannot be or be conceived without the thing of which it is the essence, therefore, he must be referring only to the essences of modes existing with duration. (I explicate this distinction in greater detail in section V.)

²¹*EIIId1* 'By "body" I understand a mode that expresses in a definite and determinate way God's essence insofar as he is considered as an extended thing' (Shirley, 244). *EIP25c*: 'Particular things are nothing but affections of the attributes of God, that is, modes wherein the attributes of God find expression in a definite and determinate way' (Shirley, 232).

IV. ESSENCE AND PROPERTIES

In this section, I argue that the understanding of essence that Spinoza does employ in his metaphysics is that according to which the essence is some feature or features of a thing which cause(s) other (non-essential) features, and which are not caused by any other features of a thing. These necessary but nonessential features are traditionally called ‘properties’, *propria* or *proprietas*, and Spinoza himself makes use of these terms interchangeably, saying that *proprietas* follow from an essence (*EIP16*, Shirley, 227), and that a complete definition of a thing must explicate its essence and not its *propria* (*TIE95*, Shirley, 25).²² The ‘following from’ relation of *EIP16* and elsewhere is not merely a logical relation, as the language of ‘following from’ connotes in contemporary philosophical discourse, but a causal relation. The languages of logical consequence and causation are, indeed, closely intertwined in this and other texts. Nevertheless, Spinoza’s understanding of the essence/property relation is what contemporary philosophers would like to call causal rather than logical. Spinoza says in the first corollary to *EIP16* (Shirley, 227), ‘God is the efficient cause of all things that can come within the scope of the infinite intellect’, and in *EIP16* and its Proof, Spinoza makes it clear that whatever can come within the scope of the infinite intellect follows from the divine essence as a property. These texts in conjunction imply that an essence from which properties *follow*, is the *efficient cause* of its properties.

In section II, I explained Spinoza’s claim that God does not pertain to the essence of an individual thing, as a claim about the relation between a substance and its accidents, namely, that from the existence of substance it does not follow that some accident exists. There my concern was to make explicit that the way in which Spinoza thinks of modes is similar, in important ways, to the Aristotelian–Thomistic understanding of accidents. It is time to complicate this picture somewhat. Accidents, for Aquinas and his tradition, are either necessary or contingent. Aquinas and his tradition would further divide necessary accidents into properties and merely necessary accidents. An example of a merely necessary accident is the relation of dependence of a created thing on God. Properties (in the relevant sense) are those accidents which are derivative from an essence in just the

²²There is a precedent for using *proprium* and *proprietas* interchangeably. In Medieval Trinitarian theology, a *proprietas* is a non-shareable feature of a divine person (Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.32, a.3), and in at least one Trinitarian text, Aquinas uses *proprium* and *proprietas* interchangeably (ibid., I, q.33, a.4). *Proprium* is the Latin word commonly used to translate Aristotle’s and Porphyry’s *idion*. Traditionally, there were several kinds of *propria*, according to all of which a property is caused by the essence, but according to only some of which a property is also unique to an essence. In Spinoza’s own metaphysics, in the case of the divine essence it is both the causal connection between essence and *propria*, and the uniqueness of *propria* to an essence, that is utilized. I am unsure whether Spinoza thinks that the properties of the essences of individual modes are also unique to their essences.

sense that a thing of that essence has those properties if and only if a thing has that essence. For Spinoza, however, every mode of substance is necessary.²³ Moreover, every mode of substance follows from the essence of substance as a property of that essence. In the proof of *EIP16*, ‘From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways [*modis*] (that is, everything that can come within the scope of infinite intellect)’ (Shirley, 227), Spinoza explicitly invokes the essence/property distinction as his way of explaining the relation of modes to substance, saying,

This proposition should be obvious to everyone who will but consider this point, that from the definition of any one thing the intellect infers a number of properties [*proprietas*] which necessarily follow in fact from the definition (that is, from the very essence of the thing), and the more reality the definition of the thing expresses (that is, the more reality the essence of the thing defined involves), the greater the number of its properties. Now since the divine nature possesses absolutely infinite attributes (Def. 6), of which each one also expresses infinite essence in its own kind, then there must necessarily follow from the necessity of the divine nature an infinity of things in infinite ways (that is, everything that can come within the scope of the infinite intellect).

For Spinoza, properties following from the divine essence are not only necessary to the divine essence, they are also unique to that essence. Spinoza makes this point in *EIP33p*:

All things have necessarily followed from the nature of God (Pr. 16) and have been determined to exist and to act in a definite way from the necessity of God’s nature (Pr. 29). Therefore, if things could have been of a different nature or been determined to act in a different way so that the order of Nature would have been different, then God’s nature, too, could have been other than it now is .

(Shirley, 236)

If one specifies different properties one, *ipso facto*, specifies a different essence, since *propria* are unique and necessary to an essence.

²³Here, I do not argue for but assume that Spinoza is a necessitarian, and that he identifies two sources of necessity: everything that exists is necessary either by its essence alone (its essence involves existence, as it is expressed in *EIP7pr*, Shirley, 219), or by being caused to exist at some point in a necessary causal series. I agree with Don Garrett’s conclusion that Spinoza has two *sources*, rather than two *degrees*, of necessity. See Garrett, ‘Spinoza’s Necessitarianism’, 111. The single most problematic text for the reader of Spinoza who interprets him as a necessitarian is *EIIP10p* (Shirley, 249). There, Spinoza says that it is ‘absurd’ that a man should exist necessarily. A full defence of Spinoza’s necessitarianism in the light of this text would take us too far afield, given present concerns; but the gist of the defence is as follows: what Spinoza is calling absurd is that existence should belong to the essence of a man, that is, that a man should exist necessarily by virtue of his essence, and not by virtue of his cause.

