

# **Infinite Existence:**

## A Study of Spinoza's God

Samuli Isotalo

Master's Thesis

University of Turku

Faculty of Social Sciences

Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History and Political Science

Philosophy

May 2022

*The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.*

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU  
Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History and Political Science/  
Faculty of Social Sciences

ISOTALO, SAMULI: Infinite Existence: A Study of Spinoza's God

Master's thesis, 38 p.  
Philosophy  
May 2022

---

The essay gives an interpretation of Spinoza's God. It argues that Spinoza's God can be viewed as the principle of infinite existence. Therefore, everything there exists is necessarily in contact with this infinity, and thus the manner of being in contact with God is rendered actual by existing within existence itself. This means that Spinoza's God cannot be understood without being in contact with the world. In other words, understanding God does not happen by the axioms and propositions within the system of the *Ethics*, it happens by being in contact with existence itself.

In addition to this, the interconnectedness of everything is emphasised, and also the inseparable nature of the finite modes in relation to the substance, that is, to God. The idea is that the substance wouldn't be the substance it is without its modes. It doesn't require this or that particular mode – because the modes are not eternal – but it requires all of them, each in their own place and order. To alter the nature of any mode in the slightest of ways is to alter the nature of the substance as well. Therefore, the substance is connected to its modes in the most intimate manner, and so, the alleged gap between God and his creations becomes rather vague.

Keywords: Existence, God, Infinity, Metaphysics, Mode, Space, Spinoza, Substance.

# Contents

1. Introduction .....	1
2. God .....	2
2.1. One Substance, One Universe, One God.....	2
2.2. Infinite Existence .....	4
2.3. Connectedness and Causality.....	18
2.4. Whole and its Parts .....	28
2.5. Finite Modes Understood as Expressing God's Nature in a Certain and Determinate Way .....	33
3. Conclusion.....	36
Bibliography .....	38

# 1. Introduction

Spinoza's metaphysical outlook stems from the realisation that existence itself is one infinite unified whole where everything is connected with everything. Thus, there cannot exist any independent entities, as it were disconnected from others. We are in this together.

One often hears that there is something unintuitive in Spinoza's outlook. That in order to grasp what Spinoza is after, a lot of persuasion is required so that the student who's studying Spinoza's philosophy will be able to let go of his everyday-like intuitions. Then again for me personally, Spinoza's metaphysical outlook has always appeared as capturing something fundamentally true about reality.

In this essay, I give an interpretation of Spinoza's God where existence itself is taken as a crown jewel of everything. I also examine what does it mean to exist in God, as Spinoza says that everything does.

In the first section, section 2.1. I give a general overview on how I approach the philosophy of Spinoza. In 2.2. I examine the infinite existence and the finite within it. In 2.3. I move on to the interconnectedness of everything. In 2.4. I explain how I view Spinoza's attitude towards wholes and parts, and finally, in 2.5. I explain how it must be that the finite modes are not something irrelevant with regards to God, that is, they are intimately connected with God. Indeed, God would not be what he is without them.

All references to Spinoza's works are from the translations of Edwin Curley.

## 2. God

*To say that we are nothing but waves in the ocean seems to capture the spirit of Spinoza and his idea of the manner in which we exist in the world. Waves come and go – and so do we. But it is not the case that the waves in the ocean would appear arbitrarily, one here one there. For a wave to exist in a particular place in the ocean, the whole of the ocean must be disposed in such a way that this particular wave appears just here and just now. The single wave is inseparable from the rest of the ocean. And that is why we cannot understand the ocean without its waves.*

### 2.1. One Substance, One Universe, One God

In my view, the most fundamental theme of Spinoza's philosophy is the idea that everything is connected to everything. This idea is the golden thread that is spread out through the whole field of Spinoza's thinking, and it is present no matter what topic – be it metaphysics, ethics or politics – Spinoza is discussing. Thus, in this essay I want to firmly emphasize the interconnectedness of everything. And I mean *everything*.

Now, this everything, in order to be thusly connected, presupposes some kind of *unlimited unitary power* that binds this everything together, not only giving it existence but also preserving it in existence. It is the power that keeps this everything going. But the everything should not be looked at as something distinct from this power. On the contrary, the everything *is* the power itself, now determined like this, now determined like that. I, as a single human being, am the power, *here*. And similarly you, being another, are the same power, *there*. Somehow all this is God. How – that is what I try to comprehend in what follows.

In God, as Spinoza tells us, there are lots of distinctions. There is the *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. There are the attributes, immediate infinite modes, mediate infinite modes, finite modes, and so on. In other words, more than enough to make the reader confused. But let us not get stuck with the *words* – a mistake which Spinoza himself very often warns us not to fall into.

A quick remark considering this point is at place here before we proceed any further. Anyone having heard – if only a little bit – about the philosophy of Spinoza, cannot have failed to hear the word ‘substance’ being used quite often. Indeed, substance is just that which is at the very centre of Spinoza’s thought. But – and this is important – one should not deify the *word*. What Spinoza does in the *Ethics* is that he talks about this being which he uses the word ‘substance’ to refer to, and the word he then defines famously as that: “what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.”<sup>1</sup> But he could have used some other word just as well to refer to this being. In other words, it is not the *word* we are interested here but the being itself that the word refers to. Using some other word to refer to it does not change the being itself in any way. In letter 9 there is an interesting remark by Spinoza in which he states that:

if I say “By substance I understand what consists of one attribute only,” that will be a good definition, provided that afterwards beings consisting of more attributes than one are designated by a word other than substance

Here it is apparent that Spinoza is not that unyielding when it comes to the word substance – some other word will do just as well, provided that it is defined in such a way that we know what is meant by it, that is, what the word signifies. I stress this because – although

---

<sup>1</sup> E1d3.

all this seems self-evident – as Spinoza too states, many people completely confuse ideas with words (also with images)<sup>2</sup> – an issue which is all too present in many of our present-day discussions and debates as well.

Spinoza's philosophy is no doubt very technical and complicated. And when one immerses oneself into the complex web of definitions, axioms and propositions of the *Ethics*, one might be misled into thinking that it is nothing but an intellectual game that one might engage into in order to get some sort of intellectual satisfaction. But for Spinoza, it was not like this. For him, the ideas he presented in the *Ethics* were a matter of life and death, something he thought to be of the utmost importance to us all. Now, did he get everything right, that is another question, but at least he tried, wholeheartedly.

