Modes Infinite and Finite
in Spinoza’s Metaphysics

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The God of the
Tractatus Theologico-Politicus

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I. Modes Infinite and Finite

Spinoza looks to the world and sees just one self-subsistent thing, call it God or call it Nature. All the other things — you and I and flowers and comets, together with our various shapes and colors — are not self-subsistent; we are each, as Spinoza says, in other things, and we can be conceived only through other things. Ultimately, according to Spinoza, all things exist in God or Nature and are conceived only through God or Nature. For this reason, he calls the non-self-subsistent things “modes” (also “affections”) of God. In short, Spinoza is a monist, denying any plurality of substances; any appearance of plurality is an appearance of modes of the one substance.

“Whatever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be or be conceived” (Ethics, IP15); but it seems that, according to Spinoza, some things are closer to God than others. In IP21, Spinoza introduces the infinite modes, creatures standing midway between God and finite modes, just as angels might:

1. I wish to thank Michael Della Rocca, Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Don Garrett, Lee Rice, and other members of the North American Spinoza Society who have offered helpful criticism of this essay. The material in this essay may contribute to a subsequent, expanded treatment of the subject.

2. For information regarding my method of citations and my translations, see the Cited Literature section at the end of this essay.
IP21: All things that follow from the absolute nature of any attribute of God must have always been infinite, or are infinite and eternal through that attribute.

These infinite and eternal things, as Spinoza says, follow “from the absolute nature” of God’s attributes. God’s attributes are what the intellect conceives as constituting the essence of God (ID4); so it is seen readily that infinite modes are closely bound up with God’s very essence.

Spinoza also raises the possibility of infinite modes that do not follow so immediately from God’s attributes, but stand, as it were, a step away:

IP22: Anything that follows from an attribute of God insofar as that attribute is modified by a mode that is, through that attribute, both necessary and infinite must also be both necessary and infinite.

These mediate infinite modes follow from God’s attributes only insofar as those attributes are modified by other infinite modes. So the idea, in all, seems to be that some infinite modes spring immediately from the absolute nature of God’s attributes, and these in turn modify those attributes from which they sprang in order to produce mediate infinite modes, which may (for all we know) go on to do the same thing, producing even more mediate modes.4 Spinoza’s chain of being is therefore a somewhat incestuous line of descent, with the immediate descendants of the attributes modifying their parents in order to produce a second generation of infinite modes.

In the next proposition, Spinoza tells us that there are no other ways for infinite modes to be produced:

3. There is more to this irreverent analogy than meets the eye. Throughout his work Spinoza is concerned to preserve the letter of traditional theology while changing its sense. Thus the attributes are (more or less) what the Hebrews saw as God’s attributes, but “as if through a cloud;” and for all we know, the infinite modes may be presented as what the old timers conceived as angels, clouded by the mists of superstition. Nor are the Christians left out of this desacralization: in the Short Treatise, as we shall see, Spinoza calls each immediate infinite mode “a son” (een Zone) of God (U48).

4. I know of no commentator who has suggested the possibility of mediate infinite modes modifying attributes to produce more mediate infinite modes, and Spinoza does not explicitly raise this possibility; still, I see no reason to rule it out.
IP23: Every mode that is both necessary and infinite must have necessarily followed either from the absolute nature of some attribute of God or from some attribute modified by a mode that is both necessary and infinite.

And so infinite modes spring only from the absolute nature of God’s attributes or from the modifications of God’s attributes by other infinite modes.

We can turn this conclusion around to make a more revealing claim: infinite modes can modify attributes repeatedly without ever producing anything finite. And it is so far an utter mystery how any finite mode is ever supposed to come about from Spinoza’s God. Yet clearly there are finite modes such as you and me. So there is still some explaining to do.

The only general information we get concerning the production of finite modes comes with IP28:

IP28: Any singular thing, or any thing that is finite and limited, can neither exist nor be determined to act without being determined to exist and act by some other cause, which is also finite and limited; and in turn this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to act without being determined to exist and act by another cause, which is also finite and limited, and so on to infinity.

Thus it takes a finite mode to make one. God, it must be noted, is needed as well; for as we find in Spinoza’s ensuing demonstration, a finite mode is determined to exist and act “by God, or by some one of God’s attributes, insofar as that attribute is modified by a mode that is finite and has a limited existence.” So finite modes result from, or perhaps we may say just are, God’s attributes as modified by other finite modes.

But this consequence seems unwelcome. For when we characterize Spinoza as a monist, we expect him to explain how things that appear to be finite and limited arise from the one substance. But in IP28 we are told that every finite mode depends on another finite mode, and it seems we are left without any explanation of why there should be any finite modes in the first place. It seems, then, that a deep gulf divides Spinoza’s envisioned universe: on one side there are God, his attributes, and his infinite modes, for all these are ultimately accounted for through God alone; and on the
other side there are the finite modes, for they require not only God but also each other for the explanation of their existence and action.

II. Is This Consequence Unwelcome?

According to Curley’s interpretation of Spinoza’s metaphysics, this seemingly unwelcome consequence is in fact a virtue of Spinoza’s account of things. To understand why, we need to briefly review Curley’s interpretation.

Curley interprets the infinite modes as those general facts responsible for the truth of the laws of nature. They issue from God’s attributes in approximately the same way that general facts issue from more general facts: the attributes are supposed to be the most basic and most general facts of the universe (i.e., fundamental facts of extension and of thought), and the infinite modes are the slightly less fundamental facts described by the laws of nature. In Curley’s words:

Spinoza’s thesis that every infinite and eternal mode of the attribute of extension follows either directly from the absolute nature of the attribute of extension or indirectly from some other infinite mode which follows from the nature of extension (IP23) put in logical terms amounts to the thesis that every scientific law relating to extended objects can be derived either directly from the fundamental laws governing extended objects or from a finite series of nomological propositions which terminates ultimately in the fundamental laws.5

Thus there is a series of general facts, ordered with respect to their depth, and the series terminates in the most basic facts of the attributes of God. This series of general facts is isomorphic to a series of laws of nature which describes those facts, and these laws are ordered with respect to their explanatory power. The deepest facts are described by laws of nature that explain the most. For example, if we count Newton’s three basic laws as descriptions of extension’s immediate infinite modes, then the law of universal gravitation is a derivative law, describing a mediate infinite mode,

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5. Curley 1969, p. 59
and the law of freefall acceleration as an even “more derivative” law, describing an even “more mediate” infinite mode. All these laws are ultimately grounded in the most basic features of extension itself; that is, if the laws are true, they are true precisely because that is just how space is.