A mode, therefore, is a property of the divine essence, but a mode also has an essence of its own, with properties following therefrom. In *TIE95* (Shirley, 25), Spinoza explains that a complete definition of a thing will explain the ‘inmost essence’ of the thing, and will not substitute for the essence any of its properties [*propria*]. Getting the order of essence and properties right, Spinoza says, is ‘a matter of utmost importance when it is a question of physical and real beings. For the properties [*propriates*] of things are not understood as long as their essences are not known’ (ibid., Shirley, 26). Spinoza then gives two requirements of a complete definition of a ‘created’ thing. They are, first, that the definition must include the proximate cause of the definiendum, and, second, that the definition must be such that all of the properties of the definiendum can be deduced from it (ibid.). I will have much to say about the first requirement in section V; for now, I would like to focus briefly on the second. Spinoza thinks of individual modes as structured by an essence/property division, no less than he thinks of God or Nature as so structured. The essence of any particular mode is that which, when known, all properties can be deduced. Consider Spinoza’s own example of a definition of the essence of a circle: a figure described by any line of which one end is fixed and the other movable. A rejected definition, which Spinoza says is merely a property (*propriatatem*) of the essence of a circle, is this: a figure in which the lines drawn from the centre to the circumference are equal. The successful definition specifies how a circle is put together; the property cannot be an explication of the essence of a circle, because it presupposes that the circle is already there, with a centre and a circumference such that infinitely many equal lines can be drawn from the former to the latter. The property is a necessary feature of the circle, and it is unique in such a way that any figure in which one can draw infinitely many equal lines from the centre to the circumference, is a circle, but the property is posterior to the definition, since in the definition we are given an account of why it is that a circle is such that infinitely many equal lines can be drawn from its centre to its circumference. From the property, it may well be possible to reason back to the essence; the point, however, is that even if the order of explanation can run from essence to properties or from properties to essence, the causal order must run from essence to properties. When we have identified some feature or features of a thing such that they causally explain other features, but are themselves not causally explained by any other features, we have a good candidate for the essence of the thing.

V. THE METAPHYSICS OF ESSENCES

V.1. Divine Production of Formal Essences

So far, we have seen that Spinoza thinks of the production of modes by the divine essence as properties following from an essence. We have also seen that Spinoza thinks that the essence/property distinction obtains at the level of the

essences of modes. Here I attempt to present a Spinoza who thinks of essences as produced by the divine essence prior to and independent of the creation of individual things of those essences (section V.1), and who thinks of these essences as the formal or exemplar causes of finite modes (section V.2). I also argue that individual things, or actualized essences, are genuine causal relata in the causal order of finite modes (section V.3). Finally, in section VI, I offer some speculations about Spinoza's answer to the fundamental question about why there should be any finite modes at all, speculations which draw on aspects of the account of essence given in section V.

Spinoza says that God is the efficient cause of both the essence and existence of things (*EIP25*), but he also says that one finite mode is produced by another finite mode (*EIP28*). How is divine causation of the essences and existence of things related to the finite modes' causation of other finite modes? When a finite mode produces a finite mode, does the cause produce both the essence and the existence of the effect, or one but not both of these? We might be inclined to say that a cause brings about both the essence and the existence of its effect, and that God is the cause of the essence and the existence of a thing just in so far as God is considered in a determinate way as a finite mode. Or, we might say that a cause brings about the existence of an essence, or that it brings about the existence of a thing with an essence. On this second picture, the essences of modes are, as it were, available to be created, or to be an ingredient in a created thing. The second picture finds its historical source in *Timaeus*, where the Demiurge produces things as copies of the eternal exemplars. It found various updated expressions in medieval philosophical theology, where the basic view was that God's essence was in some sense the source of the essences of creatable things. Henry of Ghent thought that God was the first cause not just in the order of efficient and final causality but also of formal causality, since creatable essences are imitations of the divine essence and have some sort of being prior to God's creative activity.²⁴ Many thinkers who did not distinguish exemplar causality as a distinct species of divine causality, nevertheless maintained that what gets created is created through exemplar essences. Some, including Aquinas, thought that an essence was just a way of imitating God, eternally known by the divine intellect in its understanding of its own essence.²⁵ Scotus thought that the essences were constituted independent of the divine essence as complexes of non-repugnant *notae*.²⁶ These and many other

²⁴Cf. Adams, 'Final Causality and Explanation in Scotus', in *Nature in Medieval Thought*, edited by Chumaru Koyama. Adams references Henry of Ghent, *Summae Quaestionum Ordinarium*, a.22, q.4 (1520 ed.), fols cxxxii–cxxxiii, L–T, but see especially P–Q; also *Quodlibeta VIII*, q. 1 (Venice, 1613), among other texts.

²⁵Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, 54 (Leonine, 1961); see the discussion in Bréhier, 'The Creation of the Eternal Truths in Descartes's System', 194.

²⁶Scotus, *Ordinatio I*, d.36, q.1, .60–1, Vat. 6: 296; see the discussion in Normore, 'Scotus, Modality, Instants of Nature and the Contingency of the Present', in *John Duns Scotus: Metaphysics and Ethics*, edited by Ludger Honnefelder et al., 162–3.

Scholastic thinkers shared the basic view that creatable essences are imperfect imitations of the divine essence, such that God creates what already exists in the divine intellect, using these imperfect imitations as exemplars, the way a builder builds according to a blueprint, with the exception that Spinoza, like Descartes, thought that essences are produced by God.²⁷ I believe it can be shown that Spinoza's metaphysics neatly fits into the second picture, in the general way in which I have described it.

