Philosophy and
Phenomenological Research

Philosophy and Phenomenological Research
doi: 10.1111/phpr.12219

Backing into Spinozism

SAMUEL NEWLANDS
University of Notre Dame

One vexing strand of Spinozism asserts that God's nature is more expansive than traditionally conceived and includes properties like being extended. In this paper, I argue that prominent early moderns embrace metaphysical principles about causation, mental representation, and modality that pressure their advocates towards such an expansive account of God's nature in similar ways. I further argue that the main early modern escape route, captured in notions like "eminent containment," fails to adequately relieve the metaphysical pressures towards Spinozism. The upshot is that those sympathetic with these early modern projects must embrace a costlier option if they are to successfully escape the orbit of Spinoza.

Like any good vice, the sin of Spinozism comes in a variety of forms. One especially vexing strand to early moderns asserts that God's nature is more expansive, more bloated—Spinoza might say "richer"—than traditionally conceived in the major monotheistic traditions. For example, although 17th century Christian confessions contain wide-ranging lists of divine properties, there was a general consensus that some ways of being are not ways that God is. God is not, to use a contemporary example, cylindrically shaped, composed of plastic, and recyclable, though these are features of my water bottle.

Spinoza denies this point of consensus and claims instead that God exemplifies every possible fundamental way of being and every possible derivative way of being (EIp16).[1] If being extended is a fundamental way of being, then God is extended (EIIp2). If being in a liquid state is a derivative way of being an extended thing, then God is in a liquid state (EIp15). As Spinoza knew well, it is not immediately obvious that this yields a coherent account of God, but in this paper, I will not be especially concerned with whether Spinoza can successfully defend his conception of God against charges of incoherence.

[1] See the "Works Cited" section for a list of abbreviations used to refer to primary texts.

Instead, I will discuss some early modern metaphysical principles that push their advocates toward such an expansive, Spinozistic conception of God's nature: one from causation in Descartes (section 2); one from mental representation, also in Descartes and sometimes in Leibniz (section 3); and one from modality in the early Kant (section 4). I will argue that these seemingly disparate principles share a structure and motivation and tend towards Spinozism in similar ways. I will also claim that there are three main ways of responding to this pressure: *expand* the range of divine properties, *reject* the principles or *reduce* the non-divine features in question to traditional divine properties.

All three options come with associated costs, as we will see. However, early modern advocates of these principles claim that there is a fourth option, one that preserves the goods of the original principles and incurs none of the costs of the other responses. This alternative, captured in notions like "eminent containment," appeals to what I will call a *divine proxy*. In the final section of this paper, I will show why such appeals to divine proxies are unsatisfying, a judgment I share with Spinoza himself.

1. A Schematic Overview

Before plunging into the deep end of the modern metaphysics pool, let us begin with a schematic overview. Suppose that God and at least one non-divine thing, Rocky the rock, exist, and now consider the following mutually inconsistent triad, where 'F' names a particular property or nature:[2]

1. It is not the case that God is F.
2. Rocky is F.
3. If Rocky is F, then God is F.

A familiar example of such a property or nature in the early modern context is *being extended*: God is not extended, whereas some created things like Rocky are extended. But why would the existence of extended things entail that God is extended, per (3)?[3]

---

[2] Following the early moderns themselves, who use a bewildering array of terminology for this, I am going to remain as noncommittal as possible about the ontology of properties and the relations among properties, property-bearers, and predication. I will usually speak of the property-thing relation in terms of exemplification, and I will sometimes refer to properties as *ways of being* a thing or as *attributes*, *qualities*, or *features* of a thing, depending on context. Two more substantive commitments I will presuppose here are that God has features or properties and that God having some feature or property F entails that God is F (i.e., property exemplification by God entails true predications of the property to God). For some textual justification of these commitments, see footnote 30 below.

[3] The entailment expressed by (3) should not be understood as indicating a kind of metaphysical or explanatory priority. It reflects our reasoning *ab effectu*, but it is consistent with the priority of God's ways of being over creaturely ways of being.

Several metaphysical principles that were attractive to various early moderns seem to support (3). Although the details will be more complicated, for a toy example, suppose that causes and effects must share all of their qualitative properties. Then if God is the cause of Rocky and Rocky is extended, it follows that God is extended as well. More generally, the route to (3) typically involves the following two additional steps, in which 'R' names an asymmetric relation and *x* and *y* are two distinct things:

4. $x\mathrm{R}y \rightarrow (\mathrm{F}y \rightarrow \mathrm{F}x)$
5. *God*R*Rocky*

The three metaphysical principles I will discuss appeal to three such relations: *causes*, *mentally represents*, and *grounds the possibility of*.

In what follows, (2) and (5) will be accepted by all parties for some relevant R and range of Fs. There are then two obvious ways of avoiding inconsistency and one more complicated one. First, one might accept (2)–(5), deny (1) and thereby embrace the expansion of divine properties, à la Spinozism. I will call this option *Expand*. Second, one might accept (1) but reject the metaphysical principles that yield (4), thereby allowing the denial of (3). Call this option *Reject*.

There is also a slightly more complicated response available, which represents a less Spinozistic version of *Expand*. One might respond that (1)–(4) is ambiguous between a *fundamental* and a *non-fundamental* reading. For ease, let us stipulate that *fundamental* properties are ways of being a thing that cannot be reduced to other properties and that *non-fundamental properties* are properties that can be reduced to other properties.[4] For example, the property *being a fist* (arguably) counts as non-fundamental since being a fist can be reduced to *being a curled up hand*. By contrast, *being spatially extended* (arguably) counts as a fundamental property, at least according to many in the 17th century.[5]

The slightly more complicated reply to the trilemma accepts (3) and rejects (1) for all the relevant fundamental properties. (By "relevant" I mean those properties that fall under the scope of the various principles that generate (4).) On this view, God has every (relevant) fundamental property, a point in common with Spinozism. However, this reply adds that every (relevant) property traditionally thought to be exemplified by creatures but not God is reducible to one of God's traditional properties. Hence, *pace*

---

[4] The metaphors are intentionally hand-wavy, as there is an enormous literature in contemporary metaphysics on fundamentality that I am setting aside here, even though some of it involves distinguishing fundamentality from non-reducibility. For present purposes, I am interested only in outlining a broad family of responses.

[5] For example, Descartes marks fundamental properties by naming them "principal attributes," and he claims there are two: thought and extension (Descartes, CSM I/210–211, AT VIIIa/25).

Spinozism, it would not follow from (2)–(5) that God exemplifies any property not traditionally ascribed to God. Rather than expanding God's nature to include non-traditional properties, this option tries to *reduce* every creaturely property to a version of one of God's traditionally accepted properties. I will call this option *Reduce*.

These are the three main replies available to the original trilemma, given the shared assumptions: *Expand, Reject* or *Reduce*. According to many early moderns, each reply incurs a cost. The principles themselves will be motivated on grounds of intelligibility or explicability, such that violations of (4) would be unintelligible. Hence *Reject* incurs the cost of accepting unintelligibility. Alternatively, *Expand* was thought not only to violate religious orthodoxy, but also to yield a less than maximally perfect God, since, for example, being extended implies being divisible and hence dependent on one's parts and thus imperfect.[6] *Reduce* is acceptable only to the extent to which the proposed reductions are acceptable, but few are willing to accept that the sparse properties in the traditional concept of God exhaust all the fundamental ways things are or might be.[7]

There might be good reasons to pay some of these costs. But several prominent early moderns thought there was a fourth option, distinct from *Expand, Reject*, and *Reduce* and free from their costs. To be frank: I am dubious about this alternative. But to get there, let us turn to the three metaphysical principles that generate versions of (4) in the first place.

