"Spinoza's Relevance to Contemporary Metaphysics"
Samuel Newlands (University of Notre Dame)
For *Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*

Preamble

How is a long dead Dutch philosopher relevant to contemporary metaphysics? Lurking behind this question are far more sweeping questions about the relation of contemporary philosophy to its history. In what ways, if any, is the work of *any* long dead philosopher relevant to contemporary projects? What is it to be "relevant" to contemporary concerns in the first place? Should contemporary interests inform interpretations of philosophical history, and, if so, how? This isn't an essay on methodology in the history of philosophy, so I won't dwell on these larger issues for long, lest we never get back to the initial question. But I will say a bit up front about what I will take the relevant sense of "relevance" to be in this paper before turning to Spinoza's relationship to contemporary interests.

One way in which a long dead philosopher could be relevant to contemporary concerns is as an *outsider*. Historically distant philosophers operated in intellectual cultures very different from our own; they faced different challenges, accepted different assumptions, and sometimes pursued different questions. Perhaps the *more different* their orientation and interests are from our own, the more relevant they become. Studying their work could provide us with alternative perspectives and agendas, a hedge against intellectual groupthink. By standing outside contemporary paradigms, their work could remind us just how narrowly and contingently constrained our own intellectual horizons and interests tend to be. More positively, the works of philosophical outsiders may contain neglected alternatives, making their study relevant to contemporary pursuits by

providing a cache of forgotten but promising ideas. Interpretations that emphasize the otherness of historical figures will be especially attractive to those dissatisfied with contemporary discussions: the history of philosophy may become relevant by offering an escape from the blind alley in which we (allegedly) now find ourselves.

An alternative approach takes historical thinkers to be relevant to the extent to which they are *forbears* of contemporary views. Instead of highlighting the ways in which long dead figures differ from us, perhaps we should focus on the ways their concerns and conclusions are ancestors of our own. The hope is that genetic illumination will shed new light on contemporary questions. Understanding the origins of a dominant paradigm like naturalism may help us better understand the problems naturalism can and cannot contribute to solving. By emphasizing the continuity between philosophy and its history, this approach will be especially attractive to those who believe there is a common core to philosophical problems that transcend their cultural and historical development. The vice in ignoring the history of philosophy would be akin to the vice of ignoring the views of a likeminded contemporary colleague just because they happen to work in a different building or speak in a different native tongue than one's own. Bridging the gap in these cases may take additional effort, but surely at least some of us ought to make the effort to do so, given that we're all (allegedly) pursuing similar questions.

Of course, taken too far, either approach can make the history of philosophy quite *ir*relevant for contemporary practitioners. Make long dead philosophers too alien to contemporary concerns and they become philosophically unhelpful and uninteresting, save as antiquarian artifacts to be studied only for the same reasons one might study alchemy – surely not to further one's scientific understanding of metallurgy! Or, if we

focus too much on historical views that are proto-versions of what many of us now believe, the history of philosophy becomes increasingly irrelevant by providing merely cruder and less developed versions of contemporary theories – why study the inchoate beginnings of a view when we have far more developed versions now?

Clearly we should approach the history of philosophy in a way that blends both orientations, finding in historical figures views that are at once somewhat familiar and somewhat foreign. An apt model is a good philosophical conversation partner. A good interlocutor will have interests in some of the topics we're interested in, but she will also hold a set of views distinct from our own against which our own convictions can be reevaluated. At any rate, this is how I propose to treat Spinoza in this paper: his views are relevant to contemporary metaphysics to the extent to which they immerse us in ongoing philosophical discussions, challenging and being challenged in turn.

One final methodological point bears mentioning. Both the outsider and forbearer models share the view that the history of philosophy remains *philosophically* relevant, even though they disagree on the ways in which it is relevant. Not everyone accepts this point of agreement, however, and dissenters include those working in both contemporary and historical fields. Here, at least, I am no dissenter. I share the view of those who do not see a deep divide between studying philosophy and studying its history. The work of those who have successfully bridged the cultural and intellectual distance between long-dead philosophers and the rest of us have shed too much light on both interpretive and constructive questions to be rejected as fundamentally misguided. Let us join them in their *philosophical* labor and explore further the ways Spinoza's views are relevant for contemporary metaphysics.

1.0 Introduction

I begin with a word of caution. The topics I discuss are intended to *illustrate*, not wholly constitute, Spinoza's relevance to contemporary work. That's a good thing, since many of the views I will attribute to Spinoza involve highly controversial interpretations that other Spinoza scholars (including contributors to this volume) would reject, and I make no attempt to adequately defend my interpretations here. Defending particular interpretations would take us too far afield from this essay's goal of fostering dialogue with contemporary philosophers, whereas avoiding controversial claims altogether would degrade the discussion into a series of vague and uninteresting generalities.[1] The reader is therefore encouraged to substitute alternative interpretations of Spinoza into the mix and consider what distinctive illuminations they may yield, as well as to reflect on Spinoza's relevance to other issues in metaphysics. I hope what follows can help provide a template for at least one fruitful way such dialogues can unfold.

I will consider Spinoza's views on three topics of contemporary interest: monism, metaphysical dependence, and modality (section 3). Two common threads in Spinoza's approach to these different topics will emerge, but it is worth highlighting them at the outset, as they too should be of contemporary interest (section 2).

2.1 Systematicity

The first common thread in Spinoza's philosophical outlook is *systematicity*, both across and within traditional subfields of philosophy. Spinoza was a deeply systematic thinker. His major work, *The Ethics*, is a tightly crafted book whose geometrical structure

[1] Where appropriate, I provide citations to places where I defend these controversial interpretations at greater length. The topics I discuss are also canvassed in other essays in this volume, so readers are encouraged to turn there for an orientation to Spinoza secondary literature.

highlights what he saw as the connections – sometimes surprising – between metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, psychology, philosophy of mind, action theory, political theory, the natural sciences, and even religious beliefs and practices. On Spinoza's approach to philosophy, untangling problems in moral philosophy requires attending to issues in human psychology, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind. Similarly, adequately understanding one's inner life of beliefs, desires, sensations, imaginings, and emotions requires a scientifically rigorous exploration of the external world, a religious examination of the nature of God, and metaphysical scrutiny about the nature of intentionality. For Spinoza, philosophical investigations are all-or-nothing affairs. Given what he takes the interconnections between all these branches of philosophy (broadly construed) to be, he concludes that making progress on one philosophical question requires making simultaneous advances on many others.

Spinoza's systematic approach to philosophy would today earn him the label of an "inter-disciplinary" thinker, though hopefully without any of the charlatanry that also gets lumped under that label. He should be greeted as a friend by current analytic philosophers who are trying to apply insights from the natural and social sciences to philosophical questions, though he would also be critical of approaches that attempt to subordinate the methods, results, and utility of philosophical pursuits to those of the purely scientific domain. Metaphysics is to be informed by, not made subservient to, physics and biology on Spinoza's model (and, I hasten to add, vice versa).

Spinoza's commitment to systematicity also applies within a given subfield of philosophy, such as metaphysics. This marks him as a bit of an outsider to trends in contemporary analytic metaphysics. In many contemporary quarters, metaphysics has the

feel of a speculative lunch buffet: on display is a range of carefully developed views on a wide array of metaphysical issues, and the philosopher is invited to step up, tray in hand, and choose among the bounty as she will. A little eternalism, a bit of counterfactual analysis of causation, some linguistic ersatzism, a healthy dose of Platonism about numbers, and, for dessert, reduction-free physicalism. Spinoza's approach to metaphysics is less buffet and more value-menu: many metaphysical theses stand or fall together, for they are based on shared, though often hard-to-discern underlying principles. For Spinoza, metaphysicians ought to endorse individual views only insofar as they are willing to endorse these other, sometimes surprising, companion views ("Who ordered the gunky space-time?!").

Systematicity can cut both ways, of course. Philosophers with systematic proclivities are also quick to cry "Foul!" when genuinely distinct views have been unnecessarily run together. Later, we will see a stronger alliance on this tendency between Spinoza and contemporary metaphysicians, both of whom excel at taking views that historically were thought to come as a package and showing how they are not mutually entailing after all. Spinoza will continue to insist, however, that such decoupling ought to be followed by an alternative recoupling of views.