Spinoza's motivation for positing an abstract realm of essences is fairly straightforward. The produced essences, at least those following from the attribute of extension, are simply all of the ways of being extended. The causal order of finite modes cannot instantiate, either simultaneously or successively, all of the ways of being extended. A circular table *right here and now* rules out there being a rectangular table *right here and now*, even though both are ways of being extended, but from the attribute of extension, all of the ways of being extended follow simultaneously and eternally. Whatever comes to be in the causal order, whatever comes to have 'existence with duration', as Spinoza calls it, is a way of being extended, but it is no part of what it is to be extended, or of what it is to be a way of being extended, that it should exist with duration. I interpret the 'infinite modes' of *EIP21*, as well as the 'fixed and eternal things' of *TIE101*, as these eternal, simultaneously existing modes of extension, some of which are determined to exist with duration as finite modes in the series and order of causes. (For ease of reference, I sometimes use *formal essence* to denote any of these infinite modes.)²⁸

In *CM12*, Spinoza says that essence 'is nothing other than the way in which created things are comprehended in the attributes of God'.²⁹

²⁷On Descartes's view of the creation of the eternal truths, see Émile Bréhier, 'The Creation of the Eternal Truths in Descartes's System', On page 205, Bréhier nicely compares and contrasts Descartes's and Spinoza's understanding of the creation of the eternal truths or formal essences:

When Spinoza affirms that 'God is the efficient cause not only of the existence of things but also of their essence,' he agrees with Descartes on a basic point. Both are of the opinion that the divine causation productive of essence is of the same type as that productive of existence . . . Spinoza's divergence from Descartes comes out in their determination of this single type of causation. For Spinoza, it is akin to the mathematical causation of a definition, while, for Descartes, it is free and creative

See also Gueroult, *Spinoza I*, 333–4.

²⁸Spinoza does not use this terminology often, but when he does use it, it is usually consistent with my use. Cf. *EIP8*, *CM12* and *KV* Appendix II. However, in *EIIP40s2*, Spinoza writes of the formal essence of the attributes of God. This use, obviously, does not refer to the infinite modes, since the infinite modes follow from the divine essence.

²⁹*CM12*,

First, that which is essence is nothing other than the way in which created things are comprehended in the attributes of God. That which is idea refers to the manner in which all things are contained in the idea of God in the form of thought. That which is potency has reference only to the potency of God, whereby from absolute freedom of will he could have created all things not already existing. Finally, that which is existence is the essence of things outside God when considered in itself and is

The phrase, ‘comprehended in the attributes of God’, is used in *EIIP8* to describe the way that formal essences exist. In that proposition (*EIIP8*) and its demonstration and corollary, Spinoza distinguishes *existence as duration* from *existence as being comprehended in the attributes of God*.³⁰ Reading *EIIP8* and *CM12* in tandem, we gather that when Spinoza says that when things do not exist with duration but nevertheless exist as comprehended in the attributes of God, he means that the *essences* (or, in the language of *EIIP8*, the *formal essences*) of things exist as comprehended in the attributes of God. In *CM12*, Spinoza denies that the formal essences are self-generated, and he also denies that they are created. To suppose that they were self-generated or created would be to suppose that essence ‘is a thing existing in actuality’. Instead, essence ‘depends on the divine essence alone, in which all things are contained’. Now, since the divine essence, as Spinoza tells us in this chapter, includes existence, whatever is contained in the divine essence must, therefore, also exist in some way. It seems, then, that Spinoza is using two senses of existence in *CM12*, just as he does in *EIIP8*. On the one hand, there is the *existence of created things*, and on the other there is *existence as contained in the divine essence*. We can surely identify the existence of created things (*CM12*) with the existence of duration (*EIIP8s*),

attributed to things after they have been created by God . . . From this we can readily reply to the questions that are commonly raised regarding essence. These questions are as follows: whether essence is distinct from existence; if so, whether it is something different from idea, and if that is the case, whether it has any being outside the intellect. To this last question we must surely give assent. Now to the first question we reply by making this distinction, that in God essence is not distinct from existence, because the former cannot be conceived without the latter, but that in other things essence differs from existence, seeing that it can be conceived without existence. To the second question we say that a thing that is clearly and distinctly (i.e. truly) conceived outside the intellect is something different from an idea. But then there is the further question as to whether this being outside the intellect is self-generated or whether it is created by God. To this we reply that formal essence is not self-generated not again is it created – for both of these would presuppose that it is a thing existing in actuality – but it depends on the divine essence alone, in which all things are contained. And so in this sense we agree with those who say that the essences of things are eternal.

(Shirley, 181)

³⁰*EIIP8*,

The ideas of nonexisting individual things or modes must be comprehended in the infinite idea of God in the same way as the formal essences of individual things or modes are contained in the attributes of God.

(Shirley, 248)

EIIP8s,

Hence it follows that as long as individual things do not exist except insofar as they are comprehended in the attributes of God, their being as objects of thought – that is, their ideas – do not exist except insofar as the infinite idea of God exists; and when individual things are said to exist not only insofar as they are comprehended in the attributes of God but also insofar as they are said to have duration, their ideas also will involve the existence through which they are said to have duration.