2. From Causation

Early modern theories of causation posit constraints on the nature of causes. For example, Spinoza thinks that causes and effects must satisfy a *commonality* condition: a cause and its effect must have something in common between them, and "if things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other" (EIp3). Malebranche thinks causation imposes *modal* conditions on causes: *a* causes *b* only if *b* necessarily follows from *a*.[8] Descartes endorses a *reality* condition on causes: causes must have at least as much reality as their effects.[9]

These constraints often stem from underlying theories of causation. For example, Spinoza thinks of causal relations as relations of conceptual

---

6 Unsurprisingly, Spinoza denies that being extended entails being divisible into parts that are independent of and prior to their whole (EIp15).

7 Another potential cost of *Reduce* is that it seems to rule out incompossibility relations among creaturely properties, at least if facts about incompossibility among the reducible properties supervene on facts about incompossibility among the fundamental properties (all of which God exemplifies). Leibniz faces this worry with his early work on the ontological argument.

8 LO 450; Spinoza also endorses this condition (EIax3).

9 CSM II/28; AT VII/40.

connection, and he claims that things that have nothing in common cannot be conceived through each other (EIp3dem, EIax5). Perhaps it is because Malebranche thinks there is a similarly tight connection between conceptual and causal relations that he endorses his modal condition.[10] Like Suarez and many others before him, Descartes thinks of causation as a kind of *giving* of reality, and he reasons that a thing cannot give something to another unless it has it to begin with: "For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect unless it possessed it?" (CSM II/28; AT VII/40).[11]

An important point of agreement was that these causal conditions also apply to God. So if Spinoza's commonality constraint is correct, then God and God's effects must share at least one property. Likewise, if Malebranche's modal condition is correct, and if God is the cause of the world's existence, then the world's existence necessarily follows from God's volition to create the world. And by Descartes' reality condition, if God is the total and efficient cause of some finite substance, then God must have at least as much reality as is had by the finite substance.

Nothing so far raises the specter of heterodoxy. Indeed, it was an attractive feature of these conditions that God readily satisfies them whereas some finite things do not.[12] However, Descartes' reasoning about causation suggests a principle that yields a version of (4), thereby pressuring him towards one of our three main options: *Expand, Reject*, or *Reduce*.[13]

---

10 That is at least one way of understanding the significance of Malebranche's appeal to the *mind's perceptions* of necessity in LO 450.

11 See also CSM II/29, AT VII/41 and CSM II/97, AT VII/135; Suarez reasons in very similar ways (e.g., DM XVIII.ix.8 and DM XXVI.i.2).

12 For example, in the Third Meditation, Descartes uses his reality condition to argue from the content of the meditator's ideas to the existence of an *ens realissimum*. Similarly, Descartes reasons from a violation of the reality condition to the lack of causation (CSM II/29, AT VII/42). For an alternative reading, according to which the reality condition plays little to no role in Descartes' proofs for the existence of God, see Nolan and Nelson (2006). As my focus will not be on Descartes' actual proofs, I will not say much about this more course-grained reading. It is worth noting, however, that the main conclusion Descartes reaches in a given *Meditation* can often be reconstructed without invoking as premises many of the particular claims he makes in that meditation. Nevertheless, (a) Descartes willingly defends just about any sentence of the *Meditations* to his objectors, even if it is clearly not central to the main conclusion of a meditation, and (b) he never defends himself by pointing out that an objector is focusing on a claim that he made but does not need for his overall argument. In other words, Descartes defends principles (including the reality condition) that, in some sense, he may not "need," which I take to be good evidence that the *Meditations* contains more of Descartes' actual views than can be discerned by focusing exclusively on the minimal reasoning required to reach the main conclusion of a given meditation.

13 Although expressed in very different ways, this general point has garnered much discussion in the secondary literature. For some especially helpful examples, see Radner (1985), O'Neill (1987), Gorham (2003), and Schmaltz (2008).

Although Descartes sometimes states what I will call his "reality condition" as the requirement that a thing's total and efficient cause[14] must have at least as much reality as the thing itself has, his condition is actually more fine-grained and demanding than this.[15] Consider the following passage from Meditation Three:

> A stone, for example, which previously did not exist, cannot begin to exist unless it is produced by something which contains, either formally or eminently, everything to be found in the stone <FR: i.e. it will contain in itself the same things as are in the stone or other more excellent things>; similarly, heat cannot be produced in an object which was not previously hot, except by something of at least the same order <Fr: degree or kind> of perfection as heat, and so on (CSM II/28, AT VII/41).

For now, I will set aside Descartes' "formal or eminent" qualification, as it qualifies the *ways* causes contain the reality of their effects. The stone example points to an extremely fine-grained version of the reality condition. In addition to containing at least as much reality as the stone itself contains, the stone's cause must also contain versions of all the qualitative properties of the stone. Descartes provides a similar gloss in the Fifth Replies: "there is nothing in the effect which did not previously exist in the cause, either formally or eminently" (CSM II/253, AT VII/367).[16]

The heat example points to another aspect of the reality condition: causes must also contain at least the same *order, degree or kind* of reality as had by each property of their effects.[17] Admittedly, the notion of a hierarchically ordered scale of reality has proven a stumbling block to many of Descartes' 20th and 21st century readers. For now, we can focus on one upshot of the heat example: Descartes' reality condition is not purely quantitative. Causes must contain the right *kind* of reality as well. Descartes links the two examples with "similarly," as though he intends the examples to make the same basic point about causal requirements. I will focus on the

---

14 For ease, I'll drop the "complete and total" cause, since Descartes himself often does and it won't be relevant for the present purpose. For discussion of this qualification, see Schmaltz (2008), 56–58.

15 For the coarser version, see also CSM II/34, AT VII/49 and CSM II/116, AT VII/165. He also uses the coarser version later in the Third Meditation when he argues that the meditator satisfies the reality condition for extended things, whether substances or modes, since (a) the meditator is a thinking substance and therefore contains at least as much reality as any extended substance and (b) any substance always contains more reality than any mode or collection of modes (CSM II/30–31, AT 45).

16 See also CSM II/55, AT VII/79; CSM II/76, AT VII/105; and CSM II/97, AT VII/135.

17 Like many other early moderns, Descartes uses "reality" and "perfection" interchangeably in this context (for two explicit examples in the Third Meditation, see CSM II/28, AT VII/40 and CSM II/29, AT VII/42).

second, coarser-grained version that applies not to every single property of an effect but to the *kind* of effect a thing is, which I take to refer primarily to a thing's principal attribute.[18]

Putting Descartes' claims together yields the following causal principle, which I will call Descartes' *fine-grained reality condition*:

> Fine-grained reality condition (FGRC)*: For every basic attribute A had by a substance S, the total and efficient cause of S must contain a sufficient amount of the right kind of reality as A contains.*

Although this formulation is restricted to basic (or "principal") attributes, it will still be strong enough to generate the worrisome Spinozistic pressure.

Descartes relies on FGRC in an inference he makes a few pages later:

> [F]or as I have said before, it is quite clear that there must be at least as much <Fr: reality> in the cause as in the effect. And therefore, whatever kind of cause is eventually proposed, since I am a thinking thing and have within me some idea of God, it must be admitted that what caused me is itself a thinking thing and possesses the idea of all the perfections which I attribute to God (CSM II/34, AT VII/49–50, emphases mine).