2.2 Explanatory Naturalism

A second broad and related theme that we will encounter is Spinoza's *explanatory naturalism*. "Naturalism" has become one of those catchall terms in contemporary philosophy, so widely and regularly applied that it appears, at best, to have several different meanings. Without trying to disambiguate contemporary usage, I will call

Spinoza's *explanatory naturalism* the position he endorses in the Preface to Part III of the *Ethics*:

> …for Nature is always the same, that is, the laws and rules of Nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. So the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, namely, through the universal laws and rules of Nature.

In this passage, Spinoza makes two important claims. First, everything can be understood or explained through "the laws and rules of Nature." This reminds us of Spinoza's general commitment to the explicability of all things, a view captured in his version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR): "For each thing there must be assigned a cause or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence" (E1p11d2). But although Spinoza's explanatory naturalism is consistent with the explanatory rationalism embodied in the PSR, it goes further than the PSR itself.

Explanatory naturalism, as Spinoza's second point in this passage makes clear, constrains what counts as a proper explanation. Spinoza claims that the *explanans* – "the laws and rules of Nature" – are changeless and universal in the sense that they always apply across all domains. Proper explanations, for Spinoza, do not admit of exception clauses. Making exceptions to the scope of explanatory principles is indicative of the failure of those principles to adequately explain, Spinoza thinks. Earlier in the Preface to Part III, Spinoza criticized those who try to make human beings "a dominion within a dominion." He had in mind philosophers like Descartes, who tried to explain the nature and activity of persons using a set of mental principles that Descartes himself admitted do

not apply within the purely physical domain. No, Spinoza objects, proper explanatory principles are universally applicable. Everything plays by the same rules.

Putting these points together, Spinoza's explanatory naturalism is the thesis that each of the most basic explanatory principles applies to everything and the set of basic explanatory principles is sufficient to explain everything, even God.[2] If, for example, possessing intentional mental states partly explains God's activity, then so also will possessing mental states partly explain the activities of humans, trees, and rocks. There will, of course, be differences in complexity and degrees among the *explananda*, but there are no differences in explanatory scope among the most fundamental explanatory principles.[3]

Hence, in addition to affirming PSR-style demands for the explanation of everything, Spinoza's explanatory naturalism places a demand on the ways of explaining as well. Explanations must be constant, exceptionless, and applicable across all domains. This leads Spinoza to seek out explanatory principles that can do such work, and we'll see examples of what he finds in later sections.

---

[2] It might initially appear that Spinoza's explanatory naturalism is inconsistent with his explanatory barrier between the attributes (E1p10). Isn't the explanatory scope of each attribute limited? Short answer: no. Each attribute applies to the very same domain; the very things that fall under one attribute – substance and modes – also fall under every other attribute. The identity of substance and modes across attributes means that each attribute applies equally to every existing thing. And jointly, the set of attributes is sufficient to explain all the features of substance and modes. So, far from being an exception to his explanatory naturalism, Spinoza's attribute doctrine is the clearest example of it. (To get a feel for Spinoza's position, compare his insistence that each thing can be explained as thinking *and* as extended with Descartes' insistence that substances that have the attribute of thought *cannot* be explained in terms of extension.)

[3] Here is another point of relevance: I suspect Spinoza would be unhappy with the popular "multi-leveled" approach to the relations between the special sciences. If emergent phenomena were to operate and be explained by distinct, non-fundamental laws (e.g., biological laws or principles that are "over and above" the laws of physics), then facts about higher-level phenomena would violate Spinoza's explanatory naturalism. Since this multi-level ontology is often taken to be compatible with contemporary forms of naturalism, this should give us pause when trying to assimilate Spinoza's sense of naturalism with contemporary forms. For other concerns about this tiered picture that are friendly to Spinoza's concerns, see Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View.*

Notice that Spinoza's explanatory naturalism underwrites his commitment to systematicity. Because he thinks there must be uniform and exceptionless ways of explaining every feature of the world, his proposals for explaining the world will be deeply systematic. The basic explanatory relations that account for human psychology must also account for religious practices, metaphysics, ethics, and the formation of political communities. Simultaneously exploring these different domains will, he hopes, reveal underlying explanations that can then be used to illuminate yet other domains of inquiry.

Spinoza does not, so far as I can tell, have an independent argument for his explanatory naturalism, anymore than he has an independent argument for his explanatory rationalism (PSR). It is among the basic background beliefs that animate and structure the rest of his philosophical thought. And in that, he is just like every other philosopher: we all have to start somewhere. Spinoza's ultimate faith is that our world is structured by such universal explanatory principles. It seems fair to give Spinoza at least this much at the outset: *if* he succeeds in finding and articulating such universal and constant explanations of everything, he will have gone a long way towards vindicating his faith and making his explanatory naturalism more appealing to the rest of us.

3.1 Monism and Metaphysical Dependence

Spinoza was a monist. Few students escape modern philosophy survey classes without learning this fact. Passages like E1p14-15 are clear proof texts: "Except God, no substance can be or be conceived"; "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God." These propositions espouse *substance monism*, the view that there exists exactly one substance, namely God. For much of the 20th century, that

conclusion alone catapulted Spinoza's views into the realm of the exotic, the type of philosophical view to be taught for the sake of historical completeness but not worth grappling with too seriously.[4]

However, in one of those remarkable epicycles of intellectual history, monism is once again being taken seriously by metaphysicians, a turn of events that invites us to revisit Spinoza's position as well. The renewed interest in monism isn't as unlikely as it may first appear, as several major trends in the last forty years of metaphysics and philosophy of mind stand behind it. As philosophers of mind became interested in forms of supervenience (following similar discussions in metaethics), metaphysicians began to study the riches of metaphysical dependence more generally.

At the same time, in the wake of positivism's demise, substantive metaphysics was reinvigorated by a keen interest in modality (Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* is the *locus classicus*) and by related questions about the identity, persistence and constitution of objects (Van Inwagen's *Material Beings* is the *Naming and Necessity* counterpart here). One interesting and viable option that emerged from these discussions was a broadly Aristotelian account of the world that had been thought long dead in Anglo-American philosophy since Hume: a world layered by essences, natures, natural kinds, and *in rebus* universals, which together form a rich structure of necessary, sometimes empirically discoverable connections among contingent beings. When metaphysicians evaluated such layered accounts of reality, a natural question arose: in what way(s) do the less fundamental features of the world depend on the more fundamental features? It is but a short step from questions about dependence and metaphysical priority to questions

[4] Seventeenth century metaphysics abounded with seemingly quixotic views that are regularly presented as exhibits in the "Believe It or Not!" museum of the history of ideas: occasionalism, phenomenalism, superaddition, anything involving monads.

about the *order* and *direction* of dependence and priority, to which monism stands as a viable reply.

Most recently, several metaphysicians have developed new arguments for versions of monism, arguments with enough promise to rouse pluralists from their dogmatic slumbers for long enough to respond with fresh anti-monistic defenses.[5] Thus, the time is ripe to approach Spinoza's most famous metaphysical conclusion as more than just an historical oddity; I'll try to spur this process on by situating Spinoza's monism in relation to contemporary versions.

Let's begin by looking more closely at Spinoza's form of monism. Although Spinoza claims that exactly one substance exists, this does not prevent him from referring to a plurality of "things" (E1p16). In other words, Spinoza does not think only one *thing* exists. Many – infinitely many! – things exist, though only one existing thing is a substance. That is, only one thing is ontologically fundamental or "prior in nature" (E1p1): substance or God. Everything else is a modification or mode of that one substance. A vast amount of interpretive ink has been spilled on how we ought to understand the substance/mode relation in Spinoza, and I'll have something to say about this vexed issue shortly. But notice straightaway that Spinoza does not advocate a more extreme form of monism, one that Jonathan Schaffer calls "existence monism," the view that there is exactly one (concrete) existing object.[6]

Existence monism is strikingly at odds with common-sense intuition and everyday discourse. It seems to entail that a seemingly straightforward assertion like "There are

[5] For example, see Schaffer, "Monism: The Priority of the Whole"; Cameron, "From Humean Truthmaker Theory"; Horgan and Matjaž, *Austere Realism*; Rea, "How to Be an Eleatic Monist"; Sider, "Against Monism,"; and Trogdon, "Monism and Intrinsicality."

[6] See Schaffer, "Monism." The leading, and perhaps only, proponents of this view are Horgan and Matjaž, who call the one existing thing the "blobject."

three chairs in my office" is false, though a sharp-minded metaphysician will find ways to paraphrase away the pluralistic commitments of such utterances or to restrict the assertability conditions of its denial to very special circumstances.[7] However, Spinoza had a remarkably high tolerance for error-theory, so it is unlikely he would be perturbed if it turned out that most us uttered mostly falsehoods in ordinary discourse. His opposition to existence monism lies elsewhere.