(Shirley, 248)

and identify existence as contained in the divine essence (*CMI2*) with existence as comprehended in the attributes of God (*EIIP8s*). The *CMI2* account of the existence of essence, then, is that created things are essences that have been given existence (the existence of created things), but that the essences of created things also exist as contained in the divine essence. One unsettled question from *CMI2* and *EIIP8*, however, is whether there are more formal essences than there are created things, that is, whether there are unactualized possible essences. Also unsettled is the nature of the relation – causal? identity? – between the divine essence and those essences contained or comprehended in the divine essences.

These questions are answered in *CMI3*. In this chapter, Spinoza gives a familiar taxonomy of modal notions.³¹ He begins the taxonomy by distinguishing two ways in which a thing is said to be necessary or impossible: (a) with respect to its essence, and (b) with respect to its cause. (For ease of reference, I will call the first, necessity_a (or impossibility_a), and the second, necessity_b (or impossibility_b.) God exists by necessity_a, ‘for his essence cannot be conceived without existence’. A chimera is impossible_a, because there is ‘contradiction involved in its essence’. ‘Material things’ (modes of extension) are either necessary_b or impossible_b. Material things lack necessity_a because their essences do not include existence; in epistemological terms, their essences can be clearly and distinctly perceived without existence, that is, the essences can be clearly and distinctly perceived, whether or not they exist. If it is in ‘the divine decree’ for the essence of a material thing to exist, it exists by necessity_b. If it is not in the divine decree for the essence of a material thing to exist, it is impossible_b for that thing to exist.

Spinoza goes on to subdivide necessity_b, saying, ‘The necessity such as in created things by virtue of their cause [necessity_b] is so called either with respect to their essence or with respect to their existence . . .’³² (For ease of

³¹*CMI3*,

There are two ways in which a thing is said to be necessary or impossible, either with respect to its essence or with respect to its cause. With respect to essence we know that God necessarily exists, for his essence cannot be conceived without existence; whereas, with respect to the contradiction involved in its essence, a chimera is incapable of existence. With respect to cause, things (e.g., material things) are said to be either impossible or necessary. For if we have regard only to their essence, we can conceive that clearly and distinctly without existence; therefore they can never exist through the force and necessity of their essence, but only through the force and necessity of their cause, God, the creator of all things. So if it is in the divine decree that a thing should exist, it will necessarily exist; if not, it will be impossible for it to exist.

(Shirley, 183)

This distinction between two sources of necessity – necessity by essence and necessity by cause – is made in at least two more texts: *TIE53* and *EIP33s1*. While there are some terminological differences in each one, the basic philosophical position is consistent throughout.

³²*Ibid.*,

Finally, the necessity such as is in created things by virtue of their cause is so called either with respect to their essence or with respect to their existence; for these two are distinct in created things, the former depending on the eternal laws of nature, the latter

reference, I will call the first, *necessity_b with respect to essence*, and the second, *necessity_b with respect to existence*.) That which is necessary_b with respect to essence depends on ‘the eternal laws of nature’, and that which is necessary_b with respect to existence depends on ‘the series and order of causes’. Spinoza distinguishes necessity_b with respect to essence and necessity_b with respect to cause *on the basis of* these distinct orders of dependence. The things that are necessary_b with respect to essence are necessary_b and not necessary_a, just because they are caused (by the eternal laws of nature). The things that are necessary_b with respect to existence are necessary_b and not necessary_a because they are caused (by the series and order of causes). The things that are necessary_b with respect to essence are the essences which are contained in God, from *CM12*, and which exist as comprehended in the divine attributes, from *EIIP8*. Those things that are necessary_b with respect to existence are to be read as the created things of *CM12*, and the things existing with duration from *EIIP8s*. Spinoza infers that

if we were to conceive the entire order of nature, we should find that many things whose nature we clearly and distinctly perceive – that is, whose essence is necessarily such as it is – could in no way exist.

Those things ‘whose essence is necessarily such as it is’ are, I take it, those things which are necessary_b with respect to essence, that is, the essences contained in God or existing as comprehended in the divine attributes. Spinoza’s view, then, is that there are unactualized, formal, essences, and an unactualized essence necessarily is unactualized.

The terminology here is confusing (see table 1), but the metaphysical picture is clear. Spinoza takes there to be a class of things – formal essences – which are caused, contained in God/comprehended in the attributes of God, and necessary_b with respect to essence. This line of interpretation is reinforced in *CM17*, where Spinoza says that the essences of things must be determined by God’s intellect, lest the essences of things be prior to the divine intellect – a conclusion which Spinoza calls, ‘absurd’.³³ One consequence of this view is that creation is only one way in which God

on the series and order of causes. But in God, whose essence is not distinguished from his existence, the necessity of essence is likewise not distinguished from the necessity of existence. Hence it follows that if we were to conceive the entire order of nature, we should find that many things whose nature we clearly and distinctly perceive – that is, whose essence is necessarily such as it is – could in no way exist.

³³*CM17*,

Furthermore, from God’s perfection it also follows that his ideas are not defined, as ours are, by objects that are external to God. On the contrary, the things created by God external to God are determined by God’s intellect (N.B.: From this it clearly follows that God’s intellect, by which he understands created things, and his will and power, by which he has determined them, are one and the same thing.) For otherwise these objects would have their own nature and essence through themselves and would be prior, at least by nature, to the divine intellect – which is absurd.

produces, for Spinoza denies that the essences of things are created, while affirming that they are produced (they are necessary_b, he says).