## 2.2. Infinite Existence

Let's begin with existence. The way I see it, it is where Spinoza begins as well. When engaging in a philosophical meditation, one must begin from something. And this something must be taken as granted. I can't see the beginning of philosophy being as it were *tabula rasa*, on which the philosophical system would then be written on. Neither does it seem right to say that we could get our system of philosophy from some innate *a priori* ideas.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding the *Ethics* could be read in this manner – beginning from the definitions and axioms, that is, from *a priori* concepts which didn't come from experience, and then deriving the whole system from there – this is not, however, how I read Spinoza. Rather, before all this, there already must be something more fundamental

---

<sup>2</sup> See E2p49s.

<sup>3</sup> For Spinoza, there are no innate ideas but only *intellectual tools* which we can develop further by the power of the intellect, and by which we can then eg. form axioms. Just like we can make better and better corporeal tools by using older tools to make them. See: TdIE, II/13/30-II/14/12.

going on. And for Spinoza, this something more fundamental is – in my reading – *that existence is*. And this is something that we can take for granted because existence itself is indeed granted to us.

Spinoza regards the third kind of knowledge, the *scientia intuitiva*, that is, the intuitive knowledge, as the highest form of knowledge. Below this is reason, the second kind of knowledge. Both of these are only dealing with adequate ideas, meaning that they are necessarily true.<sup>4</sup> But whereas the second kind of knowledge reasons, that is, engages into long chains of propositions and derives conclusions from these, in other words, it calculates, the third kind of knowledge sees the truth instantly. This being the case, it seems to me that the whole book of the *Ethics* – with its ‘cumbersome’ geometric order<sup>5</sup> – is written in view of the second kind of knowledge. Were it written in view of the third kind, it would obviously be much shorter and more assertive, thereby not perhaps being that convincing to those expecting to see the ideas justified in an argumentative manner. But to understand what Spinoza is trying to say, I feel we must also look at things beyond the system presented in the *Ethics*.

In *The Short Treatise* there is really interesting dialogue that seems to present the whole philosophy of Spinoza in a very concise manner.<sup>6</sup> In it, *Intellect* by which Spinoza means the third kind of knowledge, curtly asserts that:

For my part, I consider Nature only as completely infinite and supremely perfect.  
If you doubt this, ask Reason. He will tell you this.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> In addition to these, there is of course the first kind of knowledge as well which is gotten from the senses or signs. In other words, it is knowledge from random experience, and it is the sole cause of falsity because it deals with inadequate ideas. See E2p40 & E2p41.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. E4p18s.

<sup>6</sup> KV I, I/28-I/30. I am grateful to Olli Koistinen for pointing this out.

<sup>7</sup> KV I, I/28/12-14.



Then *Reason* – the second kind of knowledge – engages into a detailed back-and-forth argumentation with *Love* and *Lust*, attempting to convince them that Nature is infinite, that it is a Unity, and that nothing is distinct from it. In other words, *Reason* is trying to argue that there can be only one substance which is in itself and is conceived through itself, and that the corporeal and the intellect are only modes, being dependent on the substance, just like a single idea is on the intellect. And finally, that the substance, when causing its modes, is not outside them because it is their immanent cause. But *Intellect* already understood all this and doesn't consider it worthwhile arguing about it. For the rest of the dialogue, *Intellect* remains completely silent, as if thinking that once the obvious has been stated, there is no need to justify it any further.

This is how Spinoza sees it. That the infinite intellect of which we are parts<sup>8</sup> has the power of seeing the metaphysical structure of the universe as it were instantly, without any reasoning. And because we are indeed parts of it, we are able to participate in this seeing. Just like in the case of  $\frac{2}{4} = \frac{3}{x}$  we see instantly that  $x = 6$ . Of course, we could solve this problem in other ways also. We could remember from experience that we get the right answer by multiplying the second with the third, and then dividing that by the first ( $\frac{4*3}{2} = 6$ ). Or we could use demonstrations from mathematics, relying on the proportionality of numbers. These latter two ways of solving the problem would correspond to the first and second kinds of knowledge respectively.<sup>9</sup> But in both of them, unlike in the case of the third kind, we go through a certain *procedure* in order to get the right answer. Whereas

---

<sup>8</sup> E2p11c.

<sup>9</sup> TdIE, II/12/1-13.

when using the third kind of knowledge, we sort of *become one* with the solution, we *see* it intuitively.

One immensely important remark should be made here before we proceed any further. What I am talking about is the doctrine that I consider to be at the very centre of Spinoza's thought, namely, that infinite is prior to finite. Being finite for Spinoza is always a limitation where something of a similar nature limits the thing in question. Finite things are determined, and determination is not about affirming but rather negating. In letter 50 he writes:

--determination does not pertain to the thing according to its being, but on the contrary, it is its non-being. Therefore, because the shape is nothing but a determination, and **a determination is a negation**. as they say, it can't be anything but a negation.<sup>10</sup>

Infinite, on the other hand, is all about affirming. If something is infinite *in its own kind*, then there can't be anything with *the same nature* that would be limiting it. And if something is *absolutely infinite*, then there simply cannot be any other thing whatsoever that wouldn't be included within it. The absolute infinity thus implies totality and completeness – there is nothing beyond it.

Now, because the finite is a limitation of the infinite, it means that the finite can only be understood through it. It is not the case that we could get to infinity by adding lots of finite things together. This is because, first of all, doing it like this we would never reach it, and secondly, the infinite is not a *collection* of finite things in the first place. The infinite is a unity, not a plurality. The infinite, as a unified whole, is prior to its parts,

---

<sup>10</sup> ep 50, IV/240b/32-35. (Emphasis mine).

namely, those limitations which are gotten from it by negating something of it. The reason why we can locally increase something by putting more and more finite things together, as is the case when counting 1, 2, 3, ... , is only because the infinite is already there. When counting the natural numbers like this, we come to realise that we could just carry on and on, forever. Now why is this? Why is there always more room to advance? The reason for this is that the infinite is already there, and it is within the infinite that all local increasing happens. We don't make it bigger by iterating, we can only iterate within it.