Why, then, does Spinoza want to maintain both substance monism and the existence of a plurality of non-substantial things? The answer turns on what Spinoza takes to be the metaphysical requirements of perfection. Spinoza's God isn't merely qualitatively diverse. Inhering in God is a plentiful pastiche of individuals, natures, and dependencies – infinitely many individuals, attributes, and the parallel, isomorphic patterns of relations they stand in. According to Spinoza, God would be less perfect, less powerful, were God not to instantiate such a plentiful array of complex "things." Such an emaciated being, he argues, would not be God at all. As Spinoza put it in an early reflection, "God's true perfection is that he gives all things their essence, from the least to the greatest; or to put it better, he has everything perfect in himself."[8] Put more grandly: in virtue of its perfect and plentiful nature, Spinoza's One must also give rise to the Many.[9] Admittedly, more work needs to be done on the origins and motivations of Spinoza's conviction that perfection requires both plenitude and parsimony, though it is a view he shared with other 17th century rationalists. At the very least, we should recognize that Spinoza's *thing pluralism* stems from his convictions about the necessary richness of

[7] Alternatively, following Horgan and Matjaž, one could defend a different semantics for truth that counts the statement as true, even though there are no such things are chairs and offices.
[8] KV 1.6/G 1:43; see also E1app/G 2:83; E1p33s2; E1p16; E1p9; and E2p6.
[9] British interpreters of Spinoza at the turn of the 20th century focused on this aspect of Spinoza's metaphysics (see Newlands, "More Recent").

God's perfect internal structure rather than from contemporary concerns about preserving common-sense intuitions or achieving reflective equilibrium between theory and pre-theoretical views.

Even if we grant Spinoza his motivation from God's perfection for wanting to avoid existence monism, we might nonetheless worry that his substance monism collapses into existence monism in the end. For despite Spinoza's claim that there exist infinitely many things besides substance, it may turn out that his individuals aren't sufficiently independent of God to count as genuine "things" in the final analysis.[10] I'll return to this worry later. For now, let's grant Spinoza that in addition to the one substance, there exist a plurality of other, albeit dependent, things.[11]

Admittedly, if by "substance monism" Spinoza meant only that there exists a plurality of dependent things in addition to the one completely independent substance, he will be guilty of rephrasing a common view in an exotic sounding manner. If all Spinoza's substance monism amounts to is the claim that God alone is fully independent and that everything else that exists depends in various ways on God, then Spinoza will simply be describing *monotheism*, a position that earns the title "monism" only by a terminological sleight of hand. Descartes, for instance, readily admits that, strictly

[10] Kant pressed a version of this objection: "But every thing, just because it is a thing, is *eo ipso* not the predicate of another thing, but it exists for itself and is thus a substance…[the things in the world] would cease being things if they were mere determinations of another thing." A bit surprisingly (coming as it does during his critical period), Kant suggests that introspection reveals why the "concept of a thing in general" is that which "exists for itself, without being a determination of any other thing": "For my own self-consciousness testifies that I do not relate all my actions to God as the final subject which is not the predicate of any other thing, and thus the concept of a substance arises when I perceive in myself that I am not the predicate of any further thing," adding a few lines later, "I myself am a thing and also a substance" (*Religion and Rational Theology*, 382). I am grateful to Karl Ameriks for calling these passages to my attention.

[11] I write as though substance and modes all *exist* to the same degree, differing only in their dependence relations. Michael Della Rocca has argued instead that Spinoza's finite modes don't *fully* exist. If existence comes in degrees, Della Rocca's Spinoza could be classified as a distinctive kind of existence monist: exactly one concrete thing (substance) *fully* exists, though many other things exist to a lesser, non-zero degree. (See his "Rationalism Run Amok.")

speaking, only God is a substance, but he takes that admission to be perfectly consistent with the existence of many other, less independent things, things that he and many others call "finite substances."[12] Is Spinoza just reserving the word "substance" for God alone, while agreeing that there are lots of other more and less dependent things in the world and ham-fistedly insisting that we call them all "modes" instead of calling some "finite substances"?

To see that this is *not* what Spinoza is doing, consider again E1p15: "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be nor be conceived without God." The latter half of this proposition is a thoroughly orthodox view in the 17th century: everything (besides God) depends on God in the sense that God is part of the ontological and explanatory grounds of all other things. However, the first half of this proposition contains the explosively heterodox claim that everything is in that on which it depends. If by "in" Spinoza means something close to what was traditionally meant by "inheres," Spinoza's claim that the plentiful range of existing things is in the one substance returns his form of monism to the distinctive and controversial.[13]

Spinoza's monism is beginning to sound more like Schaffer's second type of monism, "priority monism." Priority monism is the doctrine that exactly one basic (concrete) object exists. Whatever other objects exist, they are derivative objects, things that are ultimately grounded in, and hence dependent on, the one basic thing. Schaffer points out that most historical monists were actually priority monists, and it is priority monism that Schaffer himself tries to defend. But once again, we might wonder whether priority monism is really just a general version of something most traditional theists

[12] PP 1.51.
[13] For further discussion of Spinoza's views on inherence, see Melamed's essay "The Building Blocks of Spinoza's Metaphysics" (this volume).

already believe: God alone is the fundamental existent, and everything else is ontologically grounded in, and hence dependent, on God.[14] Once again, as with Spinoza, exactly how outlandish and heterodox priority monism turns out to be depends on the nature of the dependence relation that obtains between the one basic thing and the many derivative things. For Spinoza, the issue turns on the meaning of his claim that everything *is in* substance. For priority monists, it turns on the meaning of their claim that everything is asymmetrically *grounded in* the one basic thing. Until we get clearer on these forms of metaphysical dependence, it will be unclear exactly what these monisms amount to.

What we need in both cases is an account of dependence, the kind of metaphysical relation in monism that holds between the one fundamental thing and all the other, less fundamental things. Spinoza and priority monists like Schaffer provide accounts of such dependence, though their accounts are importantly different. Thus, while I think Spinoza would applaud the renewed interest in metaphysical monism that Schaffer's exposition of priority monism has generated, we should nonetheless distinguish Schaffer's version from Spinoza's by distinguishing their accounts of metaphysical dependence.

Let's begin with Spinoza. Metaphysical dependence relations form the backbone of Spinoza's philosophical system. And what an abundance of dependence relations he uses! By my count, Spinoza uses 22 different locutions for relations of metaphysical dependence within the first half of Part One of the *Ethics* alone – that's 22 varieties in

[14] The two aren't equivalent, since even if the truth of theism entailed the truth of priority monism, the reverse entailment would still be false. One could be a priority monist without being a theist. (As Schaffer pointed out in correspondence, contemporary priority monists will likely also deny that the fundamental thing has other traditional divine attributes.)

just 12 pages of text.[15] The very first definition of the *Ethics* defines one type of metaphysical dependence (self-causation) in terms of another type of dependence (conceptual containment). Two definitions later, when Spinoza begins to lay out his ontology, he again uses dependence as the *explanans*: what it is to be a substance is to be self-inhering and self-conceived. In this way, metaphysical dependence precedes and shapes Spinoza's ontology. In order to explain what exists, Spinoza first appeals to the ways things could hang together, an appeal that invites questions about the nature of the "hanging" or metaphysical prioritizing relations themselves.[16]

Spinoza had a long-standing interest in discerning, articulating, and ultimately explaining metaphysical dependence relations. In his earliest work, he claimed that our "ultimate end" involves explaining things through their dependence relations (TdIE §92). Indeed, what it is to provide an explanation of something is to articulate the dependence relations in which the thing stands, according to Spinoza. Given Spinoza's central insistence that everything must be explained, the project of explaining things through appeals to dependence means that dependence relations lie at the heart of his metaphysical project.

In fact, Spinoza goes yet further in his appeals to metaphysical dependence. Recall that Spinoza's explanatory naturalism has a very broad range: in principle, nothing is immune from the demands of explicability. We have now seen that explicability, for Spinoza, is first and foremost a matter of metaphysical dependence. Things are explained through their dependencies. What about the dependence relations themselves? Are the

[15] The list: causing, explaining, inhering in, determining, producing, creating, generating, corrupting, following from, depending on, acting on, constituting, being conceptually involved in, being formed from the concept of, conceiving through, conceiving by, contained in, belonging to, flowing from, existing on account of, being understood through, and being prior in nature to.
[16] For a recent discussion of this strategy in ontology, see Schaffer, "On What Grounds What."

forms of dependence that he appeals to in the *Ethics* – causation, inherence, existential dependence, conceptual dependence, part-whole, and the like – themselves primitive and inexplicable? I don't think so. For example, Spinoza clearly rejects primitive causation, and instead explains causal dependence in terms of conceptual dependence (E1d1, E1p3). That is, just as Spinoza sought to explain *things* via priority and dependence, he also tries to explain the dependence relations themselves via priority and dependence. This constitutes one of the more important but easily overlooked projects in the early parts of the *Ethics*: Spinoza tries to prioritize the prioritizing relations, a project that is the natural outgrowth of his explanatory naturalism.