Spinoza thinks that what is necessary_b with respect to essence depends on ‘the eternal laws of nature’ and what is necessary_b with respect to existence depends on ‘the series and order of causes’. It remains to try to flesh out this distinction of orders of dependence, since it is central to my claim that essences are produced prior to being given existence with duration. *CM13* is the only text in which Spinoza makes this distinction in these words, but there are at least three other texts in which the distinction appears, albeit expressed differently: *KVI8*, 9; *EIP21*; and *TIE* 95–101. In *KVI8*, Spinoza distinguishes between *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. He is explicit that *Natura naturans* is to be identified with God.³⁴ He divides *Natura naturata* into two: *general* and *particular*. He says of these: ‘The *general* consists of all the modes which depend immediately on God, of which we shall treat in the following chapter [*KVI9*]; the *particular* consists of all the particular things which are produced by the general mode’ (Shirley, 58). *KVI9* is devoted to the general *Natura naturata*. He says that we know of only two: *motion* in matter, and the *understanding* in the thinking thing. Motion depends immediately on God as following from the attribute of Extension, and understanding depends immediately on God as following from the attribute of Thought. Particular *Natura naturata*, that is, particular things, are said to be produced by the general *Natura naturata*. I believe we can map the *KVI9* distinction between general and particular *Natura naturata* onto the *CM13* distinction between modes that are necessary_b with respect to essence and modes that are necessary_b with respect to existence in the following way: the modes that are necessary_b with respect to essence are produced by the eternal laws of nature, and the general *Natura naturata* is produced by the divine attributes. On this reading, the ‘laws of nature’ referred to in *CM13* should be interpreted as the divine essence itself, or the divine attributes themselves – the same productive source as *Natura naturans*. Additionally, the modes that are necessary_b with respect to existence are produced by the modes that are necessary_b with respect to essence, and the particular *Natura naturata* is produced by the general *Natura naturata*. *KVI8,9*, therefore, reinforces the conclusion that formal essences are produced by God, and that formal essences produce finite modes.

There is another text in which Spinoza seems to posit essences as existing in some way prior to and independent of the existence (with duration) of particular things, and as produced by God. In *EIP21*, Spinoza writes, ‘All things that follow from the absolute nature of any attribute of God must have existed always, and as infinite; that is, through

³⁴*KVI8*,

By *Natura naturans* we understand a being that we conceive clearly and distinctly through itself, and without needing anything beside itself (like all the attributes which we have so far described), that is, God.

(Shirley, 58)

the said attribute they are eternal and infinite' (Shirley, 230). Here, the so-called infinite modes follow from the attributes of God. The following-from relation is invoked in *EIP16* to explain the relation of God to everything produced by God, where what follows from God is said to be a property of the divine essence. We have already examined the way in which following from an essence as a property is a causal relation. In *EIP21*, therefore, Spinoza is saying that there obtains a causal relation between the divine attributes and the infinite modes which follow from them. It is natural to identify the infinite modes of *EIP21* with the general *Natura naturata* of *KVI8*, since the general *Natura naturata* is all the modes which 'depend immediately' on God. It is also natural to identify the infinite modes with the modes that are necessary_b with respect to essence, since the latter are produced by God, exist necessarily, and exist outside the temporal causal order (the order of the modes that are necessary_b with respect to existence).

V.2. Formal Essence as Formal Cause of Finite Modes

The modes that are necessary_b with respect to essence *are the essences of* the modes that are necessary_b with respect to existence, whereas the general *Natura naturata produces* the particular *Natura naturata*. In another text, Spinoza makes a very close connection between *producing* and *being the essence of*. In *TIE*, Spinoza is concerned with discovering the way to achieve 'clear and distinct ideas, that is, such as originate from pure mind and not from fortuitous motions of the body' (*TIE91*, Shirley, 25). If something is self-caused, then a clear and distinct idea of it will involve conceiving it 'through its essence alone', but if it is caused by another, then a clear and distinct idea of it will involve conceiving it 'through its proximate cause'. As Spinoza makes clear in *TIE97*, only God is self-caused, and therefore only of God can there be a clear and distinct conception through essence alone. For everything else, a clear and distinct idea of it will involve its proximate cause. Spinoza therefore lays down two criteria for a complete definition of a thing that is caused, where a complete definition is some expression that explains 'the inmost essence of a thing' (*TIE95*, Shirley, 25). The first criterion is that the definition include its proximate cause, and the second is that from the definition all of the properties (*proprietas*) of the thing may be deduced (*TIE96*, Shirley, 26). Of interest here is the first criterion. I do not take it as obvious that an explication of the inmost essence of a thing should make reference to the proximate cause of a thing. In an ordinary way of using 'proximate cause', the proximate causes of, for example, a horse, are its two parents, but it is not clear to me why we should be able to have a clear and distinct idea of a particular horse only by making reference to its parents. As it turns out, however, this is not at all what Spinoza has in mind in his first criterion of a complete definition. What he does have in mind is

announced in *TIE*101 (Shirley, 27).³⁵ In this infamous passage, Spinoza says that the essences of particular mutable things are only to be elicited from ‘the fixed and eternal things’, and from the ‘laws inscribed in these [fixed and eternal] things as in their true codes’. Spinoza writes that particular mutable things *depend* on these fixed and eternal things ‘intimately and essentially’. He also writes that particular things ‘can neither be nor be conceived’ without the fixed and eternal things, using verbatim part of the definition of essence given in *EII*d2. Finally, he says that the fixed and eternal things are the *proximate causes* of the particular mutable things. Therefore, the proximate cause that is sought in a complete definition of a thing is the fixed and eternal thing which is the essence of that thing. The picture here is that there are fixed and eternal things which are the essences of particular mutable things, and that these essences are related causally to the particulars of which they are essences. In *CM*13 we gathered that the essences of particular things are produced prior to the things of which they are the essences. In *KVI*8 we saw that there is a distinction in *Natura naturata* between the general and the particular, where the general produces the particular. In *TIE*91–101 we find Spinoza explicitly connecting the ideas of producing or causing and being the essence of. The common view from these texts is that there are essences produced by God or by the divine attributes, some of which are actualized as particular things. In calling these essences the proximate causes of particular things, Spinoza is not denying that particular things are caused by other particular things in the series and order of causes, but these fixed and eternal essences are given *some* role in the causal story of every particular thing. In Spinoza’s metaphysics, to be the essence of *x* is, among other things, to be the proximate cause of *x*. What sort of causality the formal essences have toward the finite modes is still unresolved.