The importance Curley places upon laws of nature in Spinoza’s metaphysics is borne out by many passages. For example, consider a passage in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* where Spinoza designates the laws of nature as God’s direction of natural things:

> By the direction of God I mean that fixed and immutable order of nature, or the linking together (*concatenationem*) of natural things. For as we said above and have pointed out elsewhere, the universal laws of nature by which all things come to be and are determined are nothing other than God’s eternal decrees, which always involve eternal truth and necessity. Therefore whether we say that all things come about by the laws of nature, or that they are commanded by God’s decree and direction, we say the same thing.6

Furthermore, the close relation between God and motion (which Spinoza offers as an example of an immediate infinite mode of extension in Letter 64) is made explicit in this passage from the *Short Treatise*:

> That which pertains especially to motion — it being better shown by a treatise on natural science than here that it has been from all eternity and will remain forever unchanged in eternity, that it is infinite in its kind, that it can neither exist through itself nor be understood through itself, but only by means of Extension — all these things I claim and shall not handle here, but will only say this about it, that it is a Son (*een Zone*), product, or effect created immediately by God.7

It is apparent from this passage (and a number of others) that Spinoza employs the infinite modes to bridge God’s nature with the laws of nature,

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in more or less the way Curley describes. Motion, for example, is an immediate product of God’s (extended) nature, and it is for this reason that extended things obey the laws of motion, whatever they may be. Spinoza does not write in terms of laws describing “nomological facts,” of course, but as Curley notes, his point is not that Spinoza thought in these categories; “[t]he point is that the concept of a nomological fact is the kind of concept that Spinoza’s system seems to require, the kind of concept that he seems to be groping for or trying to express.”

What now of the finite modes? Just as Curley understands infinite modes as nomological facts, he understands finite modes as particular facts. Hence a straightforward interpretation of the relation between modes infinite and finite: the infinite modes are to finite modes as laws of nature are to particular facts. No particular fact can be explained by laws of nature alone. Instead, antecedent conditions, i.e., other particular facts, are needed as well. In just the same way, finite modes are determined to exist and to act not simply by infinite modes, but by other finite modes as well. Thus we have Curley’s observation that God (i.e., some attribute of God, and the infinite modes issuing from that attribute) and other finite modes are separately necessary and jointly sufficient to determine a finite mode to exist and act.

Now we see why the “unwelcome consequence” mentioned at the end of the last section is instead quite welcome. For, if we follow what Hempel teaches regarding scientific explanation, laws of nature and antecedent conditions are separately necessary and jointly sufficient to determine the existence and action of finite things. Hence, according to Curley, Spinoza’s metaphysics cherishes an insight we share with him: namely, that one needs more than eternal nomological verities to account for the existence and actions of changeable things. Let us consider an immediate objection to Curley’s interpretation. IP33 makes it is clear that Spinoza thinks all things are necessitated by God: “Things could have been produced by God in no other way and in no other order.” Yet according to Curley’s interpretation, the finite modes are not necessitated by God alone; other finite modes must be brought into the picture as well. Can this interpretation preserve some sense in which finite modes are still wholly necessitated by God?

Curley concedes that, on his interpretation, finite modes are not

necessary in the same way that infinite modes are supposed to be necessary; but he argues that finite modes are nevertheless necessary for a different reason. To make this distinction, he calls upon a note Spinoza himself makes just after his demonstration of IP33. In IP33S1 Spinoza allows that a thing can be said to be necessary for either of two reasons: “either by reason of its essence or by reason of its cause.” According to Curley, we should understand infinite modes to be necessary by reason of their essence for they follow ultimately from the absolute nature of God’s attributes. But we should understand finite modes to be necessary only by reason of their causes. That is, given the causes of a particular finite mode, and the necessary causal laws that apply, that finite mode cannot fail to come about. In this latter case, God is still responsible for the necessitation of finite modes insofar as he is responsible for the character of the laws of nature. So it can be said in accordance with IP33 that all things, including finite things, are necessitated by God; it is just that we have to realize the different ways in which things can be necessitated. In Curley’s terminology, a mode can be absolutely necessary (following necessarily from the absolute nature of God’s attributes: the immediate infinite modes) or hypothetically necessary (following necessarily upon the postulation of its antecedent conditions, together with the laws of nature: the finite modes).

We still come around, in the end, to the question why there should be any finite modes at all. This seems like something Spinoza should be able to explain. Curley disagrees; he thinks that, according to Spinoza, there is an explanation for the existence of each finite thing, but no explanation for the existence of the totality of finite things. And given Curley’s interpretation, we can see why this might count as a virtue of Spinoza’s account. For while we can explain (in principle) each finite thing, given the laws of nature and the antecedent conditions, we have no obvious, natural means for explaining the totality of finite things. Perhaps, according to Spinoza as well, it is to be accepted as a brute fact that there are finite modes (look around!). Spinoza’s effort is then not to explain why they should come about, since it is obvious that they have come about; his effort is instead to show more precisely the nature of their reliance upon God. Indeed, trying to understand Spinoza as a consummate rationalist who wishes to explain all things by means of necessary truths makes him all the more distant and uninteresting to us, since we today hardly think that everything can be explained by means of necessary truths.

Let that be as it may. There is yet another, more serious objection
Curley’s account must face. Surely the totality of finite things is itself a mode for it is not conceived through itself, and so it is no substance or attribute of a substance. It must therefore be a mode. And the totality of finite things is infinite, for just the reason IP28 describes. It is therefore an infinite mode. But if the totality of finite things is an infinite mode, then it follows either mediatel or immediately from God’s attributes. Either way, the totality of finite modes has an absolute necessity quite different from the hypothetical necessity Curley ascribes to its finite parts.