Keeping in mind all this, it seems now that existence itself must be infinite. If it wouldn't be, then there would have to be another existence with a similar nature limiting this existence. But if existence would be limited by existence, it would seem that they are, in fact, the same existence, and thus no limitation occurs. And since existence covers *everything there is*, it can't be the case either that existence would be limited by *nothing*. For *nothing* doesn't exist, and so it cannot limit anything.

Now let's return to where we left off, namely, to the intuitive knowledge. Spinoza seems to think that if we only pay attention closely, we realise that we already have the idea of the infinite. But it is not an inborn *a priori* idea, but rather, we have it because we are necessarily in direct contact with it. Thus, we get the idea from experience, by being within it. But it cannot be our own making because we are finite, something very local. Thus, the infinite is something within which we discover ourselves to be existing.

In the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, Spinoza has very interesting remarks about motion. Now, when thinking of motion, we realise that motion can only happen *in relation to that something other* within which the motion happens. The idea of motion is thus a

dependent idea (incapable of existing on its own) which we formed from the idea of infinite quantity, which in turn was formed absolutely, without the aid of any other ideas. Motion is used to *determine* objects within the infinite quantity. For example, a line is determined by a point that moves, a plane by a line that moves, and finally, a body by a plane that moves. These determinations, however, presuppose the idea of an infinite quantity or space within which all this determination happens.<sup>11</sup>

This example of Spinoza also shows that there cannot be an absolute motion because motion always requires that something *other* in relation to which the motion happens. And so, it cannot be conceived that the *absolutely everything there is* would be in motion because then there couldn't be any distinction between the thing moving and that other thing in relation to which it moves (because there wouldn't be any *other thing*). Motion, by its very nature, is always something *relational*. It is not enough to have only the x that moves in order to understand motion. The y, in relation to which the x moves, is also needed.

Let us now continue from this idea of *relationality* and apply it to existence itself. In a rather similar manner than in the case of motion always needing the arena within which the motion happens, so does the single human being existing, require the arena within which this local existence happens. When we say that “x exists”, it is a *relational* claim, much like the claim, “x is in motion”. Both of these – notwithstanding they seem to say something about x only – require, however, something other as well – the arena which I called it – within which the existence or the motion happens.

---

<sup>11</sup> TdIE, II/38/34-II/39/1–14.

It seems then as if Spinoza would be saying that once we understand this relationality – the finite being a limitation of the infinite – we also understand that we, existing locally here, are conditioned by the infinite arena within which we exist. And thus, we are something that by our nature *are in another through which we are also conceived*. This is not, first and foremost, a conclusion that would be reached by reasoning, for although it might be done like this – from premises to conclusions– as it is done in the *Ethics*, this wouldn't still help us to *see* that it must be so. At most, it would be like an intellectual game that we play and then feel satisfaction of its coherence. But this is not enough. I feel what Spinoza is trying to say is that by intuition it is possible to *see*, namely, that we can, without any *procedure*, understand that we are within the infinite existence because it is only through it that our local existence can happen.

E1p7 reads that:

*It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist.*

And what is the thing's nature (or essence)? It is, according to E2d2:

that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.

So, the nature of x is, putting it bluntly, just that what x is. It is not some bare substrate which could be understood *a priori* before being in contact with the thing itself. It is rather like God speaking to Moses in *Exodus*, telling him that: “Ego sum qui sum”. *I am what I am*. And so, what substance simply is is existence itself – when substance is, existence is, and when existence is, substance is. In E1p8s2 Spinoza continues saying that P7 –

provided that men only understood the nature of the substance – could be an axiom for everyone, that is, a fact that simply must be accepted once it's understood. And in E1p20 Spinoza says that God's existence and his essence are one and the same. Indeed substance, by its very nature, simply is infinite existence.

When Spinoza conflates existence and essence in God, he does not mean that there would be an *a priori* idea of God which includes existence as one of its attributes. For Spinoza, we do not proceed from our inner psychological state – where we would discover this idea of God with existence attached to it – to the outside world, where, because of this idea of ours, we would have to conclude that God has formal reality as well, that is, that God must exist outside our mind. Rather, the whole process goes the other way around. To say that God's existence and essence are one and the same, Spinoza means simply that God *is* infinite existence, a *causa sui*. Existence is thus not an attribute which our mind would add to this idea of God. Instead, it is because of existence that we have this idea of God in the first place. God does not thus become a *real being* because God would be a unique kind of *being of reason* (such that has existence attached to it). It is rather that God becomes a *being of reason* because he is a *real being*.

What does it mean then that the finite is within the infinite? The finite is not anything separate from the infinite and thus, in a certain sense, it is wrong to call the infinite – compared to the finite – something *other*, as I have above done. Of course, I don't mean that it would be the case that infinite = finite. What I mean is that they are nothing separate from each other. Rather, they are connected in the most intimate manner. The finite is always a limitation *of* the infinite. And it is precisely because of this that we are able to *see* instantly that we are within the infinite. We *see* this because we *are* it. We are the

infinite *here*.<sup>12</sup> A single human being, for instance, is a determination of the one and only substance or God.

This one and only substance is the everything there is. In the whole universe there exists thus only one thing – the substance, or God – which, of course, *is* the Universe. Spinoza cannot accept the Aristotelian way of conceiving a substance which is “that which is neither said of a subject nor in a subject, e.g. the individual man or the individual horse.”<sup>13</sup> For instance, Socrates as an individual man, would be a substance, a subject existing independently, and of which we could say various things. These various things would be, according to Aristotle, accidents, inhering in the substance. For instance, the *snub-nosedness* would be an accident inhering in the substance, Socrates. The idea is that this accident couldn’t exist on its own, for it requires the substance, the individual within which it exists. But Socrates, as a substance, doesn’t have to exist in a definite place for he could have moved from Athens to Rome. He thus exists in himself, says Aristotle.

But Spinoza cannot accept this. Of course, it is possible for individuals to exist now here, now there. But once we zoom out a little bit, we realize that whether they are here or there, they must, however, exist in space, that is, in another body. And this another body is nothing but God understood as an extended thing. Thus, these individuals cannot exist in themselves for they always exist in God, namely, the one and only substance.