In *EIP*28, Spinoza writes that finite things with determinate existence can only exist and be determined to act by another cause which itself is finite

³⁵*TIE*101,

For the essences of particular mutable things are not to be elicited from their series or order of existing, which would furnish us with noting but their extrinsic characteristics, their relations, or, at the most, their circumstances. All these are far from the inmost essence of things. This essence is to be sought only from the fixed and eternal things, and at the same time from the laws inscribed in these things as in their true codes, which govern the coming into existence and the ordering of all particular things. Indeed, these mutable particular things depend so intimately and essentially (so to phrase it) on the fixed things that they can neither be nor be conceived without them. Hence, although these fixed and eternal things are singular, by reason of their omnipresence and wide-ranging power they will be to us like universals, i.e., the genera of the definitions of particular mutable things, and the proximate causes of all things.

(Shirley, 27)

and has determinate existence.³⁶ Unsurprisingly, I see in the finite modes a clear correlate to the particular *Natura naturata* of *KVI8*, the particular mutable things of *TIE101*, and the things that are necessary_b with respect to existence of *CMI3*, but whereas in *KVI8* and *TIE101* there is a clear causal relation between particulars and essences, the finite modes of *EIP28* are said to be causally related only to other finite modes. When Spinoza says, in *EIP28*, that a finite mode can only exist and be determined to act by another finite mode, the sort of causality he seems to have in mind is efficient causality, but when Spinoza says that the fixed and eternal things are the *proximate causes* of particular mutable things, or when he says that the general *Natura naturata* produces the particular *Natura naturata*, I take Spinoza to be thinking, not of efficient causality, but rather, of formal or exemplar causality. On this picture, finite modes are the efficient causes of other finite modes, but an infinite mode is the formal cause of finite modes.

V.3. Finite Modes and Causal Powers

In thinking of the infinite modes of *EIP21* as formal essences which are produced prior to and independent of the creation of finite modes, and which function as the formal causes of finite modes, I am opposing a forceful interpretation of what Spinoza thinks the infinite modes are. Edwin Curley interpreted the infinite modes of *EIP21* as derivative general facts (derivative from the basic nomological facts of the divine attributes), described by nomological propositions. He interpreted the finite modes of *EIP28* as singular facts described by singular propositions. General facts are supposed to be partial causes of singular facts. To quote Curley's own example,

The singular fact that body *a* fell 4.9m is causally dependent on the singular fact that it started from rest and fell freely for one second toward a body having such-and-such mass and radius and the general nomological fact that this is what bodies do under those conditions.³⁷

Taken by themselves, the singular facts are merely successive; the nomological fact is supposed to be the explanation of why it is that these singular facts are related causally instead of just successively.

³⁶*EIP28*,

Every individual thing, i.e., anything whatever which is finite and has a determinate existence, cannot exist or be determined to act unless it be determined to exist and to act by another cause which is also finite and has a determinate existence and this cause again cannot exist or be determined to act unless it be determined to exist and to act by another cause which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so ad infinitum.

(Shirley, 233)

³⁷Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation*, 54.

However, there are several texts in which Spinoza closely connects the essence of a thing with causal power or force. These texts persuade me, taken in conjunction with the picture of formal essences as the formal causes of finite modes that I have been presenting, that Spinoza thinks that individual finite modes are causal agents, and are therefore to be thought of as causal *relata* – and that thinking of causal relations as obtaining between singular facts and nomological facts does not capture Spinoza’s own view of the matter. In *EIP34*, Spinoza writes, ‘God’s power is his very essence’ (Shirley, 238). In the proof he says that it is from ‘the sole necessity of God’s essence’ that it follows that ‘God is self-caused . . . and the cause of all things . . .’. Two propositions later, in *EIP36*, which says, ‘Nothing exists from whose nature an effect does not follow’ (Shirley, 238), Spinoza reasons in the Proof that, since the essence of any produced thing is a ‘definite and determinate way’ of expressing God’s essence, and since God’s power is his very essence, it follows that a produced thing acts according to the way in which its essence expresses the divine essence. *EIP36* is referenced in the Proof of *EIIIP7* (Shirley, 283). Spinoza writes,

From the given essence of a thing certain things necessarily follow (Pr.36, I), nor do things effect anything other than that which necessarily follows from their determinate nature (Pr.29, I). Therefore, the power of anything, or the conatus with which it acts or endeavors to act, alone or in conjunction with other things, that is (Pr.6, III), the power or conatus by which it endeavors to persist in its own being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing.

In section IV I tried to show that an essence for Spinoza causes there to be non-essential necessary features, properties. The scope of the causal power of essence is expanded in *EIIIP7*, to include all actions whereby a thing ‘endeavors to persist in its own being’. Endeavouring to persist in one’s own being is, perhaps among other things, action by which a thing keeps on acting in the way in which its essence determines it to act. An Aristotelian would find no fault with such a statement. For the Aristotelian, it is of the essence of fire to heat, and it is of the essence of a cow to endeavour to become a healthy adult cow. In the conatus doctrine, Spinoza locates the causal powers of nature in individual agents, and not in natural laws.