At this juncture in the meditation, Descartes is arguing for the existence of God on the basis of his own continued existence. As I read this passage, Descartes explicitly invokes FGRC to infer that his cause is a thinking thing from the fact that he is a thinking thing.[19]

One might try to interpret this passage instead as simply a repetition of Descartes' earlier argument for God's existence from his idea of God, especially in light of his appeal to his having within himself "some idea of God."[20] But to read it in this alternative way would render the underlined portions redundant, at best. The non-underlined portion of the passage would do all the work; however, I see no reason to treat the underlined portions as so idle. Indeed, the second half of the conclusion Descartes reaches is not that God *exists*, but rather that his cause must have certain ideas too, which presupposes the underlined part of his conclusion, namely that his cause is a thinking kind of thing. The meditator is thinking and has certain ideas, so the meditator's cause must also be thinking and have those ideas. Far from a repetition of his earlier argument, Descartes here infers some-

---

18 See, for example, Descartes' claim in the Third Replies that "thought. . .is different in kind from extension" (CSM II/124, AT VII/176); see also *Principles* I/56 (CSM I/211, AT VIIIA/26).

19 See also CSM Principles I/17 (CSM I/199, AT VIIIA/11).

20 I am grateful to Larry Nolan for pressing this objection.

thing important about the nature of his cause from his own nature as a thinking thing.[21]

So it seems that Descartes should accept the following argument, in which *thinking* is taken to be a basic attribute:

6. I am a thinking thing, therefore my [total and efficient] cause is a thinking thing [by FGRC].
7. God is my [total and efficient] cause.
8. Hence, God is a thinking thing.

Descartes accepts (6) in part because being a thinking thing suffices for having the right *kind* of reality to cause other thinking things to exist.

It is tempting to assimilate Descartes' demand for the right *kind* of reality to a more general resemblance condition on causation: effects must *resemble* their causes, where sharing an attribute at least suffices for resemblance. Descartes hints at something like this near the end of the Third Meditation (and elsewhere): "But the mere fact that God created me is a very strong basis for believing that I am somehow made in his image and likeness" (II/35, AT VII/51, my emphasis).[22]

However, on grounds of charity, we should resist this resemblance-based reading of the reality condition. For if sharing an attribute is necessary for resemblance, and if causation requires resemblance, then it is unclear how bodies can ever have non-extended causes, as Descartes' interactive dualism demands. But if sharing an attribute is merely sufficient and *not* necessary for resemblance, then Descartes' inference from his having thought to his cause having thought would be patently invalid.[23]

---

[21] Part of the reason this inference is important is that it is the only place in which Descartes actually argues that God is a *thinking thing*, an absence that has drawn surprisingly little attention from commentators. Descartes' earlier argument seeks to establish the existence of an infinitely perfect being, whose idea includes "supremely intelligent," but to conclude that God and finite minds are both thinking kinds of things from the fact that the idea of God includes intelligence requires a non-trivial inference that Descartes never makes. In this passage, Descartes provides the grounds for concluding that God is formally (i.e., actually) is thinking.

[22] See also CSM II/118, AT VII/168 and CSMK III/340, AT V/156.

[23] One way to make it valid would be to add that thinking things contain the greatest possible type of reality, but I do not know anywhere that Descartes makes this claim, much less argues for it. His focus is almost always on the comparatively greater reality of thought over extension, and his general skepticism that we can penetrate very far into God's nature (e.g., CSM II/32, AT VII/46) implies he cannot rule out that God has a kind of perfection greater even than thinking in virtue of which God can cause thinking things to exist. In the *Principles*, Descartes simply asserts, "we can also have a clear and distinct idea of uncreated and independent thinking substance, that is of God," without the argument of the *Meditations* passage (CSM I/54; AT VIIIa/25–26, my emphasis).

Rather than stemming from a more general causal principle about resemblance, I think Descartes' reality condition rests on an appeal to intelligibility. As noted at the start of this section, Descartes thinks of causation as a kind of *giving* of reality, and he reasons that causes cannot give what they do not already have. Suppose we asked him: why not? Why can't a thing give something if it doesn't already have it? Descartes answers that the possession requirement on giving is "manifest by the natural light" (CSM II/28; AT VII/40), which I take to imply that it would be *unintelligible* for a thing to give something it didn't already have. We might now say that the concept of possessing is built into the very concept of giving. Questioning this connection points to a failure to grasp the concepts involved, akin to what would be revealed if we asked, "But why can't some squares have only 3 sides?" This point will become important later, so let me emphasize it: for Descartes, the intelligibility of causation requires the satisfaction of his reality condition.

So far, so good, but let us return to our extended substance, *Rocky*, a rock created by God. By FGRC, for every basic attribute had by Rocky, God must contain a sufficient amount of the right kind of reality as it contains. According to Descartes, in the case of a created thinking thing, God has the right kind of reality to cause thinking things because God *is* a thinking thing. Yet if the only way to contain the right kind of reality of an attribute is by actually exemplifying that attribute, then we would have a quick argument from God's creation of extended substances to the extended nature of God, based on a version of (4): *For all basic attributes F*, *x* causes $y \rightarrow (Fy \rightarrow Fx)$.[24] To block this Spinozistic pressure, Descartes needs it to be the case that God can cause extended things without actually being extended and without violating the reality condition.

Put differently, we might wonder how Descartes would respond to the following argument, which is parallel to the one he endorsed in the case of thinking things:

6′. Rocky is an extended thing, therefore Rocky's [total and efficient] cause is an extended thing [by FGRC].
7′. God is the total and efficient cause of Rocky.
8′. Hence, God is an extended thing.

Descartes rejects (8′) in several texts, claiming in a letter to Henry More that although "God is extended in virtue of his power" by being able to cause bodily changes, nonetheless "I deny that [God's essence] is there in

[24] Others have tried to argue in the other direction, from the non-extended nature of mental substances plus the reality condition to the denial of any mental-physical causation (see especially Radner (1985)).

the manner of extended being, that is, in the way in which I just described an extended thing" (CSMK III/381, AT VII/403). This rules out *Expand*.[25] *Rejecting* the reality condition is also clearly out for Descartes. That would render divine causation unintelligible, and Descartes is unwilling to accept unintelligibility at least here. But I am also aware of no text in which Descartes attempts to reduce being extended to something like being a thinking thing, so I suspect he would deny *Reduce* as well.[26] And yet, something has to give.

Undoubtedly some readers are ready to scream that I have been ignoring the key qualification in Descartes' reality condition, captured in the "formal" vs. "eminent" distinction. That is, there is supposed to be another way to contain the right kind of reality of an attribute without exemplifying it, namely by containing it *eminently*. On this account, Descartes' fine-grained reality condition is actually disjunctive:

> Disjunctive FGRC: *For every basic attribute A had by a substance S, the total and efficient cause of S must contain a sufficient amount of the right kind of reality as A contains either by being A [formal] or by containing A in some other way [eminent].*

This emendation certainly blocks (6′), and hence the inference from (6′) to (8′).

But notice that the disjunctive version also renders (6) false as well. All Descartes can conclude from his own thinking is that his cause *contains* thought in some way or another, not that his cause "is itself a thinking thing." In other words, this escape maneuver cuts both ways: it invalidates the inference to God's being extended only if it also invalidates parallel inferences from created things to other divine attributes, including traditional ones like being a thinking thing, having a will, a mind, and so forth.

---

[25] See also Principles I/23, CSM I/200–201, AT VIIIA/13. For an alternative reading of this exchange, see Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*, 356–362.

[26] Indeed, one of Descartes' central metaphysical theses is that extension and thought are irreducibly different ways of a being a thing. It is an interesting question whether being extended could be reduced to divine attributes other than thought. An obvious candidate would be God's omnipresence or immensity, but as Descartes' letter to More makes clear, Descartes' own account of omnipresence in terms of causal capacity would render the account circular. (In conversation, Helen Hattab floated the possibility that perhaps something in Descartes' account of God's eternality, which involves successive duration, might be a more promising reductive base.) Malebranche, who accepted a doctrine of Divine immensity closer to More's own, might have more resources here, though he too emphasizes that matter "corresponds only very imperfectly to the divine immensity, and it does not correspond at all to the other attributes of the infinitely perfect Being" (JS 138). The present issue is whether it corresponds *enough* to divine immensity to satisfy the causal condition. For an interesting discussion of the relation between God's immensity and extension in Malebranche, see Reid (2003).