Proving the existence of God then cannot be a proof in the ordinary sense. If God is already there, and everything we are and everything we think is because of God, then, we cannot prove the existence of God without already presupposing – before the conclusion

---

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Joseph Almog for this point.

<sup>13</sup> Categories, 2a12-2a15.

– that God exists. This, of course, would be arguing in a circle, a *petitio principii*. Descartes is often accused of this – in my view mistakenly – that he presupposes the existence of God when relying on his clear and distinct ideas which he got from God which he then used to prove the existence of God. The problem is that they, of course, wouldn't reliable if God didn't exist.

The mistake here is that God is held to be some kind of external giver who is seen to be giving something to a separate receiver, for example, to me. When looking at it like this, it no doubt resembles the famous *petitio* of trying to prove the existence of God by using the Bible as a premise. Because – it is said – the Bible is the word of God, and in the Bible it is said that God exists, so therefore, God exists. Obviously, this is not much of an argument. Namely, if God would not exist, then the Bible couldn't be the word of God and the whole argument would collapse. In this case it is already presupposed in the premises that God exists. So, in this fallacious argument we argue that we got something from God – be it clear and distinct ideas or the Bible – and then, by using the thing we presumably received as a premise, we conclude that the giver, God that is, must exist.

This is not how Spinoza is approaching the matter.<sup>14</sup> For Spinoza, the starting point of everything is that God exists. God is prior to any other thing, both in nature and in knowledge. The existence of God cannot thus be shown effectively by a syllogism – for that would require that the premises are known better than the conclusion – ie. that God exists – but if this would be the case, then God's existence would not be the starting point. In the very beginning I said that we must begin from something. If God is the infinite existence – which I believe Spinoza thinks it is – then we cannot begin as it were from

---

<sup>14</sup> And neither is Descartes, I think, but that's another topic which cannot be pursued here in the limits of this essay.



outside existence, from nothing, and from there try to reach the conclusion that existence is. *That existence is* is something fundamental, something primordial, which we cannot escape from. We cannot *pretend* as if existence wouldn't exist, and then by reasoning try to reach the conclusion that existence is. This is because we already know that *existence is* – it is the precondition for everything – and thus, because existence itself is just that what pertains to God's nature, which I read as God being nothing but existence itself, it means that if God would not exist, then nothing would exist.

Understanding that God exists, then, can also be done in *a posteriori* way (in the old sense, meaning an inference from effects to cause), although Spinoza thinks that *the a priori* way is better (meaning an inference from cause to effect).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Spinoza's thinking is saturated with the idea of God being prior to everything. Everything follows from God, from the ultimate cause to every effect there is, and because "the knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause"<sup>16</sup> Spinoza is not that inclined of proceeding from effects to causes. It is not because of our idea of God which would make God exist, it is only because God exists that we have an idea of him. This is how I see Spinoza proceeding. But Spinoza also talks about proving the existence of God in *a posteriori* way which is highly reminiscent of what Descartes does in Meditation III.

There Descartes writes:

when I turn my mind's eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another and which aspires without limit to ever greater and better things; but I also understand at the same time that he on whom I depend has within him all those greater things, not just indefinitely and potentially but actually and infinitely, and hence that he is God. The whole force of the argument lies in this: I recognize that it would be impossible for me to

---

<sup>15</sup> KV I I, I/18/19-20.

<sup>16</sup> E1a4.

exist with the kind of nature I have – that is, having within me the idea of God – were it not the case that God really existed.<sup>17</sup>

Spinoza on the other hand is not that keen on *turning his mind's eye upon himself*, because it would mean observing the effect before the cause. But he nevertheless in E1p11d uses this way of proving the existence of God as well. He writes:

To be able not to exist is to lack power, and conversely, to be able to exist is to have power (as is known through itself). So, if what now necessarily exists are only finite beings, then finite beings are more powerful than an absolutely infinite Being. But this, as is known through itself, is absurd. So, either nothing exists or an absolutely infinite Being also exists. But we exist, either in ourselves, or in something else, which necessarily exists (see A1 and P7). Therefore an absolutely infinite Being – that is (by D6), God – necessarily exists, q.e.d.<sup>18</sup>

Because something exists, for example me, then, because I as a limited being by my very nature, am a determination *of* the infinite – a dependent being – it means that God, an infinite being, which is necessary existence itself, must also exist. What we have here is a sort of *existential disjunction* according to which either God exists, or nothing exists. And because I, a limitation of God, do exist, it follows that God also exists. Namely, I could not, as a limited being, exist, if God, as an unlimited being, would not exist. But I do exist. Therefore, God exists.

*God exists* then is a fact that must be true no matter what. In a sense God's existence is, at the same time, not only the starting point but also the conclusion. Because of this, then, we can derive God's existence from any premises whatsoever – be they true, false or contradictory does not make any difference. But, of course, if this is the case then – as it was shown above – it doesn't make any sense to use any premises in the first place.

---

<sup>17</sup> CSM 2, 35.

<sup>18</sup> E1p11d.

There is always the infinite existence within which all the determinate things either exist or then don't exist. To think of some particular determinate thing as not existing is possible only because there is always the infinite existence within which all the particular existence, or non-existence, happens. To think of some x as not existing is to think of existence without this x. In order to think of this x as not existing then, we need to have something positive, something that does exist, in order to comprehend that this x does not exist. The arena is always required, and it is then within this arena that the x in question either exists or not. Here we can see that this x, whatever particular and determinate thing it is, by its very nature, is always dependent – both in knowledge and in nature – on something other. This is so even in the case when this x does not in fact exist. For it can only be conceived as not existing because there is the infinite existence within which we conceive that this x in fact does not exist. So, everything is dependent on the infinite substance which is in itself and is conceived through itself. These determinations of it, the particular x's and y's, are nothing but modifications of it, and thus they always require the substance through which they both exist and are conceived. Hence, because of the infinite substance, we can understand a particular x as either existing or then not existing. But the substance itself cannot ever be understood as not existing – that would be taking away the whole totality of existence and thus all understanding as well.