It is difficult to see how a totality of finite modes can be rendered absolutely necessary without thereby rendering its members (finite modes themselves) absolutely necessary as well; and this consequence is pretty clearly ruled out by IPP21-3 and IP28. So we face a problem. Either we have just found a deep inconsistency in Spinoza’s thought or there is some way of explaining how the totality of finite modes can be absolutely necessary without finite modes then being rendered absolutely necessary. But before we go on to see such an explanation, let me pause to consider whether the so-called totality of finite modes should in fact be considered a totality, let alone a mode. For Spinoza has complex and varied notions of finitude, and according to at least some of these notions, an infinite object cannot consist of some collection of finite objects. For example, Spinoza writes that a line cannot be produced by placing points next to points ad infinitum, but only by putting a single point into motion. If infinite modes are like the line in this example, and finite modes are like points, then it would seem that a collection of finite modes could never compose an infinite mode. At least, it will take some argument to show that an infinite mode can be composed in such a way.

In response to this objection let us consider two ways of conceiving the totality of finite modes. First, we can imagine all finite things over all places and all times. Second, we can imagine all finite things over all places existing just now. With the first conception, I think it is indeed unclear whether the so-called totality of finite modes should count as a mode. Given that Spinoza thinks there was no first moment of time, as there will be no last moment of time, it is hard to see how any accumulation of finite modes will be big enough to fill this limitless duration. (Or, I should say, Spinoza would have found this hard to see; with post-Cantorian hindsight, we may not find this hard to see at all.) But with the second conception, it seems to me Spinoza should count the totality of

9. Idit Dobbs-Weinstein drew this question to my attention.
finite modes as an individual. In fact he seems to call it an individual in two places. First there is his remark at the end of his “physical digression” in *Ethics* II: “And if we proceed this way to infinity, we shall easily conceive that the whole of nature is one Individual, whose parts, i.e., all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual.” Second there is the example he gives of a mediate infinite mode in letter 64 — the mysterious *facies totius Universi*, or “global form of the Universe,” which, “although it varies in infinite ways, nevertheless always remains the same” (IV/278). These two clues indicate that Spinoza thought of the entire universe — at least as it is at a given moment — as an individual with bodies as parts. The clues do not decide whether the universe over all time counts as an individual, but that is a further claim not needed for our investigation. It is enough to see the entire universe as an individual whose parts change over time, without there being any global changes in the whole, in order to ask whether this totality can be considered absolutely necessary without its parts being considered so.¹⁰ So with this in mind we may resume our line of questioning.

**III. How the Totality of Finite Modes Can Be Absolutely Necessary While Finite Modes Themselves Are Not**

Don Garrett argues for a way to understand how the totality of finite things follows with absolute necessity from God’s attributes while the finite modes do not. The key to his account is his construal of the absolute nature of an attribute. By “absolute nature,” Garrett contends, Spinoza means that which is pervasive throughout an attribute, as motion and rest and its conservation are supposed to be pervasive throughout extension. This absolute nature of an attribute is distinct from any “nonabsolute” nature of an attribute which may involve qualities that are only here or there in the attribute (and which may be responsible for determining the existence and actions of finite modes). If such a distinction can be made clear, then perhaps it can be maintained that the totality of finite modes follows from the absolute nature of God’s attributes, while the particular finite modes themselves follow only from “nonabsolute” natures of God’s attributes. And this may be enough to solve the problem given above.

Garrett clarifies the distinction in his exposition of IP21D and

¹⁰. Michael Della Rocca suggested this “second conception” to me.
IP28D:

An attribute, if it is to have any internal diversity or change, must be qualified in different ways at different places and times. Now, some things about an attribute will follow from the very nature of the attribute regardless of how it is qualified or “affected,” and thus will follow equally from it under all circumstances; accordingly, things of this kind must be infinite and eternal, in the sense of being necessarily pervasive and permanent throughout the whole range of the attribute. This is the argument of IP21D concerning infinite modes. Other things, however — those local and temporary features that actually constitute the attribute’s diversification and change — cannot similarly follow from the nature of the attribute without regard to how it is qualified or “affected”; otherwise, they would be necessarily pervasive and permanent as well. Hence, these finite things must follow only from some non pervasive or non permanent affections, and so on to infinity. This is the argument of IP28D concerning finite modes.\(^{11}\)

Thus each attribute has within itself, by its own nature, great diversification and change. That which remains invariant in the attribute is eternal and infinite. The embodiment of the diversity and change within the attribute are the finite modes, each of which clearly can be neither infinite nor eternal; but their totality follows nevertheless from the nature of the attribute. The individual finite modes follow from the attribute as well, but only given the other finite modes that, at least in part, occasion them.

Garrett then goes on to explain why there should be great diversification and change within an attribute. His does this by arguing that God’s attributes, according to Spinoza, are supposed to express the greatest possible perfection or reality, as evidenced in IP16: “From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways [\textit{infinita infinitis modis}]”. This great splendor is the variety displayed in the totality of finite modes. Hence the totality is inherent to the attribute. And consequently this totality, in all its splendor, cannot be other than it is: in

\(^{11}\) Garrett 1991, p. 196.
other words, there is a unique such totality.

Yet, even though the totality of finite modes is inherent to an attribute, each finite mode does not follow from the absolute nature of the attribute, since each finite mode requires variation for its existence, and the absolute natures of God’s attributes are invariant. So each finite thing depends upon other finite things, and thus does not follow from God’s absolute nature, but only from other parts of God’s attribute, or from God’s “nonabsolute” nature.