Before exploring this alternative form of containment further, let us turn to two other metaphysical principles that yield similar pairs of inferences, one acceptable and one worrisomely Spinozistic, which likewise elicited appeals to another form of containment.

3. From Mental Representation

In the previous section, I pointed to an argument for including extension as a divine attribute from Descartes' reality condition on causation and the fact that God is a cause of extended things. In this section, we will see similar expansionist pressures from a principle about mental representation found in Descartes and Leibniz.

The bulk of Descartes' Third Meditation focuses on what we can infer about the extra-mental world from the contents of our ideas. In the background is Descartes' rejection of both brute representational content and an infinite regress of representational content. Descartes claims instead that the contents of at least some mental representations must ultimately be explained in terms of how the world actually is:

> And although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be an infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally all the reality which is present only objectively in the idea
>
> (CSM II/29; AT VII/42, my emphasis).

Descartes reasons that although the content of some ideas might be accounted for in terms of the content of other ideas, there is at least one "primary" or basic idea whose content is accounted for in terms of something extra-representational, namely the way a thing formally or actually is. As with causation, Descartes' motivation seems to rest on an appeal to intelligibility or explicability: it would be unintelligible if the content of every idea was explained by the content of other ideas *ad infinitum* or if some ideas lacked an explanatorily-satisfying source altogether.[27]

In this passage, Descartes likens the source of basic mental content to an *archetype*, something that formally contains the reality that primary ideas represent. The traditional metaphor of archetype is wonderfully loose, inviting the reader to fill in the details of how exactly the non-representational grounding of primary ideas is supposed to go. Is mere causal relatedness sufficient, thereby making the representational demand on primary ideas an applied version of the reality condition? This passage suggests no; Descartes is looking for more than merely a causal source of primary ideas. As his

[27] Descartes claims that this too is founded on the "natural light" (CSM II/97–98, AT VII/136).

appeal to formal containment suggests, Descartes believes the source of primary ideas must also *resemble* their representational content.[28] Hence, whereas the reality condition itself does not contain a resemblance requirement, the representational demand on the source of basic ideas does require some kind of resemblance.

To what extent must the content of primary ideas resemble their source? As with the reality condition, Descartes sometimes states his demand on the source of basic representational content in very fine-grained and demanding ways. *Fine-grained*: "It is a primary notion that every perfection that is present objectively in an idea must really exist in some cause of the idea" (CSM II/97–98, AT VII/136, my emphasis).[29] *Demanding*: "Whatever exists in the objects of our ideas in a way which exactly corresponds to our perception of it is said to exist formally in those objects" (CSM II/114, AT VII/161, my emphasis). But the more one demands resemblance between the source and the content of basic ideas—much less exact resemblance for every element of the representation!—the stronger the case for a nearby version of (4) from representation becomes: x is *the extra-mental source of the representational content* of primary idea $y \rightarrow$ (y represents F $\rightarrow$ Fx).

Perhaps Descartes could make due with a coarser or weaker version, but in the Third Meditation, Descartes infers quite a lot about how God formally is from the representational contents of his ideas, including from ideas that are about things other than God. For example, "The idea [of God] is, moreover, utterly clear and distinct; for whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in it" (CSM 32/AT VII/46, my emphasis). By this reasoning, if I clearly and distinctly perceive some attribute A that contains any perfection or reality whatsoever, then A is also "wholly contained" in my idea of God.[30] This reasoning still moves *intra* ideas; however, Descartes adds that we can infer features of God's nature, and not merely our ideas of it, from clear and distinct ideas of reality-implying attributes: "I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some

---

[28] By the Sixth Meditation, Descartes will emphasize cases in which there is no resemblance between the objective reality of ideas and their sources, namely in the case of sensory ideas (e.g., CSM II/56–57, AT VII/81–83; CSM II/53, AT VII/76). However, this is consistent with his claim in the Third Meditation and elsewhere that basic clear and distinct ideas require such resemblance.

[29] See also *Principles* I/17 (CSM I/198–199, AT VIIIA/11).

[30] By "attributes" here, Descartes means qualities or properties that can be attributed or predicated of a thing (see Principles I.52, CSM I/210, AT VIIIa/25). So if *A* is an attribute of God, then God is A. (Descartes later distinguishes attributes from qualities in the case of God (Principles I.56, CSM I/211–212, AT VIIIa/26), but for reasons that do not alter the present point: if *A* is an attribute of God, then *A* can be truly predicated of God.) Descartes also glosses "perfections" in terms of the "attributes" or properties of a substance (CSM II/118, AT VII/168).

perfection—and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant—are present in God either formally or eminently" (CSM II/32, AT VII/46, my emphasis).[31] Descartes reaches this conclusion because he thinks the sources of at least some of our basic ideas are God's formally exemplified, non-representational attributes.

This passage *prima facie* suggests the following representational principle, again restricted to basic attributes:

> Representational principle (RP): *For any basic attribute A, if anyone clearly and distinctly represents A, then God is A*.

But now consider the following pair of inferences in which 'A' names a basic attribute with at least some reality or perfection:

9. If anyone clearly and distinctly represents A, then God is A [RP].
10. Descartes clearly and distinctly represents the attribute of thought [CSM I/211, AT VIIIA/25–26].
11. Therefore, God is thinking.

9. If anyone clearly and distinctly represents A, then God is A [RP].
10′. Descartes clearly and distinctly represents the attribute of extension [CSM I/211, AT VIIIA/25–26].
11′. Therefore, God is extended.

As in the causal case, Descartes accepts (10′) and rejects (11′). His preferred way of doing so involves another appeal to eminent containment, as contained at the end of the previously quoted passage. For a basic attribute like thinking, clear and distinct perceptions of thinking entails that God *formally* contains thinking—from which it follows that God *is* a thinking thing. That is precisely the way in which God functions as the archetype of the representational content of ideas of basic attributes like thought.

But for other basic attributes, such as extension, clear and distinct representations of being extended entail only that God *eminently* contains extension, which is to say that God contains extension without being extended. So once again, Descartes' representational principle becomes disjunctive:

> Disjunctive RP: *If anyone clearly and distinctly represents A, then either God is A or else God contains A in some other way.*

And as with the reality condition, going disjunctive here also invalidates inferences from the contents of our basic ideas to God's formal nature. Yes,

---

[31] See also CSM II/35, AT VII/52.

(11′) doesn't follow from (9) and (10′), but (11) no longer follows from (9) and (10) either.

As usual, matters are more complicated in the case of Leibniz, as one can find texts affirming each of our four options. Leibniz sometimes embraces a similar principle on representation as Descartes and toys with accepting *Expand* as a consequence: "There are infinitely many simple forms [in God] because our perceptions are infinitely many, and are not explicable in terms of each other" (DSR 81, my emphasis). Leibniz reasons from the fact that (infinitely) many of our ideas cannot be explained in terms of each other to the fact that God, "the subject of all absolutely simple forms," actually has infinitely many attributes or perfections. On other occasions, Leibniz invokes the formal/eminent distinction to avoid *Expand*.[32]

More often, however, Leibniz opts for *Reduce* or *Reject*. Leibniz sometimes claims that the ideas of all non-absolute perfections can be constructed out of or reduced to ideas of God's absolute perfections plus logical operators like negation and conjunction, à la *Reduce*.[33] Here is an early and a late text supporting *Reduce*:

> Ideas exist in God insofar as the most perfect being arises out of the conjunction in the same subject of all possible absolute forms or perfections; but from the conjunction of simple possible forms there result modifications, that is, ideas, as properties result from an essence (DSR 81).