Since I do not have the space to defend here what conclusions I take him to reach, let me simply state what I take to be his ultimate position on dependence. Spinoza is a conceptual dependence monist (CDM). He thinks all forms of metaphysical dependence are at bottom forms of conceptual containment relations.[17] What it is for one thing to cause another or to inhere in another or to depend on another just is for one thing to be conceived through another. There are a lot of details that need to be fleshed out about this account, but one upshot is clear. Spinoza's substance monism, when combined with CDM, entails that all non-basic things depend on substance by being conceptually dependent on substance, a tightness that Spinoza often illustrates by the relation between a triangle and the sum of its interior angles (e.g., E1p17s). Thus the way in which everything else inheres in God is by being conceptually contained in God, a conclusion that reveals just how far from traditional monotheism Spinoza's monism truly is.

Let's now turn to priority monists. Schaffer sometimes models his grounding relation in mereological (parthood) terms, though obviously one in which the whole is

[17] For discussion and defense, see Newlands, "Another Kind of Spinozistic Monism."

prior to its parts. Spinoza too sometimes expresses his monism in terms of part-whole relations (KV 1 Dialogue 1/G 1:30, Ep. 32, E2p11c, E4p4d), though since the dominant view was (and still is) that parts are prior to the wholes that they compose, Spinoza is often wary of talking about parts in this context, lest he be misunderstood. (He argues at length that extension has no parts *in the bottom-up sense* of parthood.) Although the logical contours of parthood relations have been carefully explored in contemporary metaphysics,[18] the priority monist's claim that the one fundamental thing stands to less fundamental things as a whole stands *prior* to its parts still leaves unanalyzed the nature of this metaphysical part-whole dependence. What does it mean for the whole to be *prior to* its parts? The priority monist answers that it involves a top-down direction of asymmetrical ontological dependence, but what is *that*?

There is a family resemblance among common expressions of such priority: grounding, in virtue of, dependent on, prior to, and so forth. Is there a further analysis of ontological priority available? Schaffer himself thinks not: ontological priority is a metaphysical primitive. Even if that is true, we might still wonder whether one member of the family best approximates the relation of metaphysical grounding.

Here are a few of the options that have been explored in recent years. The priority monist may intend a *modal* account of dependence, according to which *x* ontologically depends on *y* just in case the existence of *x* necessitates the existence of *y*. A virtue of this analysis is that it uses more familiar *modal* relations to define ontological dependence. However, as several others have pointed out, this account of dependence seems too

[18] A very good starting place for contemporary mereology is Simons' *Parts: A Study in Ontology.*

coarse-grained to discriminate between cases of necessary co-variance and genuine asymmetrical dependence.[19] It lets in too many false positives.

An alternative is what E.J. Lowe calls "identity dependence." According to one version, *x* ontologically depends on *y* just in case, necessarily, *x* depends for its identity on *y* in the sense that *y* metaphysically determines the identity, nature, or kind of thing that *x* is.[20] This account relies on a broadly Aristotelian theory of essences and sortals that many metaphysicians now accept.[21] Like the modal account, the identity dependence account also relies on another kind of dependence – metaphysical determination – to define ontological dependence.[22] However, given Spinoza's identification of determination and dependence (via CDM), he could not think that Lowe's account provides a non-circular *definition* of ontological dependence, even if it he agreed that Lowe's proposal sheds some light on the structure of ontological dependence.

The closest contemporary analogue to Spinoza's conceptual dependence is an *explanatory* account of grounding, according to which *x* ontologically depends on *y* just in case, necessarily, *x* exists because *y* exists.[23] (Equivalently: just in case, necessarily, the existence of *y explains* the existence of *x*.) On this account, ontological dependence,

---

[19] Fine, "Essence and Modality." Spinoza anticipates this idea, arguing that essential dependence is more fine-grained than modal dependence and so the two forms of dependence are not equivalent (E2p10cs).
[20] Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics*. Identity dependence entails modal existential dependence, though not vice versa.
[21] One noteworthy difference between Lowe's and Schaffer's approach to ontological dependence is that Lowe rejects Schaffer's suggestion that there is a single kind of ontological dependence relation that obtains across ontological categories. Whereas for Schaffer, many different kinds of relata can straddle the single *grounding* relation, Lowe posits distinct grounding relations for distinct classes of entities (a natural move for someone with Lowe's Aristotelian instincts).
[22] Lowe also gives a definition of identity dependence that doesn't explicitly invoke metaphysical determination: the identity of *x* depends on the identity of *y* just in case there is a function *F* such that it is part of the essence of *x* that *x* is the *F* of *y* (Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics*, p. 149, with slight modification). Here "metaphysically determines" becomes as innocuous as the way in which a function determines a value.
[23] See Correia, *Existential Dependence* and Schnieder, "A Certain Kind of Trinity." Parallel formulations are available for *essential* dependence, *states of affairs* dependence, and so forth.

like all forms of dependence for Spinoza, is rooted in explanatory dependence. However, like Lowe's proposal, this account succeeds as an analysis only to the extent to which the notion of explanation itself is sufficiently transparent.[24]

For his part, Spinoza tries to fill out the notion of explanation, and hence ontological grounding, in conceptual terms. He was probably inspired by the Cartesian confidence that conceptual relations are in principle transparent to the rational mind and so especially well suited to playing the fundamental explanatory role he assigns to them. That transparency assumption is no longer widely shared and needs more support than Spinoza saw fit to give it. But we can discern Spinoza's trajectory. He would be dissatisfied with a primitive, inexplicable grounding relation for the very reasons he would be dissatisfied with primitive causal relations. His explanatory naturalism admits of no exceptions to the demands of explanation. He reasons that ontological dependence, like inherence, is just a relation of conceptual dependence.

One might object that Spinoza himself reaches a ground floor of explanation with his own conceptual containment relations. And if everyone, including Spinoza, has to reach a ground floor somewhere, why favor making conceptual relations primitive and inexplicable instead of causation or inherence or just ontological priority itself?

In reply, Spinoza denies an assumption of the objection. He does not think he reaches a *inexplicable* ground floor with his CDM, an unexplained or ungrounded form of dependence that then explains or grounds the rest. If he had, perhaps it would be fair to ask him why we should stop with one set of brute facts instead of some other set. Instead,

[24] Lowe objects that the explanatory relation (a) is "hardly very perspicuous;" (b) threatens to blur inappropriately the boundary between epistemology and ontology; and (c) generates opaque contexts (Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics*, p. 146). As we will see below, Spinoza has the resources to allay the first two concerns, and he wholeheartedly embraces the final one – opacity is the philosophical grease that keeps the Spinozistic system running smoothly.

Spinoza tries to find a *self-explaining* relation to play the role of the fundamental grounding operation. Admittedly, the line between the inexplicably primitive and the self-explaining primitive is a thin one, but Spinoza clings to it at several points in his system. While Spinoza's belief that (basic) conceptual containment relations *are* in principle intellectually transparent and self-explanatory needs further defense than he gives it, his desire to use them to avoid positing inexplicable primitives at the foundation of his explanatory enterprise reminds us just how far and deep his explanatory commitment runs.

Spinoza's effort to find a self-explanatory foundation for ontological dependence also highlights another point of disagreement with priority monists. Whatever it turns out to be, ontological dependence is treated as irreflexive by priority monists like Schaffer.[25] Spinoza emphatically denies this. While he is sympathetic with those who are suspicious of an unbounded chain of dependence that descends *ad infinitum* ("turtles all the way down"), Spinoza does not think the solution is to posit an ontological foundation that is itself ungrounded, say, God or the world as a whole. Instead, Spinoza embraces the rare alternative of insisting that some grounds – God in the case of things and conceptual containment in the case of the grounding relations themselves – are *self*-grounding.[26] For Spinoza, the great chain of being does not terminate at a dead-end. It bottoms out in a *cul-de-sac*.