But we might wonder at this point exactly how all of the parts of the totality of finite things can follow from the absolute nature of God’s attributes without each of the parts of the totality of finite things also doing so. After all, the totality is nothing other than the sum of its parts; and so it seems each finite mode should be rendered absolutely necessary in virtue of being part of a totality that is itself absolutely necessary. Garrett thinks Spinoza can escape this consequence by maintaining two senses of “following from”:

Of course, the absolute nature of the attribute would “entail” the existence of each finite mode, in the sense that there would be no possible world in which the attribute had that absolute nature and yet the finite mode did not exist; but [as Garrett contends] Spinoza requires more than this of the “following from” relation. In his view, a finite mode can be said to “follow from” an attribute “considered” in one way, but fail to “follow from” an attribute considered in another, more restricted way, a distinction that makes good sense when taken as expressing a finite mode’s dependence for existence on its membership in the only constructible or maximally perfect infinite series of such modes, but a distinction for which the modern entailment relation simply makes no allowance.12

Thus we can say that each finite mode follows necessarily from God’s attributes, if all we mean by “follows necessarily” is that X follows necessarily from Y just in case Y cannot exist without X also existing. (If we restrict ourselves to this meaning, we shall have to maintain that a truth of geometry follows necessarily from a truth of arithmetic, as the second cannot be true without the first also being true.) But if by “follows
necessarily’’ we mean that Y’s nature demands X’s existence in particular in some sense for which modern logic does not allow, as Garrett notes, then we cannot say that each finite mode follows necessarily from the absolute nature of God’s attributes. What God’s attributes demand is great diversification, and while each finite mode plays its part in exhibiting that splendor, no one of them delivers by itself what the attribute demands. Only the totality is demanded by the absolute nature of God’s attributes, for it alone delivers the required splendor.

I think Garrett’s account is on the right road toward answering the problem posed at the end of the last section. But it does not carry us the whole distance because two further problems stand in the way. First, what exactly is the mechanism of the splendor found in the universe? It is clear that Spinoza thinks that “maximal reality” or “the greatest perfection” flows naturally from God’s nature, but it is unclear why it should. In short: what is it specifically about God that forces the universe to be a varied, splendid thing instead of a homogeneous soup? Second, why should we think that there is only one way for an attribute to contain the greatest diversification and change? In other words: why can there be only one totality of finite modes that exhibits the greatest splendor?

IV. The Finite Modes as Embedded in the Infinite Modes: A New Interpretation

I think the questions at the end of the last section can be answered by providing a new way of understanding the way in which the finite modes are supposed to be related to the infinite modes. I think the interpretation I

12. Garrett 1991, n.11, p. 216. Friedman also argues that to understand how the finite follows from the infinite we must distinguish following with logico-metaphysical necessity from following with causal necessity. His claim is that the totality of finite modes and the logical essences of those modes are logico-metaphysically necessitated by God’s nature, but that each individual finite mode itself is only causally necessitated by other actual finite modes. But there is a problem here. According to IIDef2, if an essence is posited, the thing whose essence it is is also posited necessarily; so if the essences of finite modes are logico-metaphysically necessitated, why should the finite modes themselves not also be logico-metaphysically necessitated? Yet this is a consequence Friedman must rule out in order for his account to work, and he does so explicitly. See Friedman 1986, esp. p. 390.
Let me begin then with the central law of Spinoza’s physics, the principle of the conservation of motion and rest. For Spinoza, this law not only regulates the outcomes of collisions among bodies; it also provides the criterion for bodily identity. In the batch of axioms and lemmas between IIIP13 and IIIP14 (the “physical digression” noted above), Spinoza argues that bodies can be understood as composites of simpler bodies that maintain a constant configuration (Latin: ratio) of motion and rest. So the individual object before me is distinguished from the air around it by maintaining a constant ratio of motion among its parts. The object can lose parts and gain parts and yet remain the same body, so long as its ratio is not disrupted.

Near the end of this brief excursion into physics, Spinoza notes in a scholium that each individual body is in turn part of a larger body that also maintains a constant ratio of motion and rest among its parts. This larger body is part of an even larger one, and so on, until we reach the universe as a whole. The universe counts as an infinite body precisely because of the universal conservation of motion and rest. (I pointed out this passage above in arguing that Spinoza conceived the universe as an individual.) Thus the outcomes of collisions among finite bodies in Spinoza’s universe are regulated ultimately by the universal conservation of motion and rest, and the end result is that the universe maintains its identity over time. It is in the universe’s nature to maintain its particular ratio.

The image here is strongly reminiscent of a peculiar image Spinoza presents to Oldenburg in their correspondence. It is the image of a worm in some unfortunate wretch’s blood:

Let us conceive now, if you please, a small worm living in the blood which is capable of visually discerning the particles of the blood, lymph, chyle, etc., and of intelligently observing the way in which each particle, when it strikes another, either rebounds or communicates some of its motion, and so on. That worm would live in this blood as we live in this part of the universe, and would consider each particle of blood as a whole, not as it truly is, a part; nor could it know how all the parts of the blood
are moderated and forced to accommodate themselves to one another accordingly by the universal nature of the blood so that they agree in a certain way.\footnote{13}

Little does our worm know that the particles in the blood are parts of a larger whole, and that they do what they do because of a universal nature that pertains to the whole. Spinoza raises this thought experiment in the course of explaining to Oldenburg how he understands each part of the universe to be regulated by larger forces:

Now all bodies in nature can and must be conceived as we have here conceived of the blood; for all bodies are surrounded by others, and are determined by one another to exist and act in a certain and determinate way, always preserving in all of them at once the same ratio of motion and rest in the whole universe. From this it follows that every body, insofar as it exists modified in a certain way, must be considered as a part of the whole universe, must agree with the whole, and must cohere with other bodies; and because the nature of the universe is not limited, as the nature of the blood is, but is absolutely infinite, its parts by this infinite power of nature are moderated in infinite ways and are compelled to undergo infinite variations.\footnote{14}

Thus, again, the collisions among individuals in the universe are governed by the universal conservation of motion and rest. This conservation acts as a universal force, applying everywhere and at once, linking each individual body’s states of motion and rest inextricably to the states of motion and rest of other bodies.

Appreciating this point leads us to a somewhat different understanding of IP28, which I will present again here:

\begin{quote}
IP28: Any singular thing, or any thing that is finite and limited, can neither exist nor be determined to act without being determined to exist and act by some other
\end{quote}

\footnote{13}{\textit{Letter 32; IV/171/9-18}}
\footnote{14}{\textit{Letter 32; IV/172-173/15-18,18}}
cause, which is also finite and limited; and in turn this
cause also can neither exist nor be determined to act
without being determined to exist and act by another
cause, which is also finite and limited, and so on to infin-
ity.