> The idea of the absolute is internal [i.e., innate] to us, as is that of being: these absolutes are nothing but the attributes of God and they may be said to be as much the source of ideas as God himself is the principle of beings (NE 158).

However, accepting the representational principle and avoiding *Expand* in this way requires a fairly stouthearted form of reductionism. Take, for example, the idea of a sensible quality, such as the color blue or pain. (Harder cases involve sensory ideas that seem to directly involve imperfection, such as the feeling of moral depravity.) Like other early moderns, Leibniz believed that sensory ideas like pain and blueness were simply confused versions of more fundamental non-sensory states, such as representations of bodily states.[34] If so, perhaps God exemplifies only those more fundamental, non-sensory states, robbing Spinozistic expansion of its hetero-

---

32 For especially clear examples, see Ak 6.4.2308–9, Ak 6.4.2313, and Ak 6.4.2316.

33 For Leibniz-friendly reasons and texts to resist this reductionist line, see Newlands (2013).

34 See, for example, NE 131–133. Nevertheless, Leibniz is not as unwavering on this reductionist line as one might expect; see Leibniz's admission of the state of pleasure in God (DSR 83) and his difficulty in denying that God experiences pain (L 177).

dox sting. However noble that hope, such thoroughgoing reductionism about *qualia* has faired quite poorly since Leibniz's time and it attracts few followers these days, reminding us of the steep cost of *Reduce*.

Although Leibniz has strong reductionist tendencies, he sometimes opts for *Reject* instead. For example, Leibniz thinks that ideas in God's intellect are the grounds of possibilities. Applying the representational principle to God's own ideas, it would follow that God's extra-representational attributes are the ultimate ground of every possibility. Leibniz sometimes appears to accept this consequence.[35] However, Leibniz sometimes *does*, and almost certainly *should* avoid appealing solely to God's extra-representational attributes to account for the grounds of possibility.[36] Instead, he sometimes concludes that those divine ideas whose content cannot be accounted for in terms of other divine ideas have their content primitively and not in virtue of anything further about God. If so, then Leibniz must think the representational principle is false for at least some basic divine ideas. That is, at least some of the content of God's basic ideas is not reflected elsewhere in the divine nature, which is a form of *Reject*.

In general, the cost of *Reject* depends on the virtues of the principle being rejected. I suggested that Descartes takes the cost of *Reject* to be the same in the representation case as it is in the causal case: inexplicability or unintelligibility. Leibniz hints at this same cost in a passage quoted earlier: some ideas "are not explicable in terms of each other" (DSR 81). Rather than admit inexplicability in his early years, Leibniz concluded that there must be a non-representational source to explain the content of such ideas and that the source is God's actual, non-representational properties. Later, Leibniz became more willing to pay the explanatory price of accepting a primitively rich divine intellect in order to avoid *Expand*.[37]

Notice the emerging pattern. We have undisputed facts among the early moderns about causation and representation: God creates thinking things and extended things; we have clear and distinct ideas of extension and power. To

---

35 Though it can be read in different ways, this is how the following passage is often read by Leibniz's interpreters: "I won't venture now to determine whether people can ever produce a perfect analysis of their notions or whether they can ever reduce their thoughts to primitive possibilities or to irresolvable notions or (what comes to the same thing) to the absolute attributes of God, indeed to the first causes and the ultimate reason for things" (AG 26, my emphasis). See, for example, the opening chapters of Nachtomy (2007).

36 For the *does*, see CP 43, Ak 6.4.1389, and 6.4.2317; for the *should*, see Newlands (2013).

37 Leibniz could also push back that the explanatory cost here is not any higher than others have to pay eventually. After all, a primitively rich divine intellect seems little worse off in the explanatory game than the expansionist alternative—why does *God thinks p* cry out more loudly for explanation than *God is conscious of p* or *God is p*? Nevertheless, for a case against paying this cost of *Reject*, see Adams (2000).

render these facts intelligible, Descartes and Leibniz appealed to ways God actually is. But the price of intelligibility appears to be a Spinozistic expansion: given the causal and representational principles, it looks like God must have more attributes than is traditionally allowed. *Reduce* stands as a tempting but difficult way to avoid *Reject* and save intelligibility.

However, we have also seen a glimmer of hope: perhaps there is another way to avoid *Expand* without *Reject* or *Reduce*, a way for God to create extended things and represent extension without actually being extended. I turn now to a third and final appeal to such hope that is found, fittingly enough, in Kant.

4. From Possibility

In this section, I will sketch a third way of backing into Spinozism. This route begins with the widespread view among early moderns that God is, in some sense, the ground of possibility. There were, of course, deep disagreements over (a) on what in God modal truths and modal truth-makers depend and (b) the manner of dependence by which modal truths and truth-makers depend on God.[38] Descartes, for example, famously held that (a) modal truths depend on God's will and (b) this form of dependence involves efficient causation. Leibniz, by contrast, believed that modal truths (a) depend on God's intellect (b) through a non-volitional form of ontological dependence. In this section, I will briefly consider an account of the ground of possibility offered by Kant in his pre-critical writings and indicate how it generates the same pressure toward Spinozism that we have encountered in the previous two cases.[39]

Leibniz and the early Kant agree that possibility is grounded in actuality. "For if there is reality in essences or possibles, or indeed, in eternal truths, this reality must be grounded in something existent and actual" (Leibniz, AG 218). "All possibility presupposes something actual in and through which all that can be thought is given" (Kant, OPB 127). Both further argue that only a single, necessarily existing being can ground possibilities and *possibilia*, thereby offering a proof for the existence of God "based simply on the fact that something is possible" (OPB 135).[40] In both cases, the motivation to find the divine grounds for possibility lies in explicability: possibilities ungrounded in *actualia* would be mysterious or inexplicable. The basic idea seems to be that possibilities are explained through their grounds, and so ungrounded possibilities would be unexplained.

---

38 This way of framing the disputes is from Newlands (2013).

39 Although I disagree with his objections to Leibniz on behalf of Kant, Andrew Chignell has cogently presented a version of the concern I am raising here about the path from Kant's early theory of modality to Spinozism (Chignell (2012)).

40 For Leibniz's version, see AG 218.

Kant differs from Leibniz on exactly what in God serves as the ground of possibility. As I suggested briefly in the previous section, according to Leibniz, God's occurrent ideas are the ground of possibilities. God actually thinking *p* makes it the case that it is possible that *p*. But if, as the representationalist principle suggests, God's thinking certain basic ideas—and hence grounding certain possibilities—presupposes that God actually exemplifies the content of those ideas elsewhere in the divine nature, then we would have another quick argument for the divine exemplification of every basic possibility, as in Spinozism. However, that reasoning relies on a substantive principle about representation and the extra-mental source of God's ideas, and I claimed that Leibniz sometimes does not, and certainly should not, accept it. So Leibniz might have an out here, via *Reject*.

Kant's early account of the divine ground of possibilities threatens to collapse into Spinozism more directly. For according to Kant, possibilities are not grounded in God by being thought about by God (Leibniz) or by being willed by God (Descartes). Rather, "the possibilities of things themselves. . .are given through the divine nature" (OPB 135).[41] In particular, Kant argues that what he calls the "data," "the material element" or, equivalently, the "real element" of possibility (OPB 123) must be found in God's actual, extra-mental nature.[42]

The inference from possibility to actual exemplification in God is based on what I'll call Kant's *possibility principle*:

> Possibility Principle (PP): *if it is really possible that something is* ϕ*, then God is* ϕ.

