

THE RELATION
BETWEEN
CONCEPTION AND
CAUSATION IN
SPINOZA'S
METAPHYSICS

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1. Introduction

If you asked a contemporary metaphysician to list her foundational, unanalyzed notions, she might say: possibility, object and part. Or perhaps: grounding, bundle and point. If you asked Spinoza, conception and causation would be at the top of his list. He uses these notions to state many of his most important doctrines, including necessitarianism and substance monism, as well as to define several of his key terms, including 'mode' and 'action'. A correct understanding of the relation between conception and causation is therefore an essential part of our understanding of Spinoza's metaphysics.

There are many different ways of understanding this relation. For example: Curley [3, p.40, 74–5] identifies conception and causation, because he thinks that they are just different ways of talking about logical dependence; Della Rocca [5, p.44] also identifies conception and causation but does not assimilate them to logical dependence; and Newlands [17, p.469] suggests that causation is reducible to conception. Underpinning all of these interpretations is what I will call the orthodox view. I wish to challenge this view.

The orthodox view is grounded in the fourth axiom of part one, 1A4, of the *Ethics*. It reads: "Cognition of an effect depends on, and involves, cognition of its cause."¹ Given the way that Spinoza uses 'involves' and 'conceived through', this axiom uncontroversially entails:²

CAUSATION → CONCEPTION

If one thing causes another thing, then the second thing is conceived through the first thing.

¹ "Effectus cognitio a cognitione causae dependet et eandem involvit." I prefer 'cognition' to Curley's [20] 'knowledge', because Spinoza sometimes talks about *adaequatam cognitionem non*, and while in English it is natural to talk about inadequate or confused cognition, it is unnatural to talk about inadequate or confused knowledge. I will otherwise rely on Curley's translations.

² See 1P6C1D2, 1A5 and the paraphrase of 1P10 in the second sentence of 2P6D. For the purposes of this paper, I'm setting aside the question of whether the axiom is restricted to certain kinds of cognition or certain kinds of causation. For my thoughts on this question see my [16].

It is also uncontroversial that CAUSATION \rightarrow CONCEPTION is one of Spinoza's central commitments, as it plays a pivotal role in his derivations of theism, substance monism, necessitarianism and parallelism.³

According to the orthodox view, this axiom also entails:

CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION

If one thing is conceived through another thing, then the second thing causes the first thing.

It is also part of the orthodox view that CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION is one of Spinoza's central commitments. Proponents of the orthodox view include Bennett [1], Della Rocca [5], Garrett [8], Jarrett [10], Lin [12], Melamed [14], Newlands [17] and Wilson [21].⁴

In this paper I will argue that both conjuncts of the orthodox view are false: that 1A4 does not entail CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION, and that CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION isn't among Spinoza's central commitments.

While I won't argue for it here, I suspect that an even stronger conclusion is true: that Spinoza *rejects* CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION. Spinoza says that God's attributes are conceived through themselves, and I suspect that he'd deny that attributes are causes of themselves.⁵ If my suspicion is correct, then God's attributes are counterexamples to CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION. Spinoza also says that finite things are conceived through their formal essences, and I suspect that he'd deny that

finite things are caused by their formal essences.⁶ If so, formal essences are another counterexample to CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION. Nonetheless, it is hard to establish these counterexamples to CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION without first undermining the orthodox view. Spinoza's remarks on God's attributes and formal essences are unsystematic and frequently obscure, making it hard to decisively argue for any particular view, while many think there is decisive evidence for the orthodox view. Therefore, in this paper I won't argue that Spinoza rejects CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION and will instead argue for the weaker conclusion that the orthodox view is false.

Before further explaining the significance of my conclusion, it is worth introducing a bit of background about 'conceived through', since, unlike 'cause', it doesn't straightforwardly map onto any of the relations we normally talk about. Let's start with an example. In ordinary cases, when one thinks about Socrates's smile, then one thereby seems to be thinking about Socrates. One explanation is that, at least in ordinary cases, the concept that one uses to think about Socrates's smile *contains* (in some sense) a concept of Socrates. When Spinoza says that a thing is conceived through another, then, very roughly, he's saying that whenever one thinks of the first thing, one is thereby thinking of the second, because the concept of the first thing *contains* a concept of the second thing.⁷

For the purposes of this paper it will be helpful to keep in mind three more points about 'conceived through'. First, according

³ 1P11 is standardly understood as committing him to theism, and it is derived from 1A4 through 1P6C (as well as through another channel). 1P14 is standardly understood as committing him to substance monism, and it is derived from 1A4 through 1P11. 1P29 is standardly understood as committing him to necessitarianism, and it is derived from 1A4 through 1P26 and 1P25. Finally, 2P7 is standardly understood as committing him to parallelism, and it is derived directly from 1A4. While some deny these interpretations of 1P11, 1P14, etc., they will still grant that they are among Spinoza's most important propositions, and therefore will agree that CAUSATION \rightarrow CONCEPTION is one of Spinoza's central commitments.

⁴ Curley [3] explicitly accepts only the second part of the orthodox view.

⁵ See 1P10. It follows from 1D1 that if the attribute of extension were self-causing, then the attribute of extension would have its own essence. That's odd.

⁶ See 2D2. I'll justify my suspicion later, when explaining the significance of my conclusion.

⁷ One respect in which this way of talking is potentially misleading is that the concept of Socrates cannot be a *part* of the concept of Socrates's smile. Otherwise, due to 2P7, he'd be committed to the view that Socrates is a part of his smile. More generally, 1D5 and 2P7 would commit him to the view that substances are parts of their modes. (See 2P15D for evidence that parthood is determined by causal relations and therefore falls under the scope of 2P7). Another respect in which this way of talking is potentially misleading is that in 2P8 he uses 'contains' in a different, more technical way.

to Spinoza a person can conceive of one thing through another without realizing it. For example, while one must conceive of everything through God, Spinoza doesn't regard this as something obvious by introspection. Instead, he treats it as something that needs to be demonstrated.⁸ Second, Spinoza doesn't establish that all modes are actually conceived until the beginning of part two, long after he defines modes as things that are conceived through something else.⁹ Thus, the claim that one thing is conceived through another does not imply that the first thing has ever been conceived. The claim that Socrates's smile is conceived through Socrates does not imply that anyone has ever conceived of Socrates's smile. Third, if one thing is conceived through another thing, and you actually conceive of the first thing, then you *must* conceive of it through the second thing. If you actually conceive of Socrates's smile, then you *must* conceive of it through Socrates.¹⁰

There's a lot more to say about Spinoza's notion of conception, and I'll say a bit more later, but this should be enough for now.