Our previous way of understanding this passage was to understand it as
describing the way in which antecedent conditions, in conjunction with the
laws of nature, determine the existence and actions of finite modes. Given
the story of the worm in the blood, we might now understand IP28 differ-
ently. (Let us confine our attention to the case of extension, for clarity’s
sake.) Spinoza is not merely describing how some local bodies, at time t,
produce (in accordance with the laws of nature) the existence and actions
of bodies at a subsequent time t+n; he is also thinking of the way in which
each finite body relies upon the ratio of motion and rest of the larger (but
nevertheless finite) body that contains it. Each body is determined to exist
and to act by the nature of a finite body of which it is a part; and this chain
of bodies, with each body “embedded” within the next like dolls in a set of
Russian dolls, extends to infinity, until (in the limit) we reach the universe
as a whole. The universe as a whole is ultimately responsible for the
exchanges of motions “all the way down,” for the simple reason that the
universe is characterized by the universal conservation of motion and rest.

I think this is a plausible reading of IP28, given what we know of
Spinoza’s physics. Spinoza is concerned to show that the universe has cer-
tain global features that govern the behavior of its parts, and our reading of
IP28 captures that concern quite nicely.

Now let us see how this interpretation helps to square the problems
we have encountered along the way. Recall the argument presented at
the end of the first section of this essay for thinking of the universe as a whole
the totality of finite modes as itself an infinite mode. If the foregoing inter-
pretation is correct, we now have an understanding of the way in which the
finite modes are related to their totality, which is itself clearly an infinite
mode. The nature of the totality of finite modes determines the existence of
each finite mode in just the same way that the nature of the blood is sup-
posed to determine the existence and behavior of particles of lymph, chyle,
etc. Each finite mode is determined to exist and to do what it does by the
nature of the larger body it is within. The finite modes exist and act by rea-
son of the universal conservation of motion and rest which governs their
totality.
What now of our basic question, why there should be any finite modes at all? The answer is that each finite mode just is part of the machinery whereby an infinite mode maintains its identity. As we saw above, an extended individual maintains its identity, according to Spinoza, by maintaining a constant ratio of motion and rest among its parts. The totality of finite modes, itself an infinite mode, could not possibly maintain its identity without having parts whose communal ratio of motion and rest is conserved. And so there must be finite modes if there is to be the particular infinite mode that is their totality.15

Moreover, on this interpretation there is a clear reason why this totality of finite modes is absolutely necessary while the individual finite modes are not. The totality of finite modes is essentially characterized by its ratio: and since this totality is an infinite mode, following indirectly from the absolute nature of God’s attributes, we can infer that the mode’s ratio also follows from the absolute nature of God’s attributes. But particular finite modes do not have as their ratio the same ratio that characterizes the whole universe; they instead have different ratios which balance each other out, in the end, to maintain the universe’s ratio. And so their ratios are not dictated by the attributes’ absolute natures in the way that the ratio of their totality is supposed to be. Rather, the ratios of finite modes are necessary only hypothetically, that is, given the necessity of the universe’s ratio and the ratios of other finite modes.

There remain still the two questions raised at the end of the last section. First, what is the mechanism behind the splendor we find in the universe? That is, why should the totality of finite modes exhibit diversification and change? The answer to this question (in the case of extension, anyway) has to do with the close relation of motion and rest to extension itself; recall that motion and rest, as an immediate infinite mode, follows from the absolute nature of extension. Now suppose we are presented with an infinitely extended region. Pervasive throughout this extension is motion and rest. Now let us ask: can there be motion and rest in this region without there being subregions of this region in motion? We might at first answer

15. Thus Wolfson: “God or substance is to [Spinoza] an infinite logical crust which holds together the crumbs of the infinite number of the finite modes, and that crust is never broken through to allow the crumbs to escape or to emanate. Infinite substance by its very nature contains within itself immediate infinite modes, and the immediate infinite modes contain within themselves mediate infinite modes, and the mediate infinite modes contain within themselves the infinite number of finite modes, which last are arranged as a series of cause and effects” (Wolfson 1934, v.1, p. 398).
yes, that it is possible for there to be just rest, for the entire region could be absolutely static. And so the universe could be a homogeneous soup. But if the entire region were completely static, there would be no bodies individuated within it, since each body is individuated by a constant ratio of motion-and-rest among its parts. And if there were no bodies within the infinitely extended region, then it would follow immediately that the region itself would no longer count as an individual: lacking any parts, it could maintain no constant ratio among its parts.\textsuperscript{16} Hence, if the region is to exist at all (as it must, since it follows mediately from the absolute nature of God’s attributes), it must have motion within it. Once we admit motion within the region, there is bound to be variety, with some bodies individuated from others. How much variety? As much as can possibly be; for extension’s immediate mode is infinite motion and rest, which means motion and rest than which there can be none greater. Hence the splendor of the universe.

This leads to the second question raised at the end of the last section: why should there be a unique totality of finite modes? I think that I can explain Spinoza’s thought here, even though I believe it to be fallacious. His thought is that if we have infinite motion in an infinitely extended region, all possible configurations of bodies will arise. The set of all possible configurations of bodies is of course unique; so the totality of finite modes must be unique. However, this line of thought is fallacious. The universe could fall into a loop, or somehow never manage to bring about some particular configuration of bodies, and it would still be an infinitely extended region undergoing infinitely many changes through infinite motion and rest. Still, Spinoza’s mistake is pardonable; his idea is initially plausible and quite tempting.

In sum, the picture I present is this. From the absolute nature of God’s attributes follow immediate infinite modes, which produce (in conjunction with their attributes) mediate infinite modes. One of these mediate infinite modes of extension is characterized by a constant ratio of motion and rest among its parts. This is the infinite totality of finite modes. Infinite motion in infinite extension produces a wide variety of finite modes, indeed all possible finite modes, each of which is characterized by a particular

\textsuperscript{16} Why not say that the whole consists of just one motionless part? Because then there would be no difference between extension, as an attribute of God, and extension together with its immediate infinite mode, motion and rest. If motion and rest is to play any role at all, extension with it must differ from extension without it.
ratio of motion and rest. The only constraint on the existence and behavior of these finite modes is that the end result of their interactions maintain their totality’s ratio. And hence each particular finite mode is not to be accounted for solely on the basis of God’s attributes and infinite modes; the natures of other finite modes must be taken into consideration as well.