Indeed, we cannot think existence away. We can think of *this* or *that* thing as not existing, but we cannot think that existence itself wouldn't exist. For Spinoza, thinking is not anything arbitrary. We cannot think anything we wish (even though it might seem that way). The mind is not omnipotent – 'omnipotent' meaning here something that's capable of anything whatsoever, as if arbitrarily.<sup>19</sup> Thinking is rather intimately integrated in the

---

<sup>19</sup> Spinoza, of course, would deny that 'omnipotent' would imply arbitrariness. For Spinoza, God for instance, is omnipotent but this does not mean that God could do something else than that which necessary

very structure of being. Thinking of the substance then (or infinite existence), must necessarily be done in agreement with the nature of the substance itself. The idea of a substance is its own certainty. It is not possible to think of the substance as not existing.

We can, of course, think of the *sentence* “substance does not exist”. But this would not be thinking of the substance *de re* as it were as not existing. In other words, the substance is what it is, regardless of what sentences we utter to talk about it. To say that I have wings does not grant me any wings. This would be confusing *words* with the thing itself. We use words to talk about something, to signify them. But whether we use the word ‘substance’ or ‘Constance’ doesn’t make any difference with regards to the thing itself – the thing itself stays the same no matter what we choose to call it.

Another mistake would be to think of the substance as an image. Then, of course, we could think the image of the substance as not existing, but once again, this would not be – provided that one understands the nature of the substance – thinking it as not existing. To think of the infinite substance does not require that one is able to form an image of it. We simply can’t, as limited beings, form an image of the infinite – our mental capacities are unable to do so – but we can, however, have an idea of it. Indeed, we must have such an idea. Having an idea does not require imagining for Spinoza.

From this it seems clear that for Spinoza, there does not exist any insurmountable gap between things and their ideas. The reason why we are able to have an adequate idea of

---

follows from God’s infinite nature. ‘Omnipotent’ for Spinoza means totality, which means that necessarily everything that is possible is also necessary. If God could do something differently, it would mean that God’s nature would have to be different as well. And if God could make it so that things would be different, for example that the sum of the angles of a triangle would not be equal to two right angles, it would mean that God could understand things the way they are not, which for Spinoza is of utmost absurdity.

the substance is not because our mind would be an independent entity capable of forming whatever ideas it pleases, but rather, it is because of the very nature of the substance itself. The idea of the substance is thus nothing separate from the substance itself. We have the idea of the substance because the substance really is like that which it is.

This keeps the door firmly locked to prevent a sceptic to sneak in. Namely, there is no distinction between the objective reality and the formal reality of things. And it is of course just this distinction that the sceptic aims to exploit at when questioning the reality of the so-called outside world. Sure, we can have clear and distinct ideas – the sceptic says – but how can we be certain that they correspond to the things those ideas presumably are of? Indeed, how can we even be certain that there exists anything in addition to these ideas? For Spinoza this way of thinking is unintelligible because the things always come as it were wrapped into their ideas. An adequate idea cannot occur by coincidence where I have an idea of something and then it also happens to be true. It is adequate because it is true.

### 2.3. Connectedness and Causality

For Spinoza, everything is connected to everything. Whenever we examine some single thing, we must in addition – in order to understand it – examine other things as well. And then these other things – in order to understand them – involve some further things which we must also understand, and so on *ad infinitum*. We can, of course, limit ourselves of examining only some single particular thing here and now, for example, me as a human being. But without taking into account all the other things in addition to me, this examination will always be a defective one, an inadequate idea of what I truly am. For

Spinoza then, to understand any single thing, one must also understand those other things, *among with* this particular thing is existing.

The various particular things thus form a kind of infinite network where everything is connected, thus rendering impossible for there to be any independent entities, that is, things that would be in themselves only. Every particular thing is an effect of some cause but also a cause for some further effect. Nothing stays static and untouchable. Instead, everything is in constant motion and interaction. This causal chain, however, is not to be understood as if being linear. It is not a long straight line of sequences having a beginning and an end, but rather, it should be understood more as a circular connection of infinite number of causes and effects which are in a state of never-ending interaction with each other.

This network of things, however, is only the first part of the story. Namely, whenever there is a plurality of particular entities, connected to each other by certain kinds of relations, there must in addition to this, also exist the domain or the arena within which these things and the relations between them are occurring. Without any domain we would have something like a point-like picture of reality, namely, the particular entities would exist as it were as points in a void. This line of thinking is unacceptable for Spinoza. For him, in order for there to exist these particular entities, being in relations to one another, there necessarily has to exist the infinite domain as well within which these particular entities are existing.

This calls, again, for some clarifications. Namely, this domain is not to be understood as if being a vacuous container within which these particulars would be found. Instead, the

particulars are to be understood as modifications of that infinite thing of which they are parts. But not parts in the sense that the infinite would be divisible by them. The infinite for Spinoza means that it is indivisible in the sense that it cannot be dismantled to its parts. The infinite as a totality is prior to its parts, which means that these parts are indeed only modifications of it. This means that, although we can examine one such part as it were detached from others, it does not follow that this particular part could exist independently of all the rest. The infinite unity is not an aggregate of its parts. The parts are modifications or determinations or limitations *of* it. The particular thing, looked at solely by itself, is always a sort of artificial way of looking at it, a *modal distinction* in Spinoza's vocabulary.<sup>20</sup>

This being the case, there cannot be any two or more entities which would be *really distinct* from each other. In his *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Spinoza seems to still think along the lines with Descartes, namely, that from the fact that we can conceive A without B, and B without A, it *follows* that they can also exist without the other.<sup>21</sup> In other words, we can move from conceivability to existence. This is of course the crux of the matter in Descartes' prove of the *real distinction* between mind and body as well, namely, that from the fact that he can *conceive* them independently of each other, it follows that they can also *exist* without the aid of the other. But in the *Ethics*, Spinoza doesn't seem to think like this anymore. In E1p10s Spinoza says, regarding the attributes, that although we can conceive the attributes to be *really distinct*, it does not follow that they could exist independently. Indeed, for Spinoza in the *Ethics*, there cannot be any *real distinctions*.

---

<sup>20</sup> E1p15s & CM II 5, I/257/29–35.

<sup>21</sup> CM II 5, I/257/24–28.