[25] Schaffer, "Monism: The Priority of the Whole," p. 37; cf. similar commitments in Rosen, "Metaphysical Dependence," and Correia, "Ontological Dependence."

[26] For this reason, ontological dependence for Spinoza will be anti-symmetrical, rather than asymmetrical. The dispute over these formal properties is hardly trivial. As Schaffer pointed out in correspondence, it can help settle whether the PSR is violated and whether the grounding relation imposes substantive constraints on the nature and modal status of the fundamental thing.

Some readers will be puzzled by the notion of a self-grounded thing, much less a self-grounded grounding relation. This puzzlement is understandable if the form of grounding we have in mind is something like causation. Spinoza's opening definition aside, how can something *cause* itself to be? Acts of causation seem to presuppose the existence of the cause. That is, whereas accounts of infinite causal descent or an uncaused causer are at least *prima facie* intelligible options, the claim that there is a being that causes itself to exist seems outright incoherent. However, according to Spinoza's CDM, a self-grounded thing is just a thing whose conceptually-laden structure is wholly self-contained and hence wholly self-explicable. Though this picture may remain puzzling to some, it strikes me as markedly *less* puzzling than the *causa sui* analogue. At the very least, showing that it makes no sense to think of God as a self-explanatory being (in the sense of being conceptually self-contained) requires an *argument*, and I don't yet know of one that would leave Spinoza without at least a plausible reply.

What leads Spinoza to this conclusion about grounding and reflexivity is again an application of his explanatory naturalism. Everything plays by the same explanatory rules – including God Himself. Hence, if everything requires ontological grounds in virtue of which everything is explicable, so too does God. However, since there are no independent grounds in God's case, the only remaining option is self-grounding. Otherwise God would be an exception case, *pace* explanatory naturalism. The same argument runs for the grounding relations themselves: if some forms of grounding are non-primitive and admit of explanation, then the most basic form (and the *only* form,

according to CDM) must be explained as well.[27] Once again, the only remaining option will be self-explanation.

Suppose something like the above is the correct account of Spinoza's monism and theory of ontological dependence. We have seen that while Spinoza's monism is similar to priority monism, there remain important differences about the nature of ontological dependence that create differences in their respective monistic conclusions. Let us now return to the initial worry that prompted this comparison, whether Spinoza's monism ultimately collapses into existence monism. Does Spinoza secure the plurality of "things" in name only, analogously to the way we first worried that he secured "monism" in name only? That is, by insisting on the monistic closeness between God and everything else in terms of conceptual dependence, does Spinoza undermine the basis for everything else being genuine "things" after all?

This is a difficult, though pressing question for Spinoza. It is also a version of a more general pressure that Spinoza faces repeatedly in other parts of his system: maintaining both sameness and yet distinctness, identity *and* diversity. In the present case, a great deal depends on what the identity and persistence conditions for being an individual thing are, another topic that has been discussed with great frequency in contemporary metaphysics. Spinoza thinks at least some finite modes are the bearers of powers, activities, tendencies, properties, parts, natures, and distinctive structures; call this the "center of activities" condition. He also thinks that each finite mode inheres in, i.e., is conceptually contained in, something else; call this the "dependence" condition.

[27] For an account of why, according to Spinoza's CDM, the fact that conceptual dependence is the most *basic* form of grounding entails that it is the only form (i.e., why he should favor elimination over some kind of reduction), see my "Another Kind of Spinozistic Monism."

Now consider: to be a thing, is it sufficient to satisfy the center of activities condition, or must genuine things also fail to satisfy the dependence condition?

Ever the systematic philosopher, Spinoza provides his own answer. He develops an account of the persistence of bodies and minds in Part II of the *Ethics* according to which satisfying the center of activities condition *is* sufficient for being an individual thing. He then shows in later parts of the *Ethics* that at least some finite modes *are* sufficiently self-organizing systems of activity, thereby making them individual (albeit dependent) things. But Spinoza agrees with tradition that these limited things aren't *substances*, for they inhere in, are contained in, another. Once again, Spinoza tries to walk the middle ground: there are non-substantial individuals, things that aren't substances but which are nonetheless genuine *things*. We may wonder whether he can have his cake and eat it too. Are the persistence conditions Spinoza lays out sufficient or even correct in the first place?

These questions would take us in yet another direction ripe for historical and contemporary dialogue, though I will not pursue them further here. This much is clear: properly evaluating whether Spinoza succeeds in saving both the plurality of things and the uniqueness of substance requires evaluating his theory of individuation, his conceptual dependence monism, and ultimately his explanatory naturalism itself. Though daunting, these interconnections are not objectionable aspects of Spinoza's thought. Instead, they reinforce the systematic character of Spinoza's metaphysics – properly evaluating one piece forces us to reckon with and evaluate many others. His views on monism and ontological dependence are no exception, which presumably is a good thing for a philosopher who insists on exceptionless philosophical theories.

3.2 Modality

If monism is Spinoza's most famous conclusion, a close second is his view that "in nature there is nothing contingent" (E1p29). According to most interpreters, Spinoza endorses necessitarianism, the view that all truths are necessarily true. In ontological terms, the actual world is the only possible world. As with monism, it is tempting to present Spinoza's necessitarianism as, at best, an instructive *reductio*. *We all know* necessitarianism is false, and so the philosophical relevance lies in exposing exactly where Spinoza blunders. I won't engage in that glum interpretive project here, partly because I don't think Spinoza was a straightforward necessitarian[28] and partly because it threatens to obscure an underappreciated and highly relevant feature of Spinoza's views on modality.

Ted Sider voices a familiar intuition about modality: "Whether something *is* a certain way seems unproblematic, but that things might be otherwise, or must be as they are, seems to call out for explanation."[29] Not all metaphysicians agree with Sider that modal facts cry out more loudly for explanation, though some have offered reductive theories of modality at least partly to discharge a perceived explanatory demand.[30] Among those who accept modal primitives, some do so grudgingly on the grounds that reductive theories of modality are more problematic than an unanswered explanatory demand would be. Spinoza, however, is unwilling to shy away from an in-virtue-of-what

[28] I defend this interpretation in my "The Harmony of Spinoza and Leibniz." For a discussion of some of the most prominent interpretations of the strength of Spinoza's modal commitments, see my "Spinoza's Modal Metaphysics."
[29] Theodore Sider, "Reductive Theories of Modality."
[30] For a critical survey of recent reductive theories of modality, see O'Connor, *Theism and Ultimate Explanation*, chapter 1. For a briefer discussion of some of the major versions, see Sider, "Reductive Theories of Modality."

question, and so if, as Sider suggests, modality cries out for explanation, it shouldn't be surprising that Spinoza endeavors a reply.

Although Spinoza's interpreters often take questions about the distribution of necessity as their starting points ("was Spinoza a necessitarian?"), we should instead begin with a prior question: just what is modality, according to Spinoza? Like Descartes, Leibniz, and, in his own way, Hume, Spinoza doesn't take modal truths to express ungrounded, primitive facts about ways the world might or must be. Spinoza is emphatic that there must be *reasons why* modal truths about objects are true. "A thing is called necessary either by reason of its essence or by reason of its cause" (E1p33s1). According to this passage, that a thing is truly said to necessarily exist is explained either by its essence or by its causal history, which suggests that the modal status of a thing's existence is explicable in terms of other facts. More generally, Spinoza seems to think that the modal profile of an object isn't a brute fact about that object. Instead, if objects have basic modal properties, their instantiation is explained by other properties that those objects have. Likewise, if basic modal ascriptions about the world are true, they are true in virtue of other features of the world.

On what does Spinoza ground the modal features of objects, and in virtue of what does he think modal truths are true? Unlike Descartes, Spinoza cannot appeal to God's arbitrary volitions to provide the ontological grounds for modal truths. God's will, according to Spinoza, is just a mode of one of God's attributes (E1p17s), and as a mere mode, God's will is posterior to a range of Divine modal facts, such as God's necessary existence. So at least some modal facts about God obtain independently of God's volitions, according to Spinoza. However, Spinoza couldn't explain some modal facts

about God in one way – without appeal to God's will – and all other modal facts another way – by appeal to God's will – without violating by his explanatory naturalism. Hence, if some grounds for modal truths are independent of God's will, *all* grounds for modal truths are independent of God's will, for Spinoza.