VI. INFINITE MODES, FINITE MODES AND MODAL PLENITUDE

Curley’s interpretation is also an attempt to resolve what has always been seen as a central difficulty in Spinoza’s metaphysics: how finite modes are necessarily produced by an infinite divine essence. Christian theologians always emphasized God’s freedom in creation, such that, even if what *can be* created is settled independent of the divine will (settled, for example, by the ways in which the divine essence can be imitated), what *is in fact* created is

still up to God. Spinoza not only thinks that the infinite modes (Curley's derivative general facts) follow necessarily from the divine essence, but that the finite modes (Curley's singular facts) also follow necessarily from the divine essence (*EIP*29, 33). The derivation of the infinite modes from the divine attributes is largely unproblematic: they are supposed to follow from the divine attributes in a way analogous to logical or geometrical deduction from axioms. We may think here of the way that infinitely many theorems can be deduced from Euclid's axioms, along with the laws of motion as Spinoza understood them, but even with the theorems of geometry and the laws of motion in hand, we still come up short in the attempt to give an account of the necessity of the series and order of finite modes, for, from consideration of the divine essence and attributes alone, the existence of the series and order of particular things cannot be deduced. The necessity of the finite modes does not appear to be logical necessity: propositions about the divine essence or its attributes will never yield, as a matter of deduction, that this or that finite mode should exist at such and such a time. Spinoza, unlike Leibniz, cannot appeal to the necessity that God should create the best of all possible worlds, since he does not think that goodness is a real feature of things or of the world (*EI* Appendix, Shirley, p.241,2; *KVIX*, Shirley, p.59). Moreover, in *EIP*28p, Spinoza seems to rule out altogether the idea that a particular finite mode can follow from the divine essence, attributes or infinite modes. Instead, a finite mode is caused by some other finite mode. Spinoza's resources for grounding his necessitarianism appear, therefore, to be thin. On Curley's account, for any singular fact or finite mode, *p*, there is in principle some conjunction of general nomological facts and singular facts from which *p* can be deduced, but this account, even if correct as an interpretation of the infinite and finite modes and the causal relations between them, offers no explanation of why there should be any finite modes at all. The problem of deducing the finite modes from the infinite remains one of the most puzzling aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics.

What is needed, therefore, is some account of why it should be necessary that God's productive activity includes producing finite modes. According to *EIP*16 and its Proof,³⁸ infinite things follow in infinite ways from the

³⁸*EIP*16, 'From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways [*modis*] (that is, everything that can come within the scope of the infinite intellect' (Shirley, 227). *EIP*16p.

This proposition should be obvious to everyone who will but consider this point, that from the given definition of any one thing the intellect infers a number of properties [*proprietas*] which necessarily follow in fact from the definition (that is, from the very essence of the thing), and the more reality the definition of the thing expresses (that is, the more reality the essence of the thing defined involves), the greater the number of its properties. Now since divine nature possesses absolutely infinite attributes (Def. 6), of which each one also expresses infinite essence in its own kind, then there must necessarily follow from the necessity of the divine nature an infinite of things in infinite ways (that is, everything that can come within the scope of the infinite intellect).

(Shirley, 227)

necessity of the divine nature. These include all of the modes of extension and thought, but these should also include all of the ways of being a mode of extension and a mode of thought. A mode of extension can be an infinite mode, existing not with duration but as following from absolute extension as a formal essence. Or, a mode of extension can be a finite mode, existing with duration. The latter come into and go out of existence (existence with duration), and the former always exist (exist as comprehended in the attribute).

The basic idea is that Spinoza seems to acknowledge three logically possible ways of being: unproduced infinite being (God and his attributes), produced infinite being (the infinite modes or formal essences) and produced finite being (the finite modes). Unproduced finite being will turn out to be impossible, since any finite being must have been caused to exist. If the divine essence is infinitely productive, then it must produce all of the ways of being. According to *EIP35* (Shirley, 238), whatever we conceive to be within God's power necessarily exists and, according to *EIP11p2*, there must be a reason for both the existence and the non-existence of things. On this view, only if there is some reason for there not being any produced finite beings, will there not be any. There evidently is no such reason, because there are produced finite beings, so produced finite beings are and are conceived to be within God's power. Such beings must, therefore, exist. For Spinoza, God and his modes constitute a modal plenitude – every way in which something can be obtained in Spinoza's cosmos.

This resolves only one problem, however: why there must be some finite modes or other. It does not resolve the further problem of why there are the very finite modes there are (and have been and will be). One plausible solution to this second problem is that all of God's modes, taken together, constitute God's maximal creative output.³⁹ Given that Spinoza thinks that God necessarily produces all that we conceive to be in God's power (*EIP35*), it would seem to follow that a sufficient explanation of why there are just the modes there are is that they together constitute the most reality that God can produce. I am inclined to think that this is the correct line of explanation, but it raises another question: why do these modes taken together constitute the most reality that God can produce? One might think that, since every formal essence is logically consistent and therefore logically possible (*TIE53*), and since God necessarily produces all that we conceive to be in God's power, God produces the most reality by actualizing every formal essence. This is inadequate. Even if Spinoza thinks that every formal essence must be actualized at some time or other in the causal series of finite modes (and I have cited *CM13* as evidence that Spinoza does not think this), the formal essences cannot be actualized all at once. Invoking again

³⁹This idea was suggested to me by John Carriero and Calvin Normore, independent of one another, and in slightly different terms than I give here (but hopefully in terms recognizable to the sources).

my well-worn example, if there is a rectangular table at this place and time (such that the formal essence of the rectangular table has been actualized at this place and time), then there cannot be a circular table at this place and time (such that the formal essence of the circular table cannot be actualized at this place and time). There must be reasons not just for the *existence* of any particular finite mode, but for its *order* in the causal series of finite modes. That each formal essence is, taken singly, logically possible, does not supply the reasons for the order of the finite modes.