According to Spinoza, we as human beings conceive everything under two attributes, namely, extension and thought. Because everything there is, is in God<sup>22</sup>, and because God is a being that has the most (read; all) reality, it means that God can be conceived under infinite number of attributes, namely, all attributes that there can possibly be. For Spinoza, if something is possible, then it's necessary. But we know only two of these attributes, namely, extension and thought. When it comes to the ontological status of the attributes, I follow Olli Koistinen in thinking that the “[a]ttributes themselves do not have any reality of their own – they are only relational names of the substance.”<sup>23</sup> It is not the case that there would be a hierarchical chain of being where at the very top would be the substance, which would then cause the attributes, which would then cause the modes. No, there are only substances and modes, namely, those which are in themselves and those which are in another.<sup>24</sup> And of course, for Spinoza, there is only one substance, that is God, and any other thing there is is a mode, and it is in that very substance.

Let's now return to that infinite domain that we talked about above. In a very interesting letter 64 to Schuller, Spinoza answers to his request for examples of the infinite modes. Now, the infinite modes are those immediately and also mediately caused by God.<sup>25</sup> According to Spinoza, nothing determinate or finite cannot be directly caused by something that is infinite and exists necessarily. Rather, the finite things are caused by other finite things, and those on their behalf by some further finite things and so on *ad infinitum*. What this means is that God, the absolutely infinite existence, can only directly cause something that is also infinite, but in such a way that the latter is infinite not by the

---

<sup>22</sup> E1p15.

<sup>23</sup> Koistinen 2021, 224.

<sup>24</sup> E1a1.

<sup>25</sup> E1p21, E1p22 & E1p23.



force of its nature but by the force of its cause.<sup>26</sup> The mode exists within its cause, because of immanent causation, that is, it is within existence, existing as infinite at all times. Such an infinite immediate modification of God further causes another modification which also must be infinite, and which exists necessarily. The latter would be then the mediate infinite mode.

What are these infinite modes then? As Spinoza writes in this letter 64, they are, firstly, conceived under the attribute of thought, absolutely infinite intellect and secondly, conceived under the attribute of extension, motion and rest. As for the mediate ones, Spinoza gives an answer only to the mode under extension which he calls the face of the whole Universe.

Next, let's examine these infinite modes under both attributes in more detail.

First, extension. Spinoza says that God causes immediately motion and rest, which further causes the face of the whole Universe. Here I follow Olli Koistinen in thinking that what Spinoza is talking about is infinite space. In space there is motion and rest. Recall that motion can only happen relationally – in order for x to be in motion, also y, which is not in motion, is needed. Hence it cannot be that the whole of the infinite modification would be in motion because that would mean that there would have to be something outside of it, in relation to which the motion would be happening. But this modification is infinite which means that there cannot be anything other of the same nature that would be limiting it. As we remember, for Spinoza being finite is always some kind of negation of existence whereas being infinite is always affirming it. That being said, it follows that space, being

---

<sup>26</sup> See letter 12.

an infinite totality, cannot itself be in motion in relation to some other thing having the same nature than it (because there is no other such thing). Space itself, as an infinite modification, is always at rest. But there is motion *in* space. This relation between motion and rest then causes the face of the whole Universe which: “however much it may vary in infinite ways, nevertheless always remains the same.”<sup>27</sup>

To understand this better, Spinoza encourages Schuller to consult the scholium of lemma 7 from the second part of the *Ethics* where Spinoza sets forth his theory of the physics (in a very concise manner). Now, it is noteworthy here that this theory of the bodies is located in the middle of the part two which is about the mind. Indeed, for Spinoza there is no substantial distinction between these – understanding the mind goes hand-in-hand with understanding the body, and vice versa.

Spinoza’s remarks concerning bodies are extremely interesting. He starts off by simple bodies which are either in motion or in rest. It is motion and rest by which they are distinguished from each other. These simple bodies then interact with other such bodies, thereby causing them to also be in motion or in rest. This causation is thus to be understood as transient cause – the cause and effect are separate from each other, not because they would be two separate substances, but because for example body a, when striking body b, thus transferring its motion to it, causes b, formerly at rest, to be now in motion. Bodies with different natures react with different ways when a certain type of body is affecting them, and a body with a certain type of nature reacts in different ways depending on the nature of the affecting body.

---

<sup>27</sup> Letter 64, IV/278/28–29.

It might also happen that multiple bodies come together in a certain way. According to the definition in the middle of Spinoza's physics:

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or Individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies.<sup>28</sup>

These individuals, consisting of smaller and simpler bodies, can also be affected by many ways and still preserve their nature. These smaller bodies might grow or become smaller, they can change their direction of motion, some of them can be removed from the whole while others take their place and so on. But as long as all this happens in such a way that the parts are as it were working together, having the same ratio of motion and rest in their act of existing, then we say that the individual remains the same.

Here we can see how there can exist individuals having more and more complex kind of nature. The more complex it is, in more ways it can be affected. And when multiple such bodies, having this kind of complex nature, are united, together they form yet a further individual with a nature even more complex. The variation within the individual in such a way composed becomes more and more diverse, yet still it preserves its nature. And as Spinoza beautifully says that:

if we proceed in this way to infinity, we shall easily conceive that the whole of nature is one Individual, whose parts, i.e., all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> E2d.

<sup>29</sup> E2L7s.

Now we have come full circle back to the face of the whole Universe. Indeed, this face is one individual, consisting of parts which are smaller and simpler individuals, all varying in infinite ways, now at motion now at rest, but in such a way that the whole, nevertheless, always remains the same. And I remind again that these parts are not to be understood as being really distinct from each other. They are distinct only modally which means that they are modifications of the one single – and indivisible – individual. The extended substance, which the infinite modification of space is, is indeed indivisible.