Spinoza also cannot join Leibniz in grounding modal truths entirely in the Divine *intellect*, at least not in the way Leibniz suggests.[31] For one, Spinoza denies that an intellect is, strictly speaking, among the most ontologically basic features of God (E1p17s; E2p1). Furthermore, the ontological grounds of all modal truths cannot lie in intellectual relations among Divine ideas because, according to Spinoza, there are modal truths about extension that must be explicable without any appeal to the attribute of Thought. Because of (a) the explanatory barrier between attributes (E1p10) and (b) the necessary existence of Extension as an equally fundamental way of being a substance (E2p2), Spinoza cannot rely on facts about Thought to explain about modal facts about Extension. However, this means facts about Thought, including God's ideas, cannot be used to explain facts about modality *at all*, lest there be a case of non-uniform *explanans*, pace explanatory naturalism. Spinoza must look elsewhere to find a universal ground for and explanation of modality.

Instead of appealing to God's will or intellect, Spinoza attempts to ground modal truths in – what else? – conceptual relations. Before unpacking this idea, notice again the systematic character of Spinoza thought. Just as explanatory naturalism justifies his efforts to explain and thereby ground other forms of dependence in conceptual relations, so too Spinoza's explanatory naturalism motivates his efforts to explain and thereby ground modal truths in conceptual relations. Conceptual relations appear to be a

[31] For discussion of Leibniz on this point, see my "Leibniz on the Ground of Possibility."

fundamental way of explaining seemingly very different sorts of features of the world in Spinoza's system, the sort of basic kind of explanatory relation that he first set out to discover.

I won't present here the full textual case for attributing the view to Spinoza that conceptual relations ground and explain the basic modal features of objects. To take the clearest textual example: what explains the fact that God necessarily exists, according to Spinoza? He does not treat this as a brute fact about God. Instead, Spinoza claims that God's necessary existence is due to God's self-causation (E1p7; E1p11d; E1p24d). As I suggested above, Spinoza understands self-causation to be a conceptual containment relation between essence and existence, and therefore true of that "whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing" (E1d1). Because (a) causal relations are just conceptual relations, and (b) God's necessary existence is due to God's self-causation, it follows that the conceptual relation between God's essence and existence is the ground of the necessity of God's existence. In other words, it is because God cannot be conceived except as existing that God necessarily exists. Spinoza emphasizes the conceptual grounds of God's necessity of existence in E1p19d, as that "to whose nature it *pertains to* exist, or (what is the same thing) from whose definition *it follows* that he exists" (emphases mine). The conceptual relation is the ground of the modal fact. As I also noted earlier, Spinoza believes in the explanatory transparency of conceptual relations. If so, the conceptual connection also *explains* the modality of God's existence. More generally, Spinoza seems to believe that conceptual relations ground and explain modal truths.

One further, more complicated feature of Spinoza's modal views is worth mentioning briefly before turning to contemporary theories. Spinoza also seems to think

that most objects can be conceived in more than one modally salient way. That is, not only do modal facts depend on conceptual facts; modal facts vary as the relevant conceptual relations vary. Interestingly, Spinoza thinks that conceived in one way, any given finite thing exists necessarily. Conceived in a different way, that same finite thing exists only contingently. The relevant difference in ways of conceiving involves which, if any, of a finite mode's external causal relations are included in the concept. Conceived broadly, in a way that includes relations to its infinitely long causal history, a finite mode exists necessary. Conceived more narrowly, including only its essence or its essence plus some but not all of its causes, that same mode exists only contingently. In such cases, ascriptions of necessity and contingency to one and the same thing are both true, relative to these different ways of being conceived. Both ascriptions are consistent because, according to Spinoza, the truth-value of modal predications to objects is sensitive to the ways in which those objects are conceived. In other words, modal contexts are intensional contexts, for Spinoza.[32] Because modal facts track these differences in ways of conceiving one and the same object, there is an important sense in which one and the same mode can consistently be both contingent and necessary, though always relative to these different ways of being conceived. Hence, strikingly, both necessitarianism and its denial are consistently true for Spinoza, relative to different ways of conceiving the objects of the world.

[32] An intensional context is one in which the substitution of co-referring designations can fail to be truth-preserving. The most common examples are in belief contexts: Suppose (1) Superman is Clark Kent and (2) I believe that Superman can fly. There are plausible reasons to think that (1) and (2) alone do not entail: (3) I believe that Clark Kent can fly. One explanation of this failure is that some contexts of belief-ascriptions are referentially opaque, in which case some belief-ascriptions invoke intensional contexts. Spinoza's position on modality, I believe, is that a similar opacity is created by modal ascriptions.

In this way, Spinoza's modal theory is closer to some contemporary versions of anti-essentialism than previous interpreters have appreciated.[33] By an asserting (1) an analysis of modality in terms of conceptual connections and (2) that there are variations among the modally relevant ways of conceiving one and the same object, Spinoza endorses a view analogous to some contemporary forms of anti-essentialism that is surprisingly sophisticated and distinctive, even if underdeveloped.

It is very controversial whether Spinoza accepts (2), the thesis that draws him close to contemporary anti-essentialists. It may be less controversial that Spinoza accepts (1), which places him within a tradition of philosophers who explain modal facts by appeal to conceptual relations. But should Spinoza be happy with these bedfellows? Conceptualist theories of modality are not very popular these days, and it is doubtful that Spinoza has a theory that is developed in enough detail to answer all the challenges that have been raised against them in the past forty years. However, as in the previous section, my goal in what follows will not be to defend Spinoza against all newcomers, but rather to help situate his views among several contemporary versions to discover points of

[33] At the same time, Spinoza's version may have more constraints in place than some contemporary anti-essentialist accounts. As we may now put it, Spinoza thinks that the essences of finite objects constrain their persistence conditions across times and across worlds, determining some of the changes a thing can survive (which determines further modal facts about a thing). Since all genuine ways of conceiving any finite object for Spinoza involve conceiving the essence of the thing, Spinoza will have the resources to reject at least some very promiscuous versions of anti-essentialism. For instance, Spinoza need not grant that my body could have been a tube of toothpaste, even though there is some way of designating my body according to which a tube of toothpaste could satisfy it (such as "the thing sitting in the office chair"). The persistence conditions that apply to bodily essences are somewhat elastic, according to Spinoza. Bodies can survive the gradual replacement of parts, for instance (see Spinoza's "Physical Digression" following E2p13s). Yet Spinoza also thinks that there are limits to this plasticity (Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics*), and being toothpaste tube-shaped may well be a configuration that would violate my body's persistence capacities. Spinoza does not, unfortunately, say a great deal about the nature of the intrinsic properties of essences that would give us a more detailed account of exactly where the boundaries lie. (For a recent discussion of a form of essentialism that also tries to straddle the divide between promiscuous and restrictive modal-determining essences, see Mackie, *How Things Might Have Been*.)

continuity and discontinuity. There, I hope, we will see better his relevance to the ongoing discussion.

Contemporary theories of modality that sound broadly similar to Spinoza's conceptualist account are often labeled "modal conventionalist" theories. Conventionalists about modality believe that our conventional practices ground and explain the modal component of modal truths. As Alan Sidelle puts it (approvingly), the "modal force [of necessary truths is to] be explained in terms of *us*, in terms of our carving up the world, and not in terms of an independently existing modal structure of reality."[34] More generally, Sidelle writes, "the basic claim of the conventionalist is that it is our decisions and conventions that explain and are the source of modality."[35] By contrast, a realist theory of modality claims that the modal force of propositions and the distribution of modal properties are determined independently of human conventions and practices. Modality is a mind-independent feature of the world.

This is undoubtedly a loose account of conventionalism. Who is the "us"? What are "conventions"? How are *they* determined and explained? For the first half of the 20th century, modal conventionalism was widely embraced by logical positivists who claimed that all necessary truths are analytic truths, by which they meant that necessary truths are either logical truths or propositions that are true in virtue of the *meaning* of the terms of the proposition. That is, the relevant conventions and practices on which modal truths depend were *linguistic* conventions and practices. The association of modal conventionalism with linguistic convention continues to this day, even though contemporary conventionalists like Sidelle deny that all necessary truths are analytic and

[34] Sidelle, *Necessity, Essence and Individuation*, p. 23.
[35] Sidelle, *Necessity, Essence and Individuation,* p. 30.

knowable a priori. As Sidelle asks, "What is it that we are basically learning about when we make progress in these issues [of modality]? Our concepts, our rules for speech and thought? Or metaphysically deep facts about the objects investigated?" A bit more fully then, modal conventionalism is the view that modal truths are true in virtue of relations between objects, human linguistic practices and empirically discoverable, non-modal properties of those objects.