If we are to think of the necessity of the finite modes as derivable from God's maximal productivity, therefore, we must think of the finite modes as the maximal order of finite modes. This suggests that there are different possible causal orders of finite modes, of which one is the maximal. We could say that, among the different possible causal orders of finite modes, the one that is produced is the one that is the fullest or most real, since God is a maximal producer. We may not be able to say exactly what it is about the order that obtains in virtue of which it is the most real, but we can be sure that it is the most real, for the following reason. Suppose that there was not one maximal causal order of finite modes, but a tie between two or more possible orders, each as real as the other and each more real than all other possible orders. In this case, neither order would be *derivable* from God's maximal productivity, because neither order would have any feature in virtue of which the production of that order would follow necessarily from God's maximal productivity. Thus, in this case there would be no actual order (since nothing other than God can bring about an order of finite modes); but there is an actual order. Therefore, one order is derivable from God's maximal productivity, and therefore there are not two or more most real possible orders of finite modes.

What exactly are these different possible causal orders of finite modes? I have argued that Spinoza's metaphysics includes, on the side of what is produced, formal essences and finite modes. Finite modes exist with duration, and formal essences exist as comprehended in the attributes of God. It seems reasonable to think of a formal essence as a possible finite mode, and therefore it might seem reasonable to think of a collection of formal essences as a possible causal order of finite modes. It is true that the causal order that obtains among finite modes is not mirrored among the infinite modes: the formal essences can and do exist simultaneously as following from the divine attributes, whereas the finite modes exist successively as caused by and causing other finite modes. Nevertheless, we might say that part of what is included in a full understanding of the formal essence of a thing are all the ways it could be produced as a finite mode, along with all of the ways it would act and be acted upon, given a place in a causal story. A complete hypothetical account of all of these ways, for any individual formal essence, would involve complete descriptions of many possible causal orders – all of the possible causal orders, in fact, in which it could be produced. A complete hypothetical account of all of these ways, for

Table 1. Several descriptions of modes in Spinoza's œuvre.

Necessary by Essence (necessary _a) (CMI3)	Necessary by Cause (necessary _b) (CMI3)	
Substance(=Deus sive Natura)	Modes	
	Necessary _b with respect to essence (CMI3)	Necessary _b with respect to existence (CMI3)
	Depend on the eternal laws of nature (CMI3)	Depend on the series and order of causes (CMI3)
	Contained in the divine essence (CMI2)	Created things (CMI2)
	Exist as comprehended in the divine attributes (EIP8; CMI2)	Exist with duration (EIP8s)
	General Natura naturata (KVI8,9)	Particular Natura naturata (KVI8)
	Infinite modes (EIP21)	Finite Modes (EIP28)
	Fixed and eternal things (TIE101)	Particular mutable things (TIE101)

all formal essences, would yield complete descriptions of all possible causal orders. This seems like a promising direction to take in thinking about how possible worlds or possible causal orders of finite modes might be construed in a way that is consistent with Spinoza's metaphysical convictions, but I am not yet in a position to give a full defence or critique.

The general approach I have taken in trying to account for Spinoza's derivation of finite modes from the divine essence and its attributes involves thinking of the divine essence as producing all that it can produce. *EIP16* and *EIP35* were the inspirational texts. While textually driven, and complemented by the interpretation of formal essences which I have presented in section V, this approach required invocation of something like possible worlds, which are not perfectly at home in Spinoza's system. I have adumbrated a way in which we might think of the possibilities of formal essences as grounding abstract causal orders of finite modes, but work remains to be done.

VII. CONCLUSION

Spinoza employs the notion of essence in his metaphysics in surprising ways. Although he rejects part of the Aristotelian conception of essence, according to which it is in virtue of its essence that a thing is a member of a kind, he nevertheless retains a different part of an Aristotelian conception of essence, according to which an essence is some structural feature of a thing which causally explains other, non-essential features. Additionally, Spinoza thinks,

as do the Aristotelians, that essence constitutes a thing as an agent, with active and passive causal powers characteristic of a thing of that essence. The homogeneity of the extended world, characteristic of mechanistic physics, is preserved in Spinoza's essence-based metaphysics, for Spinozan essences do not include the Aristotelian biological and elemental kinds, but only the infinite number of determinate ways of being extended. Whatever holds for extension in general, holds for individual extended modes, but the reason is that individual extended modes have essences that are determinate ways of being extended, and not because nomological facts produce the motion of things in the world.

By holding that formal essences are produced prior to and independent of their determination as the essences of finite modes, Spinoza reveals a deep indebtedness to the many medieval Aristotelians who thought that the essences of what God creates exist prior to and independent of created things, and that God creates through these essences as the archetypes or exemplars of created things. Spinoza followed Descartes's profound innovation to this basic model; they broke from the medieval tradition by putting the formal essence firmly on the side of what is produced. The common medieval view was that formal essences were not produced, even if the medievals disagreed about why they were not produced. Unlike Descartes, however, Spinoza does not ground the production of formal essences in the arbitrary will of God, but in the divine attributes of extension and thought, from which the formal essences follow as properties.

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