Why is it then that it seems so natural to us to think that it isn't? Because indeed, it might feel natural to think that space can be divided into parts – there is me, you and so on. And our bodies perhaps can be further divided into parts. The reason for this error is, according to Spinoza, that when thinking like this we are only *imagining* space. And when we so imagine it, that is, when we form an image of it, it seems nothing but natural that it would be divisible. But as we remember, having an idea of something is not the same than imagining it. An image is of course always finite, whereas space is infinite. We cannot form an infinite image of anything. Thus, as Spinoza says:

This will be sufficiently plain to everyone who knows how to distinguish between the intellect and the imagination—particularly if it is also noted that matter is everywhere the same, and that parts are distinguished in it only insofar as we conceive matter to be affected in different ways, so that its parts are distinguished only modally, but not really.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> E1p15s. I note in passing that Spinoza seems to be using the word 'parts', and also the phrase 'to be composed of parts' in different senses depending on the context. For example, in E1p15s Spinoza is trying to refute the idea that matter would be composed of parts, but then in lemma 5 of the Physics, for example, he talks explicitly about "the parts composing an Individual". I would say that in the former case Spinoza means 'to be composed of parts' in the sense that the whole would be divisible by its parts, that it would be an aggregate of them, and this is of course something that Spinoza strongly denies. But in the latter case he means by 'parts' modifications of the whole, being separable from each other only modally and not really. Therefore, what Spinoza means by 'parts' must be understood within its particular context.

All this shows clearly that Spinoza's conception of the Universe is not anything static. The whole of Universe is varying in infinite ways all the time yet in such a way that it itself, as a totality, always remains the same. Hence, Spinoza calls it 'the face of the whole Universe', meaning that it is constantly having different expressions yet still remaining itself the same always. The idea is very beautiful – The Universe remains the same by undergoing constant change. Remaining the same and undergoing a change are not thus looked at as irreconcilable opposites but rather something that is the very nature of existence. The various things are what they are precisely because they are constantly changing – otherwise they would be nothing but mute pictures on a panel.<sup>31</sup> Existence for Spinoza is, first and foremost, power. It is to be able to act, to produce effects and to be affected by causes. This implies a certain kind of dynamic and 'living' picture of the whole of Universe. Indeed, the whole preserves its nature by varying in infinite ways. And the modifications are needed in order for these variations to occur.

Let's now turn to the infinite modifications under the attribute of thought. Spinoza writes that the immediate one is the absolutely infinite intellect, in other words, the idea of God. E2p3 says:

In God there is necessarily an idea, both of his essence and of everything which necessarily follows from his essence.

Despite the at first glance dyad-like tone of this proposition – we have the idea of God's essence *and* the idea of everything that necessarily follows from it – it should be remembered, however, that these two are nevertheless nothing separate from each other. The latter are modifications of the former which means that this *following* does not mean

---

<sup>31</sup> Cf. E2p49s.

that they would follow from it in the manner of which a wooden table follows from the crafting of a carpenter, that is, that they would be external from their cause.

Now this absolutely infinite intellect, then, thinks everything there exists. In other words, there is an idea of everything there is. And God being absolutely infinite, therefore knows everything that's going on in the Universe. Just as extension, as an infinite space, covers everything there is when it comes to corporeality, so does the infinite intellect covers everything when it comes to mental.

In his letter to Schuller, Spinoza does not reveal what would be the infinite mediate mode under the attribute of thinking. But when looking at how in the case of extension we proceeded from motion and rest to the face of the whole Universe, that is, from the fact that single bodies are distinguished from each other by motion and rest, and from this we proceeded to the whole infinite network of these bodies, that is, to the face, then, it seems to me that in the case of thought, we would, from the absolutely infinite intellect, that is, from the totality of ideas, proceed to the infinite network of these ideas. In other words, all the infinite ideas within the idea of God, must be of course closely connected. They are not ideas independent of each other, as if being points in some container. Just like space is not a container within which the bodies would be floating, neither is the intellect a mental one, where all the ideas would exist as if some kinds of mental points. Instead, the bodies as well as the ideas are modifications of their infinite modifications of which they are parts.

## 2.4. Whole and its Parts

Relating to what I said in footnote 30, I would like to draw attention to an important distinction of the two ways of understanding whole and its parts, a theme that has run through the whole of this essay. Firstly, a whole consisting of parts can be understood as an aggregate, where the parts are prior to the whole. Here, we start with the parts, and after having assembled them together, we have the whole which is here completely dependent on its parts. In this case, the whole is nothing but the sum of its parts – take away one part and the whole becomes incomplete. From this it also follows that the whole can be dismantled into its parts, thereby destroying the whole. This way of understanding the relation between the whole and its parts is something that Spinoza strongly denies. Whenever he talks about the human mind being *part* of the infinite intellect of God<sup>32</sup> or the *parts* composing an individual<sup>33</sup> he does *not* mean parts in this sense, namely, that the whole would be nothing but a collection of its parts.

The second way of understanding the relation between the whole and its parts is when the whole is understood as prior to its parts. The very first proposition in the *Ethics* states that: “A substance is prior in nature to its affections.”<sup>34</sup> And these affections, or modes, of the substance are in it, that is, they are in God.<sup>35</sup> Now, what does it mean that they are in it, that is, that modes are in substance? It doesn’t seem right to say that they are its properties, as if God would exemplify the property of Socrates in the manner in which Socrates exemplifies the property of *snub-nosedness*. It can’t be like that. Rather, the modes exist in the substance as parts exist in the whole, but in such a way that the whole

---

<sup>32</sup> See E2p11c.

<sup>33</sup> See E2L5.

<sup>34</sup> E1p1.

<sup>35</sup> E1p15.

is not an aggregate of its parts. The whole does not lose its nature because of the variations of its parts. Instead, it presupposes these variations. Take away one such part and the whole remains. But take away all the parts and the whole is no more. Hence, the whole also needs its parts, not this or that part, but all of them, each in their right order and place. From this it also follows that each part is only understood through the whole of which it is a part. For the whole causes its parts, and the knowledge of an effect depends on the knowledge of its cause.<sup>36</sup> But it is also the case that the whole is understood through its parts. Each part explains the whole, indeed *partly*. “The more we understand singular things, the more we understand God.”<sup>37</sup> The whole thus varies in infinite ways through its parts, but it is just these variations that the whole presupposes in order to remain what it is – a whole that’s prior to its parts. But it is also the case that without these parts the whole could not exist either.