As motivation for what follows, let's consider some of the reasons why my conclusion would be significant. First, as I said above, conceivability and causation are two of the fundamental notions in Spinoza's *Ethics*. In part one alone Spinoza appeals to them in twenty-two propositions, five axioms and four definitions.¹¹ Therefore any conclusion that bears on their necessary connections is significant. Likewise for any conclusion that bears on the way that Spinoza establishes those connections.

⁸ See 2P45D.

⁹ See 1D5 and 2P3. 1P16 just establishes that things can be conceived by God.

¹⁰ See 1P15D, in particular the inference from 1D5 to the claim that a mode *cannot* be conceived without its substance. See also 1P23D, in particular the inference from 1D5 to the claim that a mode *must* be conceived through its substance. For corroborating evidence see his use of 1D5 in 1P31D and his use of 1D3 in 1P2D and 1P10D.

¹¹ See 1P3, 1P6, 1P10, 1P12, 1P14, 1P15, 1P16, 1P17, 1P18, 1P21, 1P22, 1P23, 1P24, 1P25, 1P26, 1P27, 1P28, 1P29, 1P32, 1P33, 1P35, 1P36, 1A2, 1A3, 1A4, 1A5, 1A7, 1D1, 1D3, 1D5 and 1D7. I'm taking it for granted that 'follow from', 'compel', 'effect' and 'produce' all invoke causation.

Second, 1A4 is one of Spinoza's most important axioms. For example, as noted above, he uses it to argue for many of his most famous doctrines, including theism, substance monism, necessitarianism and parallelism. As a result our assessment of the *Ethics* depends heavily on our assessment of the causal axiom. As we'll see, CONCEPTION → CAUSATION is questionable from a seventeenth-century perspective. Therefore, my conclusion would improve our estimation of Spinoza's achievement. After all, it is easy to derive implausible conclusions from implausible premises.

Third, one might think that CONCEPTION → CAUSATION helps ground the principle of sufficient reason.¹² While Spinoza never argues for the principle of sufficient reason, one might think he's implicitly relying on the following line of reasoning:

- a₁. What cannot be conceived through another must be conceived through itself. (1A2)
- a₂. Therefore, for all x , x is conceived through something. (a₁)
- a₃. If one thing is conceived through another thing, then the second thing causes the first thing. (1A4: CONCEPTION → CAUSATION)
- a₄. Therefore, for all x , x is caused by something. (a₂, a₃)
- a₅. From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily ... (1A3)
- a₆. Therefore, for all x , there is a sufficient cause of x . (a₄, a₅)
- a₇. Therefore, for all x , there is a sufficient reason for x . (a₆)

There is room for debate about whether this conclusion is enough to establish the principle of sufficient reason, because there is room for debate about whether x ranges over non-existing things and, as Spinoza understands it, the principle of sufficient reason implies that there is a reason for the non-existence of certain things.¹³ Regardless, it would be interesting if there were a line of reasoning that even *helped* entitle Spinoza to this principle, given its prominent role in his thinking.

¹² This line of reasoning is reconstructed from Garrett [6] and Lin [12].

¹³ See 1P11D.

Therefore, because this line of reasoning presupposes that 1A4 entails CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION, we should be interested in whether 1A4 really does have that entailment.

Fourth, it is natural to think that CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION plays a central role in Spinoza's argument for parallelism, which is the claim that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things, and which is also at the heart of Spinoza's views about the natural world in general and the human body and mind in particular.¹⁴ Therefore, another reason why my conclusion would be significant is that it would suggest that Spinoza gives a different argument for parallelism. I'll say more about Spinoza's argument later.

Fifth, Garrett [7, p.141] argues that CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION plays a central role in Spinoza's argument for the conatus doctrine, which is the doctrine that each thing strives to preserve itself, and which is also at the heart of Spinoza's theory of the emotions.¹⁵ According to Garrett, Spinoza's argument for the conatus doctrine is, roughly, that (i) each thing inheres in itself to some extent, and (ii) if a thing inheres in itself to some extent, then its essence is to some extent a cause of its continued existence (i.e., it strives to preserve itself). Garrett thinks that CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION plays a pivotal role in Spinoza's argument for the latter premise:¹⁶

- b₁ If one thing inheres in another, then the first thing is conceived through the second thing.
- b₂ If one thing is conceived through another, then the first thing is conceived through the second thing's essence.
- b₃ Therefore, if one thing inheres in another, then the first thing is conceived through the second thing's essence. (b₁, b₂)
- b₄ If one thing is conceived through another, then the second thing causes the first thing. (1A4: CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION)

¹⁴ See 2P7.

¹⁵ See 3P6.

¹⁶ Garrett formulates this line of reasoning in a superficially different way.

- b₅ Therefore, if one thing inheres in another, then the second thing's essence causes the first thing's existence. (b₃, b₄)
- b₆ Therefore, if a thing inheres in itself to some extent, then its essence causes its existence to that same extent (i.e., it strives to preserve itself). (b₅)

If I'm right, then we have reason to doubt that this is part of Spinoza's argument for the conatus doctrine. I'll later suggest an alternative to Garrett's reconstruction.

Finally, my conclusion would make it easier to defend a natural understanding of 'conceived through'. It is natural to understand 'conceived through' as characterizing the relation between a thing and whatever is mentioned in its real definition – that is, between a thing and whatever constitutes its essence. For example, it is natural to think that a substance is conceived through itself because to know what a substance *really is* you have to know its attributes; a substance's attributes constitute its essence.¹⁷ It is likewise natural to think that a finite mode is conceived through its substance because to know what a finite mode *really is* you have to know what it modifies; a finite mode's substance is one of the constituents of its essence.¹⁸

CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION puts pressure on this understanding of 'conceived through'. While there's no decisive evidence, there is evidence that, to know what a finite mode *really is*, you have to know what infinite modes it exemplifies.¹⁹ If so, and if we accept this understanding of 'conceived through', then finite modes are conceived through infinite modes. But CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION would then imply that finite modes follow from infinite modes, and Spinoza explicitly rules out this possibility. He says that a finite thing

¹⁷ See 1D3, 1D4.

¹⁸ See 1D5.

¹⁹ See TIE 101. Those infinite things might be what he later calls "formal essences"; see 2P8, 5P22, 5P23 and, for helpful commentary, Garrett [9]. A plausible example is human nature, which Spinoza seems to regard as an infinite mode and as one of the constituents of every human's essence. See 1P8S2.