This principle generates another version of (4): *x* makes it possible that Fy $\rightarrow$ ($\Diamond$F*y* $\rightarrow$ F*x*). Although Kant suggests a fairly fine-grained version, we could focus on a more coarse-grained version that applies only to basic attributes, as we did in the previous two cases. Either way, the possibility principle implies that the following pair of inferences should both be valid:

12. If it is really possible that something thinks, then God thinks [PP].
13. It is really possible that something thinks [$@p \rightarrow \Diamond p$].
14. Therefore, God thinks.

---

41 Although he is not as explicit as Kant, Malebranche sometimes appears to ground creaturely possibilities in the broader Divine nature and not merely in Divine thoughts (see LO 229, 319, 586, 617). For passages that sound closer to Leibniz's intellectualist position, see LO 618 and JS 128 and 197. (It is easy, but probably incorrect, to conflate Malebranche's appeals to God's *wisdom* and God's *intellect*, as I fear I did in Newlands (2013).)

42 Kant's reasons for favoring actual exemplification over mere thinking are more complex than I can get into here; for further discussion, see Adams (2000) and Chignell (2009).

12′. If it is really possible that something is extended, then God is extended [PP].
13′. It is really possible that something is extended [$@p \rightarrow \Diamond p$].
14′. Therefore, God is extended.

As with the previous principles, PP puts pressure on Kant to expand God's nature to include more properties than orthodoxy accepts. Once again, Kant faces a similar range of options: he could accept that God is, after all, extended (*Expand*). He could claim that the real possibility of extension can be reduced to other real possibilities, as in some forms of idealism (*Reduce*). Or he could reject the possibility principle altogether and allow that the real element in some possibilities is not grounded in God's nature (*Reject*).

And yet, in his pre-critical period at least, Kant explicitly rejects all three options. Against *Expand*, Kant claims that this would render God's nature inconsistent: "The impenetrability of bodies, extension and such like cannot be attributes of that which has understanding and will" (OPB 130). Against *Reduce*, the pre-critical Kant warns, "Nor it does not help if one seeks to evade the issue by maintaining that the quality of motion in question is not regarded as true reality. The thrust of a body or the force of cohesion are, without doubt, something truly positive" (OPB 130). And against *Reject*, Kant continues to insist, "insofar as body possesses extension, force, and so on, the possibility of body is grounded in the Supreme Being" (OPB 131).

But if all three alternatives are rejected, how is the real possibility of being extended grounded in God's nature? Kant suggests an alternative that should now seem hauntingly familiar:

> The data of all possibility must be found in the necessary being either as determinations of it, or as consequences [*Folge*] which are given through the necessary being as the ultimate ground. It is thus apparent that all reality is, in one way or another, embraced by the ultimate real ground (OPB 129–130, emphases mine).

In other words, there turn out to be *two different ways* in which possibilities are grounded in God, according to the early Kant. Either their real elements are directly exemplified by God "as a determination [that] inheres in" God (OPB 132), or they are *consequences* of what God directly exemplifies. The former, direct way applies to thinking (OPB 131) and the latter, more indirect way to being extended (OPB 130). Hence, Kant would reject (12′) in the same way Descartes rejects (6′) and (9′): there is *another way* of containing or grounding that does not require actual exemplification. This implies that Kant's possibility principle is disjunctive as well:

Disjunctive PP: *if it is really possible that something is ϕ, then either God is ϕ or the real possibility of being ϕ is a consequence of some other way, ψ, that God is.*

Yet again, notice that this invalidates (12′)–(14′) only if it also invalidates (12)–(14). Hence Kant's inference that God has a mind and will from the fact that "we cannot think of any reality which could. . .serve as an adequate substitute" for thinking and willing (OPB 132) is threatened by his own disjunctive principle.

Kant was keenly aware of the Spinozistic threat on the horizon, and he explicitly introduces the second disjunct to avoid *Expand*: "for all other beings are only possible through [God] alone. But this is not to be understood to mean that all possible reality is included among its determinations" (OPB 130). Kant's motives may be well and good, but as with Descartes' proposed escape, we might wonder about this alternative.

According to Kant, the real possibility of being extended is not grounded in God's idea of extension, nor in God's volition to create extension, nor in God's actually being extended. So in what exemplified attribute of God *is* the possibility of being extended grounded? As far as I know, Kant nowhere even attempts to answer this question.

So let us focus on a more general question: in what sense is the possibility of extension a "consequence" of this other, unknown divine attribute? Kant cannot mean any sort of *logical* consequence, since he motivates his possibility principle by arguing that logical relations are insufficient to ground real possibility. Nor does Kant mean *causal* consequence, since the grounding of possibility by God is supposed to be logically prior to any volitional or creative activity.[43] Disappointingly, Kant explicates "consequence" in these early texts most often by simply restating the mystery: consequence "as through a ground" (OPB 133, 129). That is, the real possibility of being extended is a consequence of God's actual attributes by being. . .well, grounded in but not exemplified by God, the very relation we wanted clarified.

5. Divine Proxies

We have now encountered three metaphysical principles—from causation, from representation, and from modality—that initially pressure their early

[43] Walford's translation misleading adds the words "produced by" at one crucial point in Kant's explication of this second way: ". . .or whether they are to be regarded merely as consequences produced by it in other things" (OPB 133, my emphasis), which might sound like a power or capacity in God to produce extension grounds the real possibility of extension. However, the German text simply does not include the "produced by" phrase that Walford adds: "*. . .oder blos durch dasselbe an anderen Dingen als Folgen anzusehen wären*." This is not a trivial point, since at least one interpreter has argued that possibilities for Kant are grounded in God's productive capacities (Stang (2010)).

modern advocates to expand the range of divine attributes beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. The initial versions of the principles function in similar ways, underwriting inferences from the fact that God bears a particular relation to an attribute to the conclusion that God exemplifies that attribute. We also saw that in some cases (6–12), the inferences were treated as unproblematic and even illuminating. But we also saw that these same principles, left standing, would apply to non-traditional divine attributes too (6′–12′), such as extension or qualitative ideas involving imperfections.

In each case, I suggested that there are three general ways of responding: *reject* the principle, *reduce* the problematic feature to something else, or *expand* the range of divine properties. Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant were reluctant, at least sometimes, to accept any of these options. Instead, a fourth option was floated: find *another way* in which God can cause, provide the representational content for, or ground the possibility of certain attributes without directly exemplifying them. This alternative forced the metaphysical principles to become disjunctive: either God directly exemplifies the attribute in question *or* God exemplifies a different attribute from which it follows that God can nevertheless cause, provide representational content for, or ground the possibility of the non-exemplified attribute. One immediate and unhappy consequence of going disjunctive is that it also invalidates seemingly salutary inferences from the natures of created things to God's nature (as in 6, 9, and 12). But perhaps that is a price worth paying to avoid the alternatives, and perhaps there are other ways to discover God's nature.

However, this fourth option faces a more serious concern. What these early moderns are searching for is a *divine proxy*, a more orthodox-friendly divine attribute that can play the same role as the problematic attributes would have played, had God exemplified them. Of course, not just any ole' proxy will work: God's actual attributes will need to have features that allow them to play the proxy role. What is it about God's being *F* but not *G* that enables God to cause/represent/ground the possibility of a thing's being G? Without an answer, appeals to a divine proxy will seem like a mysterious and *ad hoc* way of avoiding the expansionist consequences of the original principles.