A concluding note. I have based most of my argumentation on an analysis of the infinite and finite modes of extension. I have paid virtually no attention to the parallel arrangement under the attribute of thought. An easy out is to say that the arrangement under the attribute of thought is the same as the one displayed here, only considered differently. A more edifying analysis would explore the relations Spinoza perceives to exist among ideas infinite and finite, but this is an analysis I shall not try to provide here.

Cited Literature

When I cite the *Ethics*, I follow a method which is fairly standard in the literature: e.g., “IP33S1” refers to part I, proposition 33, scholium 1, etc. When I cite other works by Spinoza, I cite the volume number, page number(s), and line numbers of Gebhardt’s edition (Spinoza 1925). Translations are my own, though I rely heavily and gratefully on Curley’s edition (Spinoza 1985) and Shirley’s edition (Spinoza 1992) for guidance.


The God of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus

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Abstract

I argue against the thesis, defended by Yovel and Bennett among others, that Spinoza’s God can be identified with the whole of corporeal nature. The elements of Spinoza’s concept of God as presented in the TTP are wholly consistent with the presentation of E1. This thesis is supported not only by Spinoza’s own statements, but by a careful reading of the relevant passages in the TTP.

As Yovel has pointed out (1991, 79-80), Spinoza wrote the TTP “when most of his mature metaphysics already existed.” This being so, it is very strange that no commentators on Spinoza’s ontology have tried to elucidate the compatibility between substance as it is defined in E1 and the God of the TTP; for they must presumably be one and the same. On the other hand, it is well known that many Spinoza scholars have made appeal to arguments contained in early works of the philosopher in order to advance their own interpretations of God-Substance. Bennett, for instance, did so in the First Jerusalem Conference — focusing on E1 — in an attempt to demonstrate that Spinoza’s God is identifiable with the whole of reality. He referred to the conclusion in PPC1P11, according to which there cannot be a God and another God (and by extension not a God with any other thing which differs from Him), and Curley (in his own contribution to the First Jerusalem Conference), with the intent of pointing out the ontological differences between natura naturans and natura naturata, appeals to a passage of the KV. But insofar as I know, no one has had recourse to the God of the TTP in order to provide support for an adequate understanding of Spinoza’s substance. My suspicion is that in general Spinoza students continuously — and erroneously — assume that Spinoza in the TTP is writing about a God strictly different from the God-Substance of the Ethics, i.e., that he is writing about the God of the ancient Jews, except for some passages in TTP4 and TTP16 in which the philosopher reveals his ideas about divine law and about God’s potentia in terms very similar to those employed in E1.
I would like in the first place to point out that Spinoza firmly believed that the critiques directed against his theological point of view in the TTP were objections against his very own philosophy. This is patent from his answer to Oldenburg in Ep73. In Ep71 Oldenburg wrote to Spinoza enumerating the ideas in TTP which has tortured the readers ("quae in Tractato Theologico-Politico crucem lectoribus fiere"). Those are, namely, the apparent confusion between God and Nature, awakened in the readers because of the ambiguous form in which Spinoza — in Oldenburg’s opinion — writes about them; the suppression of authority and miracles, and Spinoza’s hidden view concerning Christ. For our aims what is particularly important is Spinoza’s response to the first objection, concerning God:

.... dico, & quidem ad primum, me de Deo, & Natura sententiamovere longé diversam ab ea, quam Neoterici Christiani defender solent. Deum enim rerum omnium causam immanentem, ut ajunt, non veró transeuntem statuo. Omnia, inquam, in Deo esse, & in Deo moveri cum Paulo affirmò, & forté etiam cum omnibus antiquis Philosophis, licet alio modo; & auderem etiam dicere, cum antiquis omnibus Hebraeis, quantum ex quibusdam traditionibus, tametsi multis modis adulteratis, conjicere licet. [Ep73, G IV, 307, 2-11]

Spinoza declares his view to be that God is an immanent cause of all things, and that all things are in God and move into God (as Paul had already said). More importantly, Spinoza believed that his conception of God was identical to that of the original Hebrew people, as this can be inferred from some ancient traditions. And given that "...quod quidam putant, Tractatum Theologico-Politicum eo niti, quod Deus, & Natura (per quam massam quandam, sive materiam corpoream intelligant unum, & idem sint, tota errant via..." [Ep73, G IV 307, 11-14].

From Ep73 we can infer two most important things: that for Spinoza God and Nature (understood as a corporeal mass) are not one and the same thing, and that he is intent upon defending the conception of God expounded in the TTP as his very own. Consequently, it seems clear to me that every affirmation concerning God’s nature to be found in the TTP should be compatible with the God of the Ethics, given that the two works were simultaneously written and that Spinoza himself implicitly assumes — as we have seen — just such a compatibility
Leiser Madanes (1989) has argued in an interesting paper that Spinoza’s characterization of substance in E1 is implicitly open to a challenge based upon his crucial thesis concerning natural rights and power in TTP16. He refers to the argument in TTP16, G III, 189, 12-30:

By the right and ordinance of nature, I merely mean those natural laws wherewith we conceive every individual to be conditioned by nature, so as to live and act in a given way. For instance, fishes are naturally conditioned for swimming, and the greater for devouring the less; therefore fishes enjoy the water, and the greater devour the less by sovereign natural right. For it is certain that nature, taken in the abstract, has sovereign right to do anything she can; in other words, her right is co-extensive with her power. The power of nature is the power of God, which has sovereign right over all things; and, inasmuch as the power of nature is simply the aggregate of the power of all her individual components, it follows that every individual has sovereign right to do all that he can; in other words, the rights of all individuals extend to the utmost limits of his power as it has been conditioned. Now it is the sovereign law and right of nature that each individual should endeavor to preserve itself as it is, without regard to anything but itself; therefore this sovereign law and right belongs to every individual, namely, to exist and act according to its natural conditions. [Elwes, 200-201]

So, even if God and Nature are not one and the same, we are told that the power of nature is identical to the power of God, which has indeed a supreme right over all things. But, given that nature’s universal power is nothing more than the power of all individuals taken altogether, then every individual has a supreme right on all he can do, i.e., everyone’s right extends anywhere to which his/her determinate power reaches.