... could not follow from God, or from an attribute of God, insofar as it is affected by a modification which is eternal and infinite (by 1P22). It had, therefore, to follow from, or be determined to exist and produce an effect by God or an attribute of God insofar as it is modified by a modification which is finite and has a determinate existence. (1P28D; see also 2P9)

Therefore, if CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION is true, then we potentially need a different understanding of 'conceived through'. If my conclusion is correct, however, then a finite thing can be conceived through an infinite thing without following from that infinite thing, making it easier to maintain this natural understanding of 'conceived through'.²⁰

The remainder of the paper will be devoted to evaluating the evidence for and against the orthodox view. Here's the plan. In the next section I'll consider the evidence against the orthodox view. In section three I'll consider the evidence for the orthodox view. I will conclude that the balance of evidence suggests that the orthodox view is incorrect.

2. The Evidence Against the Orthodox View

The orthodox view has two parts: the entailment claim (that 1A4 entails CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION) and the centrality claim (that CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION is one of Spinoza's central commitments). I find it helpful to separate the evidence against each part.

²⁰ Another, less appealing option is to interpret the passage from 1P28D so that it allows infinite modes to be *partial* causes of finite things. This is less appealing because Spinoza would be using 'follows from' in the first sentence to talk only about *total* causes, and then, without any indication, using that same phrase in the second sentence to talk about *partial* causes.

2.1 The Evidence Against the Entailment Claim

There are two pieces of evidence that indicate that 1A4 does not entail CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION. The first piece of evidence is 1A4's formulation. Let's develop it using an example:

Photosynthesis depends on sunlight.

This claim doesn't entail that photosynthesis depends *only* on sunlight. It is consistent with the fact that photosynthesis also depends on carbon dioxide.

As this example suggests, sentences of the form '*xs* depend on *ys*' do not usually entail that *xs* depend *only* on *ys*. In other words, they don't usually entail that if an *x* depends on another thing, then the second thing is a *y*.

Let's now turn to 1A4:

Cognition of an effect depends on, and involves, cognition of its cause.

Given the way it is formulated, this claim presumably doesn't entail that cognition of an effect depends *only* on cognition of its cause. In other words, given the way it is formulated, this claim presumably doesn't entail that if cognition of an effect depends on cognition of *y*, then *y* is a cause. Yet that's exactly what it would entail if it entailed CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION. Therefore, 1A4 is formulated in a way that strongly suggests that it doesn't entail CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION.

Notably, there are some special contexts where people use 'depends on' as equivalent to 'depends only on'. Suppose that you would like to buy a book from my store and I say:

My selling you this book depends on your giving me ten dollars.

Subsequently you give me ten dollars, but I refuse to give you the book on the grounds that my giving you the book *also* depends on my willingness to part with the book and I really want to keep it. In that case you could rightly object that I was breaking my word,

which suggests that what I've said entails that my selling you the book depends *only* on your giving me ten dollars. In other words, what I've said seems to entail that if my selling you the book depends on *z*, then *z* is your giving me ten dollars.

However, the context of 1A4 isn't like the context of our conversation. In conversations about merchandise, what's relevant is what is *sufficient* for a sale; in our conversation there was a default assumption that I was talking about a sufficient condition, making it dishonest to keep the book. In contrast, there's no reason to think that this kind of assumption is in play when Spinoza introduces 1A4; there's no reason to think that what's relevant in that context is what's *sufficient* for cognition of an effect.

When Spinoza wants to say 'depends only on' he explicitly includes the adverb 'only' [*sola*]. For example, here's a passage from the *Theological-Political Treatise*:

Now since all our cognition, and the certainty that banishes every possible doubt, depend only [*sola*] on the cognition of God ... it follows that our supreme good and perfection depends only [*sola*] on cognition of God. (TPT, ch. 4, par. 7; see also ch. 1, pars. 2 and 14)

He doesn't include 'only' [*sola*] in 1A4.

There's also a helpful contrast with Spinoza's definition of 'substance'. It begins: "By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself..." It is important for Spinoza's subsequent arguments that a substance is conceived *only* through itself.²¹ He therefore ends the definition by making this explicit: "... that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed." He doesn't include an equivalent clause following 1A4.

How powerful is this first piece of evidence against the orthodox view? If we're going to interpret 1A4 in a way that isn't grounded

in its formulation, then we need a good reason. By default, then, we should be deeply suspicious of the entailment claim. I suspect that most proponents of the orthodox view will agree with this point but will nonetheless insist that there is a decisive reason to prefer their interpretation. More on this in the next section.

The second piece of evidence against the orthodox view centers on Spinoza's decision to include 1A4 as an axiom. Spinoza wanted to write the *Ethics* in a way that would persuade his readers, and he chose axioms with this in mind. While he regarded 1P7 and 3P4 as self-evident, he apparently did not include them as axioms because he worried that others would not regard them as self-evident until later in the book.²² Likewise, in an earlier draft he included 1P1, 1P2, 1P3 and 1P4 as axioms rather than propositions, but he appears to have reclassified them in the final version because, at least in part, he feared that many would not accept them without explicit demonstrations.²³ He also tries to coax his readers out of prejudices, particularly Cartesian prejudices, which might prevent them from accepting his definitions of 'God' and 'free'.²⁴ Given all of this, we should by default prefer an interpretation of 1A4 that makes it more acceptable to his contemporaries.

Would Spinoza's contemporaries accept CONCEPTION → CAUSATION? It is hard to answer this question with much confidence because 'conceived through' wasn't standard terminology and, as noted earlier, Spinoza never defines it. Still, it seems unlikely that his contemporaries would have accepted it. Descartes says that we can think about the modes of a piece of wax, including its shape, color and hardness, only if we think about the underlying piece of wax, suggesting that he'd agree that the modes of a piece of wax are conceived through that wax.²⁵ But there is no evidence that Descartes thought that the piece of wax was a cause of its own shape, color and hardness. More generally, there is no evidence that he would accept CONCEPTION → CAUSATION.

²² This is especially clear in the case of 1P7. See 1P8S and Ep12.

²³ See Ep4.

²⁴ See 1P10S and 2P10C1S.

²⁵ See CSM 1:211.

²¹ See 1P6C1D2 and 1P25D.

Therefore, if all other things are equal, then we should interpret 1A4 so that it doesn't entail CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION.

These two pieces of evidence combine to give us reason to doubt that 1A4 entails CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION. In review: it is formulated in a way that suggests that it doesn't entail CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION, and it is unclear why Spinoza would have presented 1A4 as an *axiom* if it entailed CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION. While I think that Spinoza's formulation of 1A4 is the strongest evidence against this part of the orthodox view, what's ultimately important is the strength of all the evidence taken together.

2.2 *The Evidence Against the Centrality Claim*

The second part of the orthodox view is that CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION is a central commitment. There are two pieces of evidence that tell against this claim.

Setting aside his repeated statements of 1A4, Spinoza never states CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION or anything equivalent in the *Ethics*. He also never states it or anything equivalent in any of his earlier works, including his letters. In general we expect authors to state their central commitments even if those commitments are entailed by claims that are often repeated. This is doubly true when the relevant commitments aren't shared by the author's contemporaries, as authors tend to acknowledge disagreements with their peers.