As we have seen, Descartes appeals to the notion of *eminent containment* to account for this proxy relation, an appeal that Leibniz occasionally echoes and that is in the neighborhood of Kant's "other way." In the context of explaining the representational principle, Descartes outright defines eminent containment in terms of sameness of functional roles: "Something is said to exist eminently in an object when, although it does not exactly correspond to our perception of it, its greatness [L: *tanta*; Fr: *grandes*] is such that it can fill the role [*supplere*] of that which does so correspond" (CSM II/114; AT VII/161, my emphasis). For example, God can cause extended things

without being extended in virtue of possessing a distinct attribute, ψ, that can "play the same role" as God's thinking plays when God causes thinking things.[44] God's being ψ can, as Kant puts it, act as an "adequate substitute" for being extended. As Spinoza describes the move, being ψ can "take the place of" being extended (C 304). As I have put it, God's being ψ serves as a causal proxy for God's being extended.

But simply claiming that God's attributes stand as proxies for non-traditional attributes does not explain *how* they can do so, and unless that mystery can be cleared up, the appeal to a proxy will just be another name of the problem. To block this concern, Descartes claims in the above passage that it is the "greatness" of God's attributes that allow them to stand as causal and representational proxies for attributes like extension.[45] Elsewhere, he invokes similar comparative metaphors: "more noble," "more excellent," and in "higher form."[46] In other words, the reason why one of God's exemplified attributes can function as a causal proxy for extension is because it is greater than, more noble than, more perfect than extension.

To say that this explanation has left readers unsatisfied would be an understatement. As Jorge Secada puts it, "the notion of having a property or perfection eminently, though easy to apprehend in its general meaning, is difficult to the point of intractability when examined closely."[47] Exactly where does the puzzle lie? Secada thinks it is "the mysterious idea of degrees of reality." I do not think that's quite right, in part because I do not find degrees of *perfection*, at least, to be an utterly impenetrable notion.[48]

Another source of frustration is the tendency of some interpreters to analyze eminent containment in a way that includes a clause to the effect that *S eminently contains ϕ only if S can bring about ϕ.*[49] However, causal capacity can hardly be included in the analysis of eminent containment. Causal

---

44 See also CSMK 381, AT V/403. Descartes cites number and length as examples of extended properties (CSM II/99, AT VII/137) and, arguably, memories and imaginings as examples of mental properties (CSM II/40, AT VII/57) that are eminently contained in God.

45 See also CSM II/29, AT VII/42.

46 In order of citation: CSM II/55, AT VII/79; CSM II/28, AT IX/32; CSM II/97, AT VII/135. These metaphors are by no means novel to Descartes. For a few examples from different periods, see Aquinas ST I, q4, art 2; Suarez, DM XVIII.ii.8; XVIII.ii.35; XVIII.ix.25; XXX.i.10 and Kant OPB 132–133.

47 Secada (2000), 81; see also Schmaltz (2008), 67 and many other notes of skepticism in the voluminous Descartes literature.

48 Nonetheless, others seem to share Secada's concern and have tried to analyze eminent containment in ways that do not appeal to degrees of reality at all, relying instead of *independence* (see especially the accounts offered by O'Neill (1987) and Schmaltz (2008)). My main objection will still stand even if "more independent than" is the correct analysis of "more perfect than."

49 See Gorham (2003) for a nice version of this complaint.

capacity is supposed to *follow* from and be explained by eminent containment; it is an empty achievement to accomplish this by building the capacity into the very notion.[50]

Furthermore, building causal capacity into the *analysans* of eminent containment threatens to render some of Descartes' other claims obviously false. For example, according to Descartes, "it seems possible" that the meditator himself eminently contains the "extension, shape, position, and movement" of bodies, "since they are merely the modes of a substance [whereas the meditation is] a substance" (CSM II/31, AT VII/45). But it seems clearly false that the meditator, qua limited thinking substance, has the *causal* capacity to bring about all these features of bodies. Hence, eminent containment for Descartes does not, by itself, require the power to bring about that which is contained, even if it is true that some things have the power to bring about effects in virtue of eminently containing them. The more general lesson is that eminent containment is not, strictly speaking, a causal notion for Descartes. It is a form of containment that is supposed to satisfy different constraints (some causal); however, since it is not itself a form of causation, it should not be analyzed in causal terms.

Although these concerns have some force, I do not think they penetrate to the heart of the problem facing appeals to eminent containment and their ilk. To illustrate my concern, suppose I said to my department chair, "I won't be in town during the next department meeting, so I won't be able to attend. But don't worry, my wife will attend as my proxy." Suppose he questions me about the appropriateness of this, given that my wife is not a member of our department, and I reply, "Oh, it's appropriate—she's an even bigger Bruce Springsteen fan than I am." Among the oddities of that exchange would be this: although the degree of Springsteen fandom may well correlate highly with moral and metaphysical perfection, it has really nothing to do with being able to fill in for my department vote.[51]

I fear something similar is going on in these divine proxy cases. Pointing out how God's exemplified attributes compare to other real or possible attributes does not thereby explain why the former can serve as proxies for the latter. Suppose God's attributes *are* nobler, more excellent, more perfect, higher, better, greater, neater, shinier. . .than lowly extension. We still need an

---

[50] Suarez was well aware of this point and urged caution against assimilating power into eminence (DM XXX.i.10). Surprisingly, Eileen O'Neill and Tad Schmaltz both highlight this warning from Suarez (O'Neill (1987), 239 and Schmaltz (2008), 69n56), but both still retain the "power to bring about" as part of their *analysans*.

[51] Of course, one might try to concoct a scenario in which my appeal to Springsteen *does* explain the appropriateness of my wife's serving as my proxy (say, we're voting on our department's official song, and I'm trying to stack the votes for "Land of Hope and Dreams"). But that's just the point: *we need to be given such a scenario*; appealing to a proxy absent an intelligible context does not by itself make it an intelligible appeal.

informative explanation of why *those* comparative characteristics enable God to satisfy the causal, representational, or possibility-grounding principles.[52]

Among the early moderns, Malebranche is refreshingly upfront on this issue. In the *Dialogues*, his spokesman Theodore makes the clear and seemingly unavoidable inference: "God contains all perfections; extension is a perfection, and so God is extended" (JS 135). Spinoza couldn't have said it better himself (not for nothing was Malebranche accused of Spinozism by Arnauld!). However, Theodore continues in the very next sentence, "But God is not extended like bodies."[53] Read in isolation, that might sound like an outright denial of divine extension, but Malebranche is clear that there is *some* connection between God's nature and being extended: "[God] is extended like bodies, but… in a way completely different than his creatures" (JS 134, my emphasis). And so once again, we are left to wonder: what is this other, "completely different" way of being such that God, by being it, contains extension?[54] In *The Search After Truth*, Malebranche embraces a divine proxy when discussing God's causal capacity, but at least he admits that this is wholly mysterious. Prior to creation, "all creatures, even the most material and terrestrial, are in God, though in a completely spiritual way that is incomprehensible to us" (LO 229, my emphasis).

Fair enough—far be it for us to insist on comprehensibility. But recall that the motivation for accepting the metaphysical principles in the first place was the desire for intelligibility. We were told to avoid *Reject* because otherwise causation, divine representation, and the grounding of possibility would involve something unattractively primitive, unintelligible, or inexpli-

---

52 Schmaltz admirably attempts to offer an explanation on behalf of Descartes in a recent paper, claiming "one obvious proposal is that even though God and finite minds cannot formally contain features of the material world, they do have the power to represent such features in thought" (Schmaltz 2013). On the "obviousness" of this proposal: I confess it remains unclear to me why being able to represent F without being F is in fact intrinsically greater than simply being able to be F. Even worse, Descartes seems to explicitly undermine this proposal by claiming that mere objective being "is of course a much less perfect [way of being] than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect" (CSM II/75; AT VII/103). But even if it were obvious and correct, Schmaltz's proposal would only push the mystery back a step, since it invokes the very divine capacity that it was supposed to help account for: God, prior to creation, can represent features that God does not actually exemplify (see section 3 above).