Right and power are coextensive in God, and even in Nature (notice that Spinoza says that Nature’s power is identical to God’s power, not that nature and God are one and the same). More to the point, nature’s power is the power of all individuals taken as a whole. Spinoza’s reasoning here, as
Madanes has brilliantly pointed out, seems to be as follows (I cite, but not completely, Madanes dissection of Spinoza’s argument):

... in nature, power and right are coextensive.
... Nature... amounts to the ensemble of all individuals.
... Consequently, in every individual, power and right are coextensive. [Madanes 1989, p. 188]

Madanes is correct when he concludes that “Spinoza apparently commits the fallacy of division” (ibid.), for even if nature — considered in its totality — has the property that power and right are coextensive in it, and if nature is the union of all individuals, from these two statements it does not necessarily follow that for any given individual power and right are coextensive. It follows of course that for the ensemble of individuals power and right are coextensive, but not that this is so for every individual in particular (cf. Madanes, 188-189). Madanes’ conclusion is adequate and to the point: “Spinoza commits a fallacy of division or else the terms ‘substance’, ‘God’ and ‘Nature’ refer themselves to an entity which has the privilege of being immune from the fallacy of division” (ibid., 189).

My point — to be argued here — is that Spinoza’s God is the kind of entity which has indeed the privilege of being immune from the fallacy of division. And I wish to remark here that if God, as I firmly believe, is in Spinoza’s system just this kind of entity, He cannot be identifiable with the whole of reality as Bennett and Yovel (to cite only two very known defenders of the thesis) have erroneously argued, because the whole of reality, understood as the ensemble of its parts, is clearly not immune to the fallacy of division, given that every individual taken as an extended or thinking part of reality could not have the properties of Nature as a whole, without Spinoza’s God being seriously compromised by Madanes’ conclusion. So Spinoza’s affirmation in EP73 (mentioned above) and Madanes’ arguments, taken together, would then induce us to conclude that the God of the TTP is not identifiable with Nature understood as the whole of reality, or as the mere ensemble of all individuals or modes conceived as parts of it.
II

There is another very important passage in TTP2 which can provide support against the identification of God with the whole of reality, a passage that — so far as I know — has been neglected by all Spinoza students. It is this:

If we now examine the revelations to Moses, we shall find that they were accommodated to these opinions; as he believed that the Divine Nature was subject to the conditions of mercy, graciousness, &c., so God was revealed to him in accordance with his idea and under these attributes (see *exodus iii iv*, 6-7, and the second commandment). Further it is related (ex. iii iii, 18) that Moses asked of God that he might behold Him, but as Moses (as we have said) had formed no mental image of God, and God (as I have shown) only revealed Himself to the prophets in accordance with the disposition of their imagination, He did not reveal Himself in any form. This, I repeat, was because the imagination of Moses was unsuitable, for other prophets bear witness that they saw the Lord; for instance, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, &c. For this reason God answered Moses, “Thou canst not see My face”; and inasmuch as Moses believed that God can be looked upon — that is, that no contradiction of the Divine nature is therein involved (for otherwise he would never have preferred his request) — it is added, “For no one shall look on Me and live,” thus giving a reason in accordance with Moses’ idea, for it is not stated that a contradiction of the Divine Nature would be involved, as was really the case, but that the thing would not come to pass because of human infirmity. [TTP2, G III, 39, 35, 40, 1-20. Elwes, 37-38. Italics mine]

Moses’ opinions did not enable him to apprehend the very nature of God. This is clear to Spinoza, given that Moses asked God for permission to see Him. So Moses believed that God was visible, and that this does not contradict divine nature, which is really the case (”*ut res revera se habet*”). Moses did not perceive that God’s visibility contradicts divine nature, as it does in reality. It remains without a doubt that Spinoza believed in God’s
invisibility.

More to the point, when Spinoza demonstrates that the fathers didn’t know God through his name Jehova (which expresses God’s absolute essence), asserting that it is not necessary to know Him in order to believe, and that men are not obliged by a law to do this — because God’s attributes cannot be admitted just by faith — he writes:

As the patriarchs did not know the distinctive name of God, and as God mentions the fact to Moses, in praise of their faith and single-heartedness, and in contrast to the extraordinary grace granted to Moses, it follows, as we started at first, that men are not bound by decree to have knowledge of the attributes of God, such knowledge being only granted to a few of the faithful: it is hardly worthwhile to quote further examples from Scripture, for everyone must recognize that knowledge of God is not equal among all good men. Moreover, a man cannot be ordered to be wise any more that he can be ordered to live and exist. Men, women, and children are all alike able to obey by commandment, but not to be wise. If any tell us that it is not necessary to understand the Divine attributes, but that we must believe them simply without proof, he is plainly trifling. For what is invisible and can only be perceived by the mind, cannot be apprehended by any other means than proofs. [TTP 13, G III, 169, 31-35, 170, 1-11. Elwes, 178. Italics mine]

So we can clearly conclude that Spinoza’s God is invisible, and this allows us to arrive at a crucial point for the understanding of substance, one which in fact refutes — as does God’s indispensable privilege in being immune to the fallacy of division also refutes — the postulated identification of God with nature (conceived as the whole of reality), given that the whole of reality is clearly not invisible. In my opinion, Bennett’s conclusions concerning the identification of natura naturans and natura naturata and Yovel’s thesis about God’s inmanence conceived as the whole of reality are utterly discredited by this consideration of God’s invisibility.
III

Despite Spinoza’s critical statements against Moses’ expounded view of God, there is a crucial question in which the philosopher seems to agree with the historical leader, namely, in the employment by the latter of the name Jehova to describe God. We read:

Indeed, if any one considers without prejudice the recorded opinions of Moses, he will plainly see that Moses conceived the Deity as a Being Who has always existed, does exist, and always will exist, and for this cause he calls Him by the name Jehova, which in Hebrew signifies these three phases of existence. [TTP2, G III, 38, 21-25. Elwes, 36]