Additionally, as we'll see in the next section, there's no compelling evidence that he relied on CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION in arguments for the principle of sufficient reason, parallelism or the conatus doctrine. There also doesn't seem to be any compelling evidence that his demonstrations of other important claims depend on it. Yet it's definitive of central commitments that other important claims depend on them.

This evidence against the centrality claim is entirely negative – it is about what Spinoza doesn't say and doesn't need. Negative evidence is often suspect, because an absence of evidence isn't always evidence of absence. However, it is a compelling kind of evidence when trying

to ascertain whether a claim is central to a thinker's system. In fact, the only stronger evidence would be a contradiction with established commitments.

As we've seen, there are compelling reasons to reject both parts of the orthodox view. Accordingly, a proponent of the orthodox view needs to do more than merely point out that her view has advantages. She needs to provide evidence that outweighs the evidence we've just considered. I deny that there is such evidence.

3. The Case For the Orthodox View

The orthodox view has two parts: the claim that 1A4 entails CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION, and the claim that CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION is one of Spinoza's central commitments. The evidence for these claims is interrelated. In particular, if we had a good reason to think CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION was central to Spinoza's thinking, then we'd have a good reason to think that he took himself to be entitled to it by one of his other claims, and 1A4 seems like a plausible candidate. Therefore, while it was useful to separate the evidence against the orthodox view, let's combine the evidence for it.

I will consider the four most promising pieces of evidence for the orthodox view.

3.1 *First Piece of Evidence*

The first piece of evidence, which is standardly taken to be decisive, centers on his demonstration of 1P25:²⁶

God is the efficient cause, not only of the existence of things, but also of their essence.

²⁶ See again Bennett [1], Della Rocca [4], Garrett [8], Jarrett [10], Lin [12], Melamed [14] and Wilson [21]. Newlands [17] also cites 2P5, but it only supports the uncontroversial converse of CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION, namely CAUSATION \rightarrow CONCEPTION.

Demonstration: If you deny this, then God is not the cause of the essence of things; and so (by 1A4) the essence of things can be conceived without [*sine*] God. But (by 1P15) this is absurd. Therefore God is also the cause of the essence of things.

I'm here relying on Curley's translation of *sine* as 'without'. Other, equally acceptable translations would be 'outside', 'beyond' or 'external to'. Although it is now somewhat archaic, in English people use 'without' in this way when they use it as an antonym for 'within'.²⁷ We'll return to this point later.

While they never get into the details, proponents of the orthodox view apparently think we need to reconstruct Spinoza's reasoning:

Pro-Orthodoxy Reconstruction

- c₁ Suppose that God is not the cause of essences.
- c₂ If one thing is conceived through another thing, then the second thing causes the first thing. (1A4: CONCEPTION → CAUSATION)
- c₃ Therefore, essences are not conceived through God. (c₁, c₂)
- c₄ Everything is conceived through something. (1A2)
- c₅ Therefore, essences are conceived without God. (c₃, c₄)
- c₆ Nothing is conceived without God. (1P15)
- c₇ Therefore, God is the cause of essences. (c₁, c₅, c₆)

Because proponents of the orthodox view apparently cannot see any other way to reconstruct Spinoza's reasoning, they take this as decisive evidence that 1A4 entails CONCEPTION → CAUSATION.

However, there is another reconstruction. Before I develop it, here is a bit of terminology to help convey the naturalness of the argument. Following Spinoza, let's say that something is *internal* to *x* if it inheres in *x*.²⁸ Everything else is *external* to *x*. In this non-spatial sense of 'internal', Spinoza thinks that everything is internal to God, including God himself and all his modes.²⁹ The alternative reconstruction:

²⁷ See the first entry for 'without' in [19], *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

²⁸ See 3P4. See also 1P18D.

²⁹ See 1P15.

Alternative Reconstruction

- d₁ Suppose that God is not the cause of essences.
- d₂ There is a cause of a thing's existence or non-existence. (implicit)
- d₃ If anything internal to God causes *x*, then God causes *x*. (implicit)
- d₄ Therefore, essences are caused by something external to God. (d₁–d₃)
- d₅ If one thing causes another thing, then the second thing is conceived through the first thing. (1A4: CAUSATION → CONCEPTION)
- d₆ Therefore, essences are conceived through something external to God. (d₄, d₅)
- d₇ Therefore, essences are conceived without God. (d₆)
- d₈ Nothing is conceived without God. (1P15)
- d₉ Therefore, God is the cause of essences. (d₁, d₇, d₈)

Two points of clarification: First, while the third premise, (d₃), might seem objectionable, it is actually quite plausible. If *Socrates's smile* causes a baby to laugh, then it is natural to say that *Socrates* caused the baby to laugh. Likewise, if something *internal to God* does something, then it is natural to say that *God* does it.

Second, we should think of (d₇) as a mere restatement of (d₆). The relevant Latin term is *sine*, which Curley correctly translates as 'without' but, as noted above, could also be helpfully translated as 'outside', 'beyond' or 'external to'. So translated, it becomes clear that to say that essences are conceived through something external to God is just to say that essences are conceived *sine* God. It also becomes clear that this leaves open the possibility that essences are still *partially* conceived through God. Likewise, to say that I poured water outside the bowl is just to say that I poured water *sine* the bowl, leaving open the possibility that I poured some of the water inside the bowl.³⁰

³⁰ This use of *sine* is on display in other passages. Consider:

Except for God, there neither is, nor can be conceived, any substance ... But modes can neither be nor be conceived *sine* substance. So they can be in the divine nature alone, and can be conceived through it alone. (1P15D)

Which reconstruction is better? Let's consider their differences. One difference that immediately jumps out is that the second reconstruction is longer. However, the length of different reconstructions is often a misleading indicator, because it is often possible to add or subtract steps, as is the case here. For example, we could expand (c₄) into two steps by treating it as an inference from 1A₂ and listing 1A₂ on a different line. Likewise, we could collapse (d₆) and (d₇) into a single step, because for Spinoza they are just different ways of saying the same thing.

Another difference is that they involve different implicit premises. According to the pro-orthodoxy reconstruction, Spinoza is implicitly relying on 1A₂ to establish that everything is conceived through something. While Spinoza usually cites the definitions, axioms and propositions that underpin his demonstrations, he doesn't always, and therefore it wouldn't be too surprising if he failed to mention 1A₂.