53 The main difference that Malebranche highlights here is that God, unlike bodies, has no parts (JS 135), though this difference is one that Spinoza accepts too (EIp15s). Elsewhere, Malebranche discusses a more distinctive difference between divine and creaturely extension (JS 138 and LO 626).

54 One might think that Malebranche's doctrine of "intelligible extension" is meant to answer this, but that doctrine comes too late in the dialectic to be of service. Intelligible extension serves as the intelligible (to us) bridge between God's idea of extension and bodies themselves, whereas we are wondering about the divine grounds of the very idea of extension, which Malebranche thinks is found—somewhere, somehow—in God's incomprehensible (to us) infinite nature (JS 136–137).

cable. My main worry about the divine proxy appeal is that it sacrifices the very gains in intelligibility earned by the principles solely for the price of avoiding *Expand* or *Reduce*. If at bottom, appeals to divine proxies are appeals to a primitive form of containment or grounding or to an incomprehensible mystery, we will have failed to secure the main good of the principles after all. Even worse, we will have also undermined a rich source of knowledge about God's nature, via reflecting on the natures of created things. In this way, appeals to divine proxies actually leave us *worse* off than before we invoked them! Hence we should have stuck with one of our original three options: *Reject*, *Reduce*, or *Expand*. The promised fourth option is really not an option at all.

My bafflement here is, alas, unoriginal. Spinoza pointed out that notions like eminent containment promise more than they deliver, replacing the pressure to expand God's properties with mere appeals to ignorance. Just before concluding that extension is among God's attributes, Spinoza objects to his contemporaries:

> Meanwhile, by other arguments. . .they clearly show that they entirely remove corporeality or extended substance itself from the divine nature. And [yet] they maintain that it has been created by God. But by what divine power could it be created? They are completely ignorant of that. And this shows clearly that they do not understand what they themselves say (EIp15s, G II/57).[55]

I suspect Spinoza would say the same to the pre-critical Kant, whose possibility premise is, after all, one endorsed by Spinoza (EIIp8)—just without the mysterious "consequence" disjunct. Spinoza's response to Descartes and Leibniz on representational content is more complicated, since Spinoza thinks that the content of every idea *can* be accounted for by the content of other ideas *ad infinitum*.[56] But Spinoza also thinks that God's mental states

---

[55] Spinoza explicitly rejects the eminent containment of extension in something non-extended in an earlier text: "it is evident that this effect of body through which we perceive [it] can come from nothing other than extension itself, and not from anything else that (as some maintain) has that extension eminently. For as we have already shown in the first chapter, this does not exist" (KV II.19; G I/90). See also the note of dissatisfaction in his commentary on Descartes' appeal to ignorance: "So we were constrained to allow [*fateri cogebamur*] that there is some attribute in God which contains all the perfections of matter in a more excellent way and can take the place of [*supplere*] matter" (CM I/ii; G I/237–238). And in an early letter to Henry Oldenburg, Spinoza writes, "As for your contention that God has nothing formally in common with created things, etc., I have maintained the complete opposite of this in my definition. For I have said that God is a being consisting of infinite attributes" (Ep4, Curley translation). I take the "complete opposite" of Oldenburg's claim to be the view that God and creatures have *all* their attributes in common, i.e., God formally contains every possible creaturely attribute, rendering an "eminent" containment of attributes empty.

[56] See EIIp7s and EIIp9.

include every finite mental state (EIIp11c), and I suspect he would find attempts to block *that* expansion via eminent containment or other proxies as mysterious and unappealing as he finds it in the causal and modal cases.

Admittedly, Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant all thought they had good reasons for rejecting Spinozistic expansion: extension implies divisibility; consciousness of limitations implies being limited; being extended and being mental are mutually exclusive ways of being; not every real possibility is compossible with every other, and so forth. For his part, Spinoza tries to address these concerns, and so it goes. But Spinoza also rejects the appeal to divine proxies as an unsatisfying way of avoiding expansion. And on this last point, I tend to agree with him, and I would urge those sympathetic with these early modern metaphysical projects to pursue one of our original, albeit costlier, options: *Reject*, *Reduce*, or, God forbid, *Expand*.[57]

Works Cited

Primary Text Abbreviations

Aquinas

ST — *Summa Theologica,* 5 vols, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948)

Descartes

AT — *Oeuvres des Descartes*, 12 vols., ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964–1976). Cited by volume/page.

CSM — *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1 and 2, ed. and trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Cited by volume/page.

CSMK — *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Cited by volume/page.

Kant

OPB — *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, in *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–*

[57] I would like to thank Karl Ameriks, Robert Garcia, Helen Hattab, Sean Greenberg, Marcy Lascano, Mike LeBuffe, Larry Nolan, Tad Schmaltz, Jeff Speaks, James Van Cleve, and an anonymous referee for extended discussions of this topic. This paper benefitted especially from extensive discussion by participants at the memorable Tahoe Early Modern Workshop; thanks so much to everyone there. I am also very grateful to audience members at Notre Dame, Rice University, Texas A&M, CSU-Long Beach, and UC-Irvine for many probing and helpful exchanges on this material.

1770, trans. and ed. by David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Leibniz

AG *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989).

Ak *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. by Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Darmstadt and Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1923–). Cited by series/volume/page. When unaccompanied by another reference, translations are my own.

CP *Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671–1678*, trans. and ed. by Robert C. Sleigh, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

DSR *De Summa Rerum*, trans. by G.H.R. Parkinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

GP *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. by C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin, Weidmann, 1875–90; reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1965). Cited by volume and page.

L *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed. by Leroy E Loemker, second edition, (Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel, 1969).

NE *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ed. and trans. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Malebranche

JS *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, ed. and trans. by Nicholas Jolly and David Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

LO *The Search After Truth*, trans. and ed. by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Spinoza

C *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Cited by page number, except when taken from the *Ethics*, where I cite the standard PyartTypeNumber of the *Ethics* itself (e.g., EIIp1).

G *Opera*, 4 vols., ed. by Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925). Cited by volume/page.

Suárez

DM *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, 2 vols., Reprint (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2009). Cited by disputation/section/paragraph.

Secondary Works Cited

Adams, Robert Merrihew. "God, Possibility, and Kant," *Faith and Philosophy* 17:425–39 (2000).

Chignell, Andrew. "Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 91: 157–92 (2009).

——. "Kant, Possibility, and the Threat of Spinoza," *Mind* 121: 635–75 (2012).

Gorham, Geoffrey. "Descartes' Dilemma of Eminent Containment," *Dialogue* 42:3–25 (2003).

Nachtomy, Ohad. *Possibility, Agency, and Individuality in Leibniz's Metaphysics* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007).

Newlands, Samuel. "Leibniz and the Ground of Possibility," *Philosophical Review* 122: 155–87 (2013).

Nolan, Lawrence and Alan Nelson. "Proofs for the Existence of God," in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, ed. by Stephen Gaukroger (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 104–121.

O'Neill, Eileen. "Mind-Body Interaction and Metaphysical Consistency: A Defense of Descartes," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25: 227–45 (1987).

Pasnau, Robert. *Metaphysical Themes*, 1274–1671 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Radner, Daisie. "Is There a Problem of Cartesian Interactionism?" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23:35–50 (1985).

Reid, Jasper. "Malebranche on Intelligible Extension," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11:581–608 (2003).

——. *Descartes on Causation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Schmaltz, Tad. "Causation and Causal Axioms," in *Descartes' Meditations*, ed. by Karen Detlefsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 82–100.

Secada, Jorge. *Cartesian Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Stang, Nicholas F. "Kant's Possibility Proof," *History of Philosophical Quarterly* 27:275–99 (2010).