One advantage of modal conventionalism is that it offers a promising modal epistemology. After all, if knowing our linguistic practices and other empirically discoverable features of the world suffices for knowing all modal truths, we can hold out hope that the rich necessities of the metaphysicians are ultimately knowable via the empirically respectable investigation of the scientists. And even if complete modal knowledge remains forever an ideal, a conventionalist has a clean story to tell about how we know the truth of modal propositions we think we do know. She needs only to appeal to things we already have plausible epistemic theories for: language and the scientifically accessible world.

There are also metaphysical advantages of conventionalism. It discharges the explanatory demands of modality that Sider noted. The modal features of the world aren't simply "out there," in need of an explanatory bridge connecting them to less puzzling, non-modal features of the world. According to conventionalism, modality is grounded in the workaday realm of human language and science. The explanatory demand of modality is thereby answered. Modality is only as puzzling as are the meanings of our words and the scientifically assessable character of the physical world around us.

Of course, since modal conventionalism is now a minority view, it must also face some steep objections. One pressing worry is whether modal conventionalism can contain the mind-relativity of modality, or whether it entails mind-dependence theses about other features of the world. After all, the identity and persistence conditions of objects seem to involve *modal* conditions about what an object *could* or *could not* survive or under what sortal an object *could* or *could not* fall. But if *those* modal facts are also due to our linguistic conventions, it is hard to see how the very essences of objects themselves aren't also partly constituted by their relations to human conventions and practices.[36] As Sidelle himself puts the conclusion (again approvingly): "…it is not merely the modal facts that result from our conventions, but the individuals and kinds that are modally involved."[37] Hence, modal conventionalism seems to imply that we don't just carve up *modality* with our linguistic practices. We also carve up the world into individuals and kinds with our linguistic practices. Sidelle is again instructive, embracing what others see as a *reductio* of the view:

> If what it is to be an individual of a certain sort is to have certain features not only actually, but essentially, then the conventionalist has all the same reason to think that if there are any such individuals, they must also not be 'fully independent,' but should arise out of our individuating practice, which is our way of articulating the world.[38]

Though Sidelle is willing to accept this expansion of conventionalism, others see it involving too high a cost.

I will call this the "explosion objection": modal conventionalism explodes into a broader anti-realism about objects. If true, the modal conventionalist who trumpets the

[36] For versions of this worry, see Michael Rea, *World Without Design*, pp. 85-89; Elder, *Real Natures*, pp. 3-20; and Yablo, "Review of Alan Sidelle, *Necessity Essence and Individuation*."
[37] Sidelle, *Necessity, Essence and Individuation*, p. 77.
[38] Sidelle, *Necessity, Essence and Individuation*, p. 57.

epistemic and metaphysical advantages of modal conventionalism will sound like the idealist who claims he's solved the mind-body problem by getting rid of physical objects altogether. In one sense, that's true. He's answered an epistemic and explanatory question – *but what an answer*!

However, not all modal conventionalists follow Sidelle in accepting the consequences of the explosion objection. John Heil asks rhetorically,

> Does this [form of modal conventionalism] mean that statues are mind-dependent entities? Why should it? We decide what counts as a statue, but an object's satisfying the statue concept is a matter of that object being a particular way quite independently of how we take it to be.[39]

Heil's point is it although modal conventionalism may broaden into conventionalism about sortals (like *statue*), it remains a mind-independent fact about the world whether there are any statues answering to our convention.

Amie Thomasson goes even further in trying to avoid the explosion objection. She restricts modal conventionalism to the view that "all modal truths are *ultimately* based on analytic truths," and denies that modal truths need worldly truth-makers at all.[40]

> The fundamental mistake of this and similar attacks on modal [conventionalism] seems to lie in assuming that modal truths require truthmakers, and concluding that these must be either intrinsic modal properties…or extrinsic properties whose existence depends on human minds and conventions.[41]

If basic modal truths are analytic truths, and if analytic truths are without truth-makers, then the inference from Thomasson's restricted modal conventionalism to the claim that what (partly) makes modal propositions true are human linguistic practices is blocked.

---

[39] Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View*, p. 186.
[40] Thomasson, *Ordinary Objects*, pp. 62-72. She labels her view "modal conceptualism" to distinguish it from Sidelle's, but that strikes me as an ill-suited replacement, since she does not seem to disagree with Sidelle about running together conventions and concepts. I have instead labeled Spinoza's view "modal conceptualist" in order to highlight the crucial difference between his view and all other conventionalist views, as I explain below.
[41] Thomasson, *Ordinary Objects,* p. 67.

Furthermore, if the truth-makers for modal propositions *aren't* human conventions, then presumably the truth-makers for the modal aspects of identity and persistence conditions of objects also aren't human conventions. If so, her version of modal conventionalism does not entail any broader anti-realism about objects.[42] How could it? On her view, strictly speaking, the modal component of modal truths ultimately doesn't place *any* conditions on the world.

From Spinoza's perspective, I think Thomasson's attempt to make modality an exception to the explanatory demands that undergird much of the truth-maker project would be too a steep price to pay to avoid the explosion objection. He writes, as did most 17th century metaphysicians, as if things in the world have modal structures about which modal truths make substantive claims. For example, we have seen that Spinoza writes about the necessity of God's existence as a fact that is made true by real features of the Divine nature. So although I think Spinoza would agree with Thomasson that there is a bad assumption being made in the debate between modal conventionalists and realists, I do not think he would not locate it over the existence of modal truth-makers.

[42] Thomasson's is not the only escape hatch for conventionalists. One could instead endorse some version of modal plentitude and claim that the role of our conventions is to disambiguate which of the many and similar objects or modal profiles we are picking out (see Thomasson, *Ordinary Objects*, p. 71 for references and Rea, *World Without Design*, for criticism). Sider has suggested another version of modal conventionalism that tries to avoid the explosion objection without relying on meaning conventions or analyticity. Let only bits of non-modal reality play the truth-maker role for all truths, including truths like 'all bachelors are unmarried men' and '2+2=4'. Nothing about our conventions in any interesting way makes these propositions true; only features of the world are truth-makers. This blocks the threat of exploding mind-dependence. While our conventions make it is the case that these are *necessary* truths, they have nothing to do with what makes them *truths*. Rather, on the basis of practical reasons, we have conventionally decided to single out mathematic, logical, metaphysical, and some empirical truths as an interesting but gerrymandered collection, an unruly and unnatural collection whose interest to us we mark out with our modal discourse. But there isn't anything particularly special about this class of truths that mark them out except that they satisfy some interests we happen to have when we single them out with our modal predicates. (For more on this "deflationary" version of conventionalism, see Sider, "Reductive Theories of Modality" and Cameron, "What's Metaphysical".)

Let's see where Spinoza's modal conceptualism might fit into this contemporary discussion. Spinoza and many modal conventionalists agree that modal truths are true in virtue of something besides only objects and their properties. Their truth-conditions involve three-place relations between objects, properties, and a convention or way of conceiving.[43] Hence whether it is true that '*x* is necessarily F' depends partly on facts about our linguistic practices, meaning conventions, practical interests, or the way *x* is conceived or designated.

Where Spinoza and contemporary modal conventionalists most deeply disagree is over the nature of the "conventions." Noticing this difference will also help us see how Spinoza would answer the explosion objection. Since its early days among the positivists, modal conventionalism has frequently appealed to *meaning*, *linguistic rules*, *mental or linguistic concepts* or *language conventions* as the grounds of modal truths, the only grounds left after the Humean purge of all speculative metaphysics. But Spinoza is no Humean and he is certainly no positivist, so we should be careful not to read what *he* might take "conceptual sensitivity" to mean in the light of the impoverished ontologies of latter-day positivists. Spinoza's modal conceptualism is not primarily a view about linguistic practices or meaning conventions.