According to the alternative demonstration, Spinoza is implicitly relying on two other premises: (d₂) and (d₃). Neither of these premises correspond to definitions, axioms or propositions. However, he implicitly uses them in other places, which suggests that they are part of his implicit conceptual framework and as such wouldn't necessarily have been acknowledged. With respect to (d₂), he implicitly relies on it in his demonstration of 1P₇ to rule out the possibility that a substance can exist even though it was never caused to exist. Regarding (d₃), it

stands behind 2P₉ (which says that finite ideas are caused by God insofar as they are caused by finite ideas that are affections of God) and the compatibility of 1P₂₈ (which says that finite things have finite causes) and 1P₂₉ (which says that God necessitates everything).

Therefore, while the reconstructions rely on different implicit premises, they both rely exclusively on premises that we'd expect him to take for granted.

One respect in which the reconstructions do not differ is their faithfulness to the text. In particular, according to both reconstructions, when Spinoza says "and so (by 1A₄)..." he's leaving out a number of details. According to the pro-orthodoxy reconstruction, he's leaving out (c₃)–(c₄), and according to the alternative reconstruction, he's leaving out (d₂)–(d₄). We've just seen why there's no advantage to supposing he left out one set of details rather than the other. Thus, the wording of the demonstration doesn't favor one reconstruction over the other.

As far as I can tell, there's only one reason why one might prefer the pro-orthodoxy interpretation. The fourth step of the alternative reconstruction, (d₄), implies that there is something that isn't internal to God, and according to 1P₁₅ everything is internal to God. Therefore, one might wonder why Spinoza didn't stop at (d₄) if he had in mind the alternative reconstruction. In the absence of a good explanation, one might think that the first reconstruction better captures Spinoza's intentions.

This is part of a larger puzzle about Spinoza's demonstration of 1P₂₅. By this point in the *Ethics* Spinoza has already established that God is the cause of everything.³¹ He therefore seems to be in a position to infer 1P₂₅ in a single step. After all, if God is the cause of *everything*, then he presumably must be the cause of the essences of things. Why then does Spinoza wait until the following scholium to acknowledge this shorter demonstration? This is the larger puzzle.

The first two sentences imply that modes cannot be conceived *sine* God. Spinoza infers that modes are conceived through God alone. Thus: if something cannot be conceived *sine* God, then it can be conceived through God alone. By contraposition: if something cannot be conceived through God alone, then it can be conceived *sine* God. It is clear that Spinoza accepts the converse from other passages (see 1P₁₇D). Spinoza therefore accepts the biconditional: something cannot be conceived through God alone if and only if it can be conceived *sine* God. This makes sense if by '*sine*' Spinoza means something like 'outside', 'beyond', 'external to' or 'without' (as opposed to 'within'). In addition, Spinoza often seems to use 'without' [*sine*] interchangeably with 'outside' [*extra*]; see 1P₁₇D, 1P₁₈D, 2P₃₃D and Ep₃₅. See also *Short Treatise* I.2 where he says that "outside [*buyten*, Dutch] God there is nothing." Thanks to Alan Gabbey for helping compile this list.

³¹ See 1P₁₆C1. I'm taking it for granted that everything falls under an infinite intellect. Note that otherwise it wouldn't be infinite in Spinoza's sense of 'infinite'. See 1D₂.

The best explanation is that Spinoza first wants to show that he can derive 1P25 without assuming that essences are *modes* of God, because that's an assumption that would make his Cartesian readers uncomfortable. Specifically, Spinoza argues for the claim that God is the cause of everything by first arguing that everything is a mode of God (specifically, a *propria*, or mode that necessarily follows from the thing's essence). Therefore, one would feel comfortable inferring that God is the cause of the essences of things only if one were comfortable assuming that those essences are modes of God. However, many of his Cartesian readers would be uncomfortable assuming that essences are modes of *anything*. This discomfort stems from the obscurity of Descartes's own view of the ontological status of essences.³² Aware of this, Spinoza presumably wanted to identify an argument for 1P25 that didn't depend on the assumption that essences are modes of anything, including God.

If that explains why Spinoza doesn't infer 1P25 in a single step, it also explains why he wouldn't have stopped his argument at (d₄): he wouldn't want this argument to assume that the external thing (which may well be another essence) is internal to God.

I conclude that, even if one thinks that the first reconstruction has advantages, it provides only relatively weak evidence for the orthodox view, especially when contrasted with the evidence against the orthodox view.

As far as I'm aware, proponents of the orthodox view never cite any other evidence besides 1P25D. Nonetheless, there is additional evidence they could cite. In what follows I will consider what seems to me the most compelling evidence.

³² In the *Meditations* he says that essences do not depend on minds (CSM 2:44), but in the *Principles* he says that they are modes of thinking (CSM 1:212). Some scholars have argued that these passages are consistent, and they may be right. For our purposes it is enough that this is a subtle issue of scholarship that Spinoza would have been wise to step around. See Kenny [11], Chappell [2] and Nolan [18].

3.2 *Second Piece of Evidence*

The second piece of evidence for the orthodox view is his demonstration of 2P6:

The modes of each attribute have God for their cause only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, and not insofar as he is considered under any other attribute.

Demonstration: For each attribute is conceived through itself without any other (by 1P10). So the modes of each attribute involve the concept of their own attribute, but not of another one; and so (by 1A4) they have God for their cause only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, and not insofar as he is considered under any other.

It can be difficult to parse this proposition, especially at first. However, a subsequent restatement of it makes clear that it is equivalent to: If x is a mode of a certain attribute, then x is caused by God considered under that attribute, and x is not caused by God considered under any other attribute.³³

Note that in the second sentence of the above demonstration Spinoza moves from the 'conceived through' locution to the 'cognition of ... involves' locution, which is what he also uses in 1A4. For Spinoza these locutions are interchangeable, so to unify our reconstruction of this demonstration with the other reconstructions let's stick with the 'conceived through' locution.³⁴

The part of the demonstration that might seem to help the orthodox view begins with the second sentence ("So the modes of each attribute"). To keep the reconstructions short, let's start there:

³³ See 3P2D.

³⁴ See 1P6C1D2 and 1A5. Note also the paraphrase of 1P10 in the second sentence.