Revealing his own concern for this name, Spinoza affirms in turn: “Furthermore, we must note that Jehova is the only word found in Scripture with the meaning of the absolute essence of God, without reference to created things” (ibid.). So we can infer that God’s absolute essence is properly understood as His unique and eternal existence, an existence beyond the concept of duration (because the three phases of existence implied by the name Jehova are considered as referring to eternity, not a temporal continuity of existence). We can plainly see that the absolute essence of Spinoza’s God, without relation to created things, is merely his eternal existence, which I believe is to be identified with natura naturans in the terminology of the Ethics. The text is as follows:

The Jews maintain, for this reason, that this is, strictly speaking, the only name of God; that the rest of the words used are merely titles; and, in truth, the other names of God, whether they be substantives or adjectives, are merely attributive, and belong to Him, in so far as He is conceived of in relation to created things, or manifested through them. [TTP13, G III, 169, 10-16. Elwes, 177]

So Spinoza affirms that the only name which expresses God’s absolute essence is a name which expresses only His eternal existence. More to the
point, we can perceive again that Spinoza was convinced of his agreement with the ancient Hebrew people’s views of God on this point.

IV

Now we come to the *Ethics*, and I maintain that Spinoza’s conception of God in the TTP enables us to resolve one of the most intricate puzzles of Spinoza’s ontology, a point which has been considered insoluble by many commentators, that has fervently confronted Bennett and Curley, and to which Lucash (1991, p. 169) has recently referenced as the “ambiguity in Spinoza’s concept of substance.” This is, of course, the question of the metaphysical differences between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. Lucash argues that Spinoza’s many texts concerning the question are ambiguous, and that, even if “there is some evidence... for the view that substance is not identical with the whole or totality of nature... the evidence to the contrary is much more compelling...” (1991, p. 173).

I conclude that God cannot be identical with any whole, simply because he is not divisible, and consequently not made of parts. In the TTP, God’s absolute essence is an eternal existence not conceivable as duration (thus divisible), and this is *natura naturans*, existence as the eternal immanent cause of all things, invisible and immune to the fallacy of division, because every individual is a mode (or union of modes, i.e., a non-eternal modification) of existence. And I maintain that it is as a mode of existence and not as a part of reality that it can be said of every individual that right and power are coextensive in it. It is true that Spinoza affirms that every person, insofar as s/he is a part of nature, is also a part of the power of nature (TTP4, G III, 58, 9-10: “*Quia homo, quatenus pars est naturae, eatenus partem potentiae naturae constituit*”). But this does not allow us to conclude that power and right are coextensive in them. For this last statement to be true we should understand persons (and every other mode or union of modes in nature) not as a part of reality but as a mode of existence, because it is just in this quality as a union of modes of existence that a person has the same right to exist as nature. The quality of the mode of existence of every individual allows us to understand that its right to exist extends everywhere to which its power reaches. So power and right are coextensive in every mode of existence exactly as they are in eternal existence, and God as existence is immune to the fallacy of division simply because existence as a mode is not heterogeneous with respect to eternal
existence (God). But this would not be possible if we were to conceive every individual merely as a part of the whole of reality, because wholes made of heterogeneous parts (we cannot forget that modes here would be parts of infinite attributes having nothing in common) are not immune to the fallacy of division.

So God, as \textit{natura naturans}, is something beyond the whole of reality, namely existence conceived as eternity. For this reason, all other things which in the \textit{TP} and in the \textit{Ethics} are assimilated with God’s essence — for instance His \textit{potentia} — are attributed to Him just in relation to created things, and are God’s merely attributive names, not substantial ones. So we read: “El, or Eloah, signifies powerful, as is well known, and only applies to God in respect to this supremacy (i. e., with respect to created things), as when we call Paul an apostle” [\textit{TP}, GIII, 169, 14-16. Elwes, 177]. And the text concludes: “Now, as God tells Moses that He was not known to the patriarchs by the name of Jehovah, it follows that they were not cognizant of any attribute of God which expresses His absolute essence, but only of His deeds and promises, that is, of His power, as manifested in visible things” (\textit{ibid.}, 20-24, italics mine).

These two characteristics of God — indispensable immunity from the fallacy of division and invisibility — help us to understand that the God of the \textit{TP} is such that \textit{natura naturans} and \textit{natura naturata} are strictly different from a metaphysical point of view. On the other hand, it is not difficult to see that eternal existence has the privilege of being immune to the fallacy of division, insofar as individuals conceived as modes of existence share its properties, and more concretely, they share the very fact that power and right are coextensive in them. Existence is also invisible. So, we can conclude that interpreters of Spinoza’s ontology who assimilate substance with the whole of reality are absolutely mistaken. The conception of God in the \textit{TP} helps us to apprehend that it is erroneous to ignore the statements in which Spinoza tells us that \textit{natura naturans} and \textit{natura naturata} are not identical, and that when he refers to \textit{natura naturata} as substance he is talking — in the terminology of the \textit{TP} — of ‘God’s relation to created things’, but not of God’s absolute essence. According to the \textit{TP} there can be no doubt that \textit{natura naturans} and \textit{natura naturata} are to be perfectly distinguished, and I conclude that this doctrine holds also for the God-Substance of the \textit{Ethics}. 
Bibliography

In a more extensive work, a book entitled *Claves de Baruch Spinoza*, at press, I argue that the absolute essence of Spinoza’s God is already eternal existence in the KV and the CM, and also in the early fragments of the *Ethics* read by Oldenburg (cf. Ep1) and De Vries (cf. Ep8). I also maintain that the first identification of God and nature in the KV is mainly due to Spinoza’s effort to eradicate neoplatonic influences, not those of Bruno’s theosophy, but most probably the doctrine contained in Herrera’s kabbalistic work, and perhaps also the doctrine implicit in Leone Ebreo’s *Dialogui d’Amore* (1535). All references to *Deus sive natura* in his posterior works merely provide an account of God’s relation ‘with created things’, i.e., with the whole of reality.


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