For Spinoza, the bad assumption in the contemporary dispute is that if modality is grounded in conceptual relations, then modality is grounded in mind-dependent, contingent features about human practices, be they psychological, pragmatic or linguistic. To Spinoza, contemporary modal conventionalists are right in their belief that modal

[43] This won't be correct for every version of modal conventionalism. On Thomasson's version, the truth-conditions for basic modal truths will not involve objects and properties at all. On Sider's view, the truth-conditions for basic modal truths involve *only* objects and properties (including whatever it is about them that our interests have honed in on).

truths are true only relative to some further feature – but they've all misidentified the further feature. What Spinoza means by "x is necessarily F only relative to some way of conceiving x" is not that x is necessarily F relative to some way of *thinking about* x, or some mind-dependent *presentational guise* of x, or some *linguistic practice* that associates x with F, or some *practical human interest* in correlations between *x* and F, or an *analytic truth* that x is F in virtue of the meaning of "x" and "F." For better or worse, Spinoza is a metaphysician at heart, and he takes modal propositions to be about metaphysical facts, propositions whose basic truth-conditions do not appeal to our psychological states, practical interests, or features of our language. Whatever the merits were of early 20th century associations of meaning and necessity, Spinoza's thinking about modality lies squarely in the pre-critical, pre-linguistic turn of 17th century speculative metaphysical realism. Thus the *ways of conceiving* in Spinoza's system are *not* psychological states or linguistic conventions, regardless of how interchangeable these expressions have now become.[44]

So although Spinoza, on my reading, agrees with conventionalists that the truth-values of modal truths depends party on ways the world is conceived, those "ways" are not mind-dependent, interest-dependent, psychological, or linguistic in nature. Like Frege, Spinoza is a realist about ways of conceiving things. The modes of designation or presentational guises of objects are not purely psychological states, though they can enter into the content of our ideas. They are real, objective, "out there" – ways of being conceived are ways of being. Unlike Frege, however, Spinoza does not locate the domain of such entities in a purely abstract realm. For Spinoza, the most basic ways of

[44] For a defense of this reading of Spinoza, see my "Thinking, Conceiving, and Idealism."

conceiving the world, the attribute contexts, are concretely reified.[45] They aren't located in the head or in the Platonic heavens; they are "out there" in the same way in which *concreta* like tables and chairs are thought to be "out there" by realists. Yet, unlike straightforward realists about modality, these ways of conceiving do figure into the truth-conditions for modal propositions in ways that allow divergent, seemingly inconsistent modal predications to be true of one and the same object, relative to which way of conceiving it "falls under" or, better, is structured by.

Once we appreciate these contrasts, we can also better understand Spinoza's fuller views on the modal status of finite things. A finite mode is truly said to be necessary in virtue of being structured by one set of causal/conceptual relations. This same mode is also structured by a different set of causal/conceptual relations, in virtue of which it is also truly said to be merely contingent. Modal realists were right, in a sense – modality *is* about mind-independent natures or structures of things. But they failed to see how each single thing is structured in multiple ways, in virtue of which its modal profile can also vary. That's partly why Spinoza labeled these structures "conceptual" relations in the first place, since it seemed clear to him that one and the same individual can fall under very different conceptual relations (Ep. 9).

More generally, Spinoza's grand, contentious, yet interesting idea is that one and the same individual is structured in very heterogeneous ways, analogous to the way that one and the same individual can fall under different concepts. This is perhaps clearest in the case of Spinoza's attributes – one and the same thing is structured by both Thought

[45] In personal correspondence, Della Rocca questioned whether Spinoza's ways of conceiving could be something like Armstrongian (or Aristotelian) immanent universals. Only in a very loose sense, I would think, given Spinoza's thorough going nominalism (see my "Spinoza's Theory of Universals" for further discussion).

and Extension – but the same point holds within each attribute. That this claim about the structure of the world *is true* is very controversial, but that the modal facts *would* correspond to such divergent structures *were they there* seems more plausible. Spinoza's attempt to make the same structuring features that are responsible for causation and ontological dependence *also* responsible for modality is yet another outgrowth of his explanatory naturalism.

Here's the upshot for the explosion objection. The sensitivity of modality to these mind- and language-independent ways of conceiving objects is, for Spinoza, due to the conceptual grounds of modal facts themselves. Modal connections just are conceptual connections, though Spinoza's conceptual connections aren't the same mind-dependent features to which contemporary modal conventionalists appeal. Thus, his modal conceptualism does not entail a broader explosion into mind-dependent conventionalism about objects.

This is probably still a bit opaque. It is easier to say what these ways of conceiving *aren't* for Spinoza than what they *are*. More work needs to be done on this most basic metaphysical category in Spinoza's thought, especially by those familiar with contemporary metaphysics. Spinoza promises a middle ground between contemporary realism and contemporary conventionalism about modality, a position with the epistemic and explanatory advantages of conventionalism but without some of the associated costs. Whether or not there *is* such a middle ground to be had – Frege without the Platonism, divergent structures of objects with built-in referential opacity – has yet to be seen. Yet again, making progress on Spinoza's views on modality requires making further progress on the rest of his thought. Here the interpretive task has been helped, not hindered, by

comparing Spinoza's positions to some recent analogues. In this way, we see that not only is Spinoza relevant to contemporary metaphysics, but contemporary metaphysics is also relevant to interpreting Spinoza.[46]

Bibliography

Cameron, Ross. "From Humean Truthmaker Theory to Priority Monism." *Nous* 44 (2010): 178-98.

-------. "What's Metaphysical about Metaphysical Necessity?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 79 (2009): 1-16.

Chalmers, David, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, eds. *Metametaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Correia, Fabrice. *Existential Dependence and Cognate Notions*. München: Philosophia Verlag, 2005.

-------. "Ontological Dependence." *Philosophy Compass* 3 (2008): 1013-1032.

Della Rocca, Michael. "Rationalism Run Amok: Representation and the Reality of Emotions in Spinoza." In Huenemann, ed., *Interpreting Spinoza*, pp. 26-52.

Di Bella, Stefano, ed. *Early Modern Theories of Universals*, forthcoming.

Elder, Crawford. *Real Natures and Familiar Objects*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004.

Fine, Kit. "Essence and Modality." In Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives 8*: *Logic and Language*, pp. 1-16.

[46] I am grateful to Michael Della Rocca, Greg Fowler, Jonathan Schaffer, Alex Skiles, and participants of a 2009 graduate seminar at the University of Notre Dame for helpful comments and criticisms.

Hale, Bob, and Aviv Hoffmann, eds. *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Heil, John. *From an Ontological Point of View*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Horgan, Terence, and Potrž Matjaž. *Austere Realism: Contextual Semantics Meets Minimal Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

Huenemann, Charles, ed. *Interpreting Spinoza*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Kant, Immanuel *Religion and Rational Theology*. Ed. and trans by Allen Wood and George Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Loux, Michael, and Dean Zimmerman, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Lowe, E. J. *The Possibility of Metaphysics: Substance, Identity and Time*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

Mackie, Penelope. *How Things Might Have Been*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Newlands, Samuel. "Another Kind of Spinozistic Monism." *Noûs* 44 (2010): 469-502.

-------. "The Harmony of Spinoza and Leibniz." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81 (2010): 64-104.

-------. "Leibniz on the Ground of Possibility" (ms).

-------. "More Recent Idealist Interpretations of Spinoza." *Philosophy Compass* 6 (2011): 109-19.

-------. "Spinoza's Modal Metaphysics." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

-------. "Spinoza's Theory of Universals." In Di Bella, ed., *Early Modern Theories of Universals*.

-------. "Thinking, Conceiving, and Idealism in Spinoza." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 94 (2012): 31-52.

O'Connor, Timothy. *Theism and Ultimate Explanation: The Necessary Shape of Contingency*. New York: Blackwell, 2008.

Rea, Michael. "How to Be an Eleatic Monist." *Philosophical Perspectives* 35 (2001): 129-51.

-------. *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Rosen, Gideon. “Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction.” In Hale and Hoffmann, eds., *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology*, 109-136.

Schaffer, Jonathan. “Monism.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

-------. "Monism: The Priority of the Whole." *Philosophical Review* 119 (2010): 31-76.

-------. “On What Grounds What.” In Chalmers, Manley, and Wasserman, eds., *Metametaphysics*, pp. 347-83.

Schnieder, Benjamin Sebastian. “A Certain Kind of Trinity: Dependence, Substance, Explanation.” *Philosophical Studies* 129 (2006): 393–419.

Sidelle, Alan. *Necessity, Essence and Individuation: A Defense of Conventionalism*. Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1989.

Simons, Peter. *Parts: A Study in Ontology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Sider, Theodore. "Against Monism." *Analysis* 67 (2007): 1-7.

-------. “Reductive Theories of Modality.” In Loux and Zimmerman, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics*, pp. 180-208.

Tomberlin, James, ed. *Philosophical Perspectives 8*: *Logic and Language*. Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1994.

Trogdon, Kelly. "Monism and Intrinsicality." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87 (2009): 127-48.

Thomasson, Amie. *Ordinary Objects*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Yablo, Stephen. “Review of Alan Sidelle, *Necessity, Essence and Individuation*.” *Philosophical Review* 101 (1992): 878-81.