Pro-Orthodoxy Reconstruction

- e₁ If x is a mode of a certain attribute, then x is conceived through that attribute and x is not conceived through any other attributes.
- e₂ If one thing is conceived through another thing, then the second thing causes the first thing. (1A4: CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION)
- e₃ If one thing causes another thing, then the second thing is conceived through the first thing. (1A4: CAUSATION \rightarrow CONCEPTION)
- e₄ Therefore, if x is a mode of a certain attribute, then x is caused by that attribute. (e₁, e₂)
- e₅ Therefore, if x is a mode of a certain attribute, then x is not caused by any other attribute (e₁, e₃).
- e₆ If x is a mode, then x is a mode of one of God's attributes. (1P25C)
- e₇ Therefore, if x is a mode of a certain attribute, then x is caused by God considered under that attribute and x is not caused by God considered under any other attribute. (e₄-e₆)

If this were the only plausible reconstruction of Spinoza's demonstration, then it would provide compelling evidence that 1A4 entails CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION. However, there is at least one other reconstruction:

Alternative Reconstruction

- f₁ If x is a mode of a certain attribute, then x is conceived through that attribute and x is not conceived through any other attributes.
- f₂ If one thing causes another thing, then the second thing is conceived through the first thing. (1A4: CAUSATION \rightarrow CONCEPTION)
- f₃ Therefore, if x is a mode of a certain attribute, then x is not caused by any other attribute. (f₁, f₂)
- f₄ If x is a mode, then x is caused by God considered under an attribute. (1P16, 1D6)
- f₅ Therefore, if x is a mode of a certain attribute, then x is caused by God considered under that attribute. (f₃, f₄)
- f₆ Therefore, if x is a mode of a certain attribute, then x is caused by God considered under that attribute and x is not caused by God considered under any other attribute. (f₃, f₅)

Which reconstruction is better? Like before, they are both equally faithful to the text, because they both allege that when Spinoza says "and so (by 1A4)..." he's leaving out a number of details. The only real difference is that the first reconstruction depends on 1P25C while the second depends on 1P16 and 1D6. Because he doesn't mention 1P25C, 1P16 or 1D6 in his demonstration, it is unclear how we should choose between them.

One reason to prefer the first reconstruction is that Spinoza uses 1P25C in his demonstration of the previous proposition, and that proposition is just a particular instance of the conclusion that he's here seeking to establish. Of all the evidence for the orthodox view, this evidence is the most compelling. Nonetheless, I don't think that it is very strong evidence, because the very fact that he mentions 1P25C in his demonstration of the previous proposition, but not in his demonstration of 2P6, suggests that he thinks that there is a difference between the two demonstrations. It also isn't very strong evidence because it involves speculation about which claim (or claims) Spinoza is using implicitly, and that kind of speculation is inherently risky and therefore shouldn't be given too much weight when there are plausible alternatives.

3.3 *Third Piece of Evidence*

The third piece of evidence for the orthodox view is his demonstration of 2P7:

The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.

Demonstration: This is clear from 1A4. For the idea of each thing caused depends on cognition of the cause of which it is the effect.

The strength of this evidence depends on how we interpret 2P7. It might initially seem that 2P7 is equivalent to a biconditional that we can break down:

THINGS \rightarrow IDEAS

If things are ordered and connected in some way, then the corresponding ideas are ordered and connected in the same way.

IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS

If ideas are ordered and connected in some way, then the corresponding things are ordered and connected in the same way.

If 2P7 were equivalent to this biconditional (hereafter: THINGS \leftrightarrow IDEAS) then Spinoza would need an argument for IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS. One possibility is that he's relying on CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION. Therefore, if 2P7 were equivalent to THINGS \leftrightarrow IDEAS, then Spinoza's demonstration of 2P7 might be good evidence for the orthodox view.

However, the following passage from part five strongly suggests that 2P7 is equivalent to only one of the given conditionals:³⁵

The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things (2P7), and vice versa, the order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas (2P6C and 2P7).

There are two reasons why this passage strongly suggests that 2P7 is equivalent to only one of the conditionals. First, if 2P7 were equivalent to a biconditional, then both clauses would express the same claim and it would be unclear why he decided to begin the demonstration by repeating the same claim twice. Second, it would be inexplicable why Spinoza lists 2P6C at the end of only the second claim. If 2P6C were sufficient for one claim, then it would be sufficient for the other; if 2P6C were necessary for one claim, then it would be necessary for the other; and if 2P6C were neither necessary nor sufficient for either claim, then there would be no reason for him to reference it.

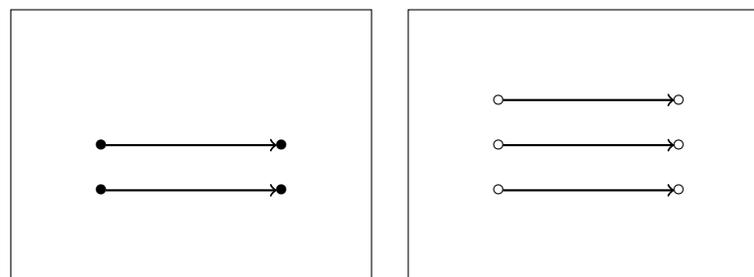
If 2P7 is equivalent to only one of the given conditionals, then it must be THINGS \rightarrow IDEAS, because the alternative would invalidate

³⁵ See 5P1D.

other demonstrations.³⁶ Therefore, if 2P7 is equivalent to only one of the given conditionals, as suggested by the above passage, Spinoza's demonstration of 2P7 doesn't motivate the orthodox view; Spinoza doesn't need to establish IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS.

A proponent of the orthodox view might respond by insisting that 2P7 is equivalent to THINGS \leftrightarrow IDEAS despite what he says in the above passage. As far as I can tell, there are three considerations that she might think support her case.

The first consideration is that Spinoza's use of the phrase 'is the same as' in 2P7 might seem to imply that the orderings of things and ideas are symmetrical, in which case 2P7 must be equivalent to THINGS \leftrightarrow IDEAS. However, that's not the only interpretation of 'is the same as'. Suppose that two teachers alphabetize their class lists. It would be natural for us to say that the order of names on the first list is the same as the order of names on the second list even if the lists weren't symmetrical because, for example, there were more names on the second list. Now consider the graphs:



³⁶ See 2P8. Additionally, in his demonstration of 2P7 he says that 1A4 establishes that "the idea of each thing caused depends on cognition of the cause of which it is the effect", which suggests that he's establishing a positive conclusion about the way that ideas are ordered (*viz.* they preserve the ordering of things).

It would be natural for us to say that the arrow between any two black dots is the same as the arrow between the corresponding hollow dots even though these graphs aren't symmetrical because there are additional hollow dots and additional arrows connecting those dots. Returning to 2P7, I think that Spinoza is using 'is the same as' to indicate that if some things have some relation to each other, then the corresponding ideas have the same relation to each other, which leaves open the possibility that there are more ideas than things as well as the possibility that there are additional relations among those ideas.

A second reason why one might nonetheless think that 2P7 is equivalent to $\text{THINGS} \leftrightarrow \text{IDEAS}$ is that one believes that Spinoza is relying on $\text{IDEAS} \rightarrow \text{THINGS}$ in his demonstration of 3P12. Here's the relevant passage:

So long as the human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human mind will regard that same body as present (by 2P17) and consequently (by 2P7) so long as the human mind regards some external body as present, that is (by 2P17S), imagines it, the human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of that external body.

Here Spinoza is using 2P7 to establish a claim of the form: If there's a connection between your mind and something external, then there's a connection between your body and something external. That might seem to require $\text{IDEAS} \rightarrow \text{THINGS}$. But it doesn't. $\text{THINGS} \rightarrow \text{IDEAS}$ states: If things are ordered and connected in some way, then the corresponding ideas are ordered and connected in the same way. If 'order and connection' is understood in the most natural way, the order and connection of things includes facts about what things are causally related (e.g., that x causes y) and what things aren't causally related (e.g., that x isn't a cause of z). If that's right, $\text{THINGS} \rightarrow \text{IDEAS}$ implies: If there's no connection between your body and something external then there's

no connection between your mind and something external.³⁷ By contraposition: If there's a connection between your mind and something external, then there's a connection between your body and something external.

A final reason why one might nonetheless think that 2P7 is equivalent to $\text{THINGS} \leftrightarrow \text{IDEAS}$ centers on Spinoza's claim in the subsequent scholium, 2P7S, that a thing and its corresponding idea are "one and the same thing." One might think that this supports the biconditional interpretation of 2P7 due to the following three-premised argument. The first premise is that when Spinoza says that a thing and the corresponding idea are "one and the same" he's saying that they are identical. The second premise is that Spinoza needs $\text{THINGS} \leftrightarrow \text{IDEAS}$ to establish that a thing and the corresponding idea are identical. The third premise is that an entitlement to $\text{THINGS} \leftrightarrow \text{IDEAS}$ must follow from 2P7 alone.

All three premises are dubious. Marshall [13] argues that when Spinoza says that a thing and the corresponding idea are "one and the same thing" he's not saying they are *identical*. According to Marshall, Spinoza is instead saying that they are *constituents* of the same thing, thereby calling into doubt the first premise. Additionally, the scholium begins "before we proceed further we must recall what we showed in the first part." Melamed [15] argues that one of the propositions

³⁷ One might wonder how the causal axiom could establish $\text{THINGS} \rightarrow \text{IDEAS}$ if it is understood in this way. There are two possibilities. First, because God is the cause of the whole universe, Spinoza could be using the causal axiom to establish that God has a true idea of the entire universe. Because true ideas must agree with their objects (1A6), that seems to establish $\text{THINGS} \rightarrow \text{IDEAS}$. I walk through the details of this reconstruction of 2P7D in my [16]. Second, he might be relying on the following line of reasoning: Suppose that x is not a sufficient cause of y but that the idea of x is a sufficient cause of the idea of y . In that case, there must be another cause of y . The causal axiom implies the idea of this other cause is a partial cause of the idea of y . Contradiction. Therefore, if x is not a sufficient cause of y , then the idea of x is not a sufficient cause of the idea of y . Because we could let x be any arbitrary collection of things, that suffices for $\text{THINGS} \rightarrow \text{IDEAS}$. It doesn't suffice for $\text{IDEAS} \rightarrow \text{THINGS}$, for the reasons I'll list in my discussion of 2P6.

from the first part, specifically 1P16, is the sole grounds for Spinoza's claim that a thing and the corresponding idea are one and the same. According to Melamed, THINGS \leftrightarrow IDEAS doesn't play a role, thereby calling into doubt the second premise. While I'm sympathetic to Marshall's and Melamed's arguments, I will nonetheless focus on the third premise.

Recall the passage from part five:

The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things (2P7), and vice versa, the order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas (2P6C and 2P7).

I'm claiming that the first sentence is equivalent to THINGS \rightarrow IDEAS and the second sentence is equivalent to IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS. If I'm right, then in this passage Spinoza is saying that 2P7 is sufficient for THINGS \rightarrow IDEAS and 2P7 and 2P6C are together sufficient for IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS. Putting these entailments together, the conjunction of 2P7 and 2P6C is sufficient for THINGS \leftrightarrow IDEAS. Therefore, if Spinoza is relying on THINGS \leftrightarrow IDEAS when he claims that a thing and its corresponding idea are one and the same, perhaps he's drawing on both 2P7 and 2P6C, rather than just 2P7. Spinoza sometimes uses his scholia to comment on a string of propositions, and it would be natural for him to use 2P7S as a scholium for a string that includes both 2P6 and 2P7.³⁸

Because it might not be immediately clear *how* 2P7 and 2P6C are together sufficient for IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS, here's a quick sketch. Let's start by getting a handle on what 2P6C is supposed to establish. It reads:

From this it follows that the formal being of things which are not modes of thinking does not follow from the divine nature because [God] has first known things; rather the objects of ideas follow and are inferred from their attributes in the same way

³⁸ See 1P8S2, 1P10S and 1P28S.

and by the same necessity as that with which we have shown ideas to follow from the attribute of thought.

This establishes that a thing and its idea exist at all the same times. How does this help establish IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS? 2P7 leaves open the possibility that there exist ideas that are connected with one another but that don't correspond to any existing things. For example, 2P7 leaves open the possibility that at some time there are ideas of future entities and that, perhaps as part of a complete description of what will happen in the future, these ideas are ordered and connected. In such a possibility IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS is false, because the corresponding things don't yet exist and therefore aren't currently ordered and connected in any way. More generally, 2P7 leaves open the kind of possibilities depicted in the diagram above. Just think of the black dots as bodies and the hollow dots as ideas. 2P6C closes off these possibilities by establishing that a thing and its ideas exist at all the same times. In this way, 2P7 and 2P6C allow Spinoza to infer IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS.

As long as there are the same number of things and ideas, and as long as the order and connection of things is matched by the order and connection of things, IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS must be true.^{39,40}

I conclude that the orthodox view is not supported by Spinoza's demonstration of 2P7.

³⁹ A mathematical analogy might help. As long as f is a bijective (one-to-one) function, and as long as f is an order-preserving function, the inverse of f must be an order-preserving bijective function.

⁴⁰ One might wonder whether there is a path from IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS to CONCEPTION \rightarrow CAUSATION. Let's explore this possibility. The most likely path is:

- g₁ If x is conceived through y , then the idea of x involves the idea of y . (see 2P1D and the paraphrase of 1P10 in 2P6D)
- g₂ If the idea of x involves the idea of y , then the idea of x depends on the idea of y .
- g₃ If the idea of x depends on the idea of y , then the idea of x is caused the idea of y . (see 2P7D)
- g₄ If the idea of x is caused by the idea of y , then x is caused by y . (IDEAS \rightarrow THINGS)
- g₅ Therefore, if x is conceived through y , then x is caused by y . (g₁–g₄)

3.4 *Fourth Piece of Evidence*

The fourth and final piece of evidence for the orthodox view is Spinoza's argument for the conatus doctrine, which is roughly the claim that each thing strives to preserve itself.⁴¹ In particular, without CONCEPTION → CAUSATION Spinoza couldn't have tried to argue for the conatus doctrine through the channel described by Garrett [7], and one might believe that is the argument Spinoza had in mind. It will be helpful to recall the last two lines of Garrett's reconstruction:

b₅ If one thing inheres in another, then the second thing's essence is a cause of the first thing.

b₆ Therefore, if a thing inheres in itself to some extent, then its essence causes its existence to that same extent (i.e., it strives to preserve itself). (b₅)

One possibility is that, as Garrett suggests, Spinoza derives (b₅) from other claims, including CONCEPTION → CAUSATION. But another possibility is that Spinoza is relying directly on (b₅), making it one of the many underived claims that appear in his demonstrations. In that case, Spinoza's argument for the conatus doctrine isn't evidence for the orthodox view.

The primary weakness in this line of reasoning is that there is no compelling evidence that Spinoza accepts (g₂). The best evidence is the formulation of 1A4 ("... involves, and depends on, ..."), and that evidence is weak enough that we shouldn't put any weight on it, especially if there are potential counterexamples, such as the attributes. Consider that, as evidenced by the way he uses these phrases, 'involves' seems to pick out a kind of conceptual dependence and 'depends' seems to pick out a metaphysical or causal kind of dependence, and there's nothing about the formulation of 1A4 that suggests these kinds of dependence always go together. In any case, Spinoza doesn't establish IDEAS → THINGS until at least part two (arguably 2P7S), and perhaps not even until part five (see 5P1D). Moreover, he never develops the above line of reasoning. Therefore, CONCEPTION → CAUSATION wouldn't be anything more than a derivative, peripheral commitment that Spinoza never acknowledges.

⁴¹ See 3P6.

There are two considerations in support of the latter possibility. First, Spinoza never argues for (b₅) even though it seems to play a pivotal role in his argument for the conatus doctrine, suggesting that Spinoza either didn't think that he could derive it or didn't think that it needed to be derived.

Second, there are at least two other unsupported claims that follow immediately from (b₅). The best explanation for why Spinoza left them unsupported is that they follow immediately from (b₅) and Spinoza is taking (b₅) for granted. In comparison, it seems far less likely that in each case he is implicitly relying on a long line of reasoning that includes (b₅) only at the fifth step.

Starting with one of his remarks on properties [*propria*], Spinoza says that the properties of a thing "follow from" its essence, and for Spinoza that means that the properties of a thing are caused by its essence.⁴² Why doesn't Spinoza offer any support for this claim? One possibility is that it follows immediately from (b₅), because, as modes, properties inhere in their subjects, and he's taking (b₅) for granted.⁴³

Let's now turn to one of his remarks on accidents. In an axiom Spinoza says that a body's accidents (e.g., its direction of motion) follow from its essence together with the essences of other bodies, and for Spinoza that means that the accidents of a body are partially caused by its essence.⁴⁴ Again, why doesn't Spinoza offer any support for this claim? One possibility is that it follows immediately from (b₅) because, as modes, accidents inhere in their subjects, and he's taking (b₅) for granted.⁴⁵

⁴² See 1P16D, where he claims that "the intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it (that is, from the very essence of a thing)." See also the inference from 1P16 (where he uses "follows from") to 1P16C1 (where he uses "causes").

⁴³ See 1D5 and TIE 96. Note that it was widely held in the seventeenth century that a thing's properties (*propria*) are caused by its essence and we might think of (b₅) as a generalization of this doctrine.

⁴⁴ See 2A1''.

⁴⁵ See 1D5.

I conclude that it is far more likely that Spinoza is relying directly on (b₅) rather than implicitly deriving it from CONCEPTION → CAUSATION. Therefore, it is far more likely that Spinoza's entitlement to the conatus doctrine doesn't rely on CONCEPTION → CAUSATION.⁴⁶

Where does that leave us? There are four pieces of evidence that might be marshaled in support of the orthodox view. However, the first piece of evidence, his demonstration of 1P25, which is standardly taken to be decisive, is comparatively weak, because it just shows that the orthodox view can give at best a marginally better reconstruction of that demonstration. The second piece of evidence, his demonstration of 2P6, also gives comparatively weak evidence for the orthodox view, because of the existence of an alternative reconstruction. The third piece of evidence, his demonstration of 2P7, fails to lend any real support to the orthodox view, because the relevant proposition isn't equivalent to a biconditional. Finally, the fourth piece of evidence, his argument for the conatus doctrine, doesn't seem to help much, because he's probably just relying on an independent principle about the relation between inherence and causation.

⁴⁶ One might wonder whether there is a path from (b₅) to CONCEPTION → CAUSATION. Let's briefly explore this possibility. It will be helpful to give (b₅) a different name: INHERENCE → CAUSATION. Some claim that Spinoza is also committed to:

CONCEPTION → INHERENCE

If one thing is conceived through another, then the first thing inheres in the second thing.

Together, CONCEPTION → INHERENCE and INHERENCE → CAUSATION are enough for CONCEPTION → CAUSATION. The problem is that (contra Della Rocca [5]) there's no compelling evidence that Spinoza is committed to CONCEPTION → INHERENCE. Nonetheless, even if Spinoza were committed to CONCEPTION → CAUSATION through this channel, that still wouldn't show that CONCEPTION → CAUSATION is anything more than a derivative, peripheral commitment that he never acknowledges.

The evidence against the orthodox view is stronger. Spinoza's formulation of 1A4 doesn't suggest that it entails CONCEPTION → CAUSATION, and while he acknowledges controversial aspects of other axioms, he never acknowledges that 1A4 has any controversial aspects. He also never states CONCEPTION → CAUSATION independently of 1A4 and none of his demonstrations seem to depend on it.

I conclude that both parts of the orthodox view should be rejected.

4. Conclusion

There are many reasons why it would be significant if the orthodox view were false. To start, it would give us a better understanding of the relation between two of the fundamental notions in Spinoza's thinking: conception and causation. It would force us to rethink the suggestion that they are really one and the same relation, the suggestion that causation reduces to conception and the suggestion that they are co-extensive. It would also make it easier to defend a natural understanding of 'conceived through' that connects it to real definitions. It would help us appreciate that 1A4 is not as powerful as many have assumed, which is significant because this axiom is at the foundation of many of Spinoza's most ambitious and most famous arguments. Finally, it would force us to rethink Spinoza's entitlement to some of his core commitments, including the principle of sufficient reason, the parallelism doctrine and the conatus doctrine.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ This paper is the result of a series of challenging objections from Don Garrett. Thanks also to John Brandau, Alan Gabbey, Martin Lin, Yitzhak Melamed and especially Colin Marshall.

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