This tenet of Spinoza then, with regards to whole and its parts, seems to imply some peculiar features with regards to the metaphysical structure of God or Nature. God, being one individual, is absolutely infinite and thus in a certain sense immutable. I say ‘in a certain sense’ because indeed, it seems – although Spinoza explicitly says that God is immutable<sup>38</sup> – that God is not in the least sense anything dead or inanimate. This immutability of God must thus be understood in a much more subtle sense than what we usually understand by the word. Namely, when we say that something is immutable, this usually implies a certain sense of static-like or inanimate existence. But God for Spinoza is not like that. First of all, existence is by no means anything static, for its essence is power itself, that is, the potential to be able to cause effects. God causes both himself and

---

<sup>36</sup> See E1p18 & E1a4.

<sup>37</sup> E5p24.

<sup>38</sup> See E1p10s & E1p20c2.



everything that necessarily follows from him. Also recall that the face of the whole Universe – which is God understood as infinite extension – is such that “however much it may vary in infinite ways, nevertheless always remains the same”. In other words, in a peculiar way it remains the same by constantly varying in infinite ways. It will not do to merely declare that it is immutable and then exit the scene – something much more subtle is going on here.

When I am questioning the austere way of understanding God as immutable, of course I don’t mean that God would be able to vary in any arbitrary manner. For example, it is not possible that God could become finite, or that God could render himself to become non-existent. Instead, what is going on here is the peculiar relationship between the whole and its parts – the whole presupposes the infinite variations of its parts in order to remain *that* whole which it is. Indeed, what would the substance be if it would be completely cut off and separated from its modes? Surely Spinoza would say that such a thing could not exist. In this sense, the substance is dependent on its modes – not *this* or *that* mode, but all of them together, each of which necessarily follows from God and thus exists in its own unique place within the whole of Nature or God.

What about these individuals within God then? It does seem as if Spinoza would be saying that the status of any given individual, instead of being static, is always somewhat relational because of its dynamic nature. This relationality does not, however, mean that individuals would be something of an illusory nature. There is you and there is me all right, but the idea of an independent individual, cut off from others or from the domain he exists in, is something we must reject if we follow Spinoza. Thus, this relationality with regards to individuals just means that every individual is much more tightly

embedded into to whole of existence, in a much stronger manner than it might at first glance appear to us.

Insofar as two individuals agree with one another, they can be looked at as two parts within some whole that's bigger than them. But insofar as they disagree with one another, then they are looked at as two wholes.<sup>39</sup> And an individual looked at as a whole presupposes the constant variations of its parts. The parts live through their whole, but also the whole lives through its parts. If the parts would not be undergoing any variations like such, then the whole could not live. It would become something incomprehensible. When paying attention closely, all this seems to be in accord with our everyday experience as well. I, as a body, am of course very much different now than what I was 30 years ago when I was only two years old. Indeed, even during a single day an ever-going change is occurring – at noon I am already different than what I was in the morning.

Same goes for the mind. According to E2p15 the mind is not simple, but rather consists of great many ideas. And these ideas change. This is of course evident from the fact that the body constantly changes, and because there exists an idea of every such change, then the mind changes as well.

This same process is constantly going on everywhere else in the Universe as well. Sometimes the change happens more quickly – a mayfly lives only a day – and sometimes more slowly – the planet Earth 'lives' much longer, about 10 billion years. I take it that Spinoza holds that the whole of the Universe is in some sense alive. For in E2p13s Spinoza says, with regards to the union of mind and body, that:

---

<sup>39</sup> See letter 32.

For the things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate.

And as we saw earlier, Spinoza thinks that the whole of Universe is itself one individual. From this we conclude that the same dynamics which are going on in every individual *within* the Universe are also going on with the Universe itself as a whole that's prior to its parts. The whole Universe is a living being. This is Spinoza's microcosm-macrocosm relation.

However, there is also something very different going on in me than what is going on in the infinite substance, or God. Namely, I of course was once born and someday I will die. The same does not hold for God – God is infinite and eternal. God does not have a beginning and an end like I, being a mode of God, do. But this does not mean that God would have a life of his own, separated from mine, as if infinite existence over there and finite existence over here. Rather, somehow the same processes that are going on in God are reproduced in me, but in a limited, local and finite way. I cannot cause myself to exist, nor do I have the power to preserve my existence forever – I can only strive to do so, or rather I must, because it is my very nature to do so<sup>40</sup>, but once there is some external cause that's stronger than me, one that overpowers my striving, then, it will take my existence away, and thus, I am destroyed. All this cannot happen to God for there is no external causes that would affect God in any way. God is infinite existence itself, without any limits whatsoever. Thus, in the case of God, there is no striving neither. God already has everything there is because he is everything there is. Therefore, he lacks nothing. He is self-caused, eternal and infinite, and nothing can take his existence away. But be that as

---

<sup>40</sup> See E3p6 & E3p7.

it may, all the modes there exist, nevertheless, are living as it were as images of God. Or rather, they are like miniature versions of the one and only God, microcosms within the infinite macrocosm.

## 2.5. Finite Modes Understood as Expressing God's Nature in a Certain and Determinate Way

In the final section of this essay, I want to focus in more detail on the finite modes among which are included us humans, other animals, trees and rocks and every other finite singular thing or individual there can possibly be. Every now and then it is said that these modes are *only* affections of God, and hence, Spinoza's theory cannot explain individuality – we become like powerless cogs, rotating around in this mechanistic-deterministic machine of the universe. On the other hand, some have claimed – most famously the German idealists, Hegel most prominently – that the finite modes don't even possess any reality, that they are only appearances by which it is meant, in the vein of Parmenides, that they are nothing but illusions. According to this view, Spinoza's philosophy is austere monistic – there is only one substance, and everything else is an illusion.<sup>41</sup>

In view of my understanding of Spinoza, however, I would like to get rid of the word *only*. We are not *only* modifications of God for we are expressing God's nature in a certain and determinate way. Indeed, we *are* modifications of God and thus I, for instance, am God *here*. What I mean by this is that when God is thinking of me, he doesn't think of me as something external to him. He is thinking of himself in a certain and determinate

---

<sup>41</sup> Melamed 2012.

way. And this determination is me. Little bit like if I would be thinking of my right hand, I would think that this hand is me *here*.

Now, it is true that God exists in himself and is conceived through himself, whereas the modes exist in God and are conceived through God. But just as the modes cannot exist without God so it seems that God cannot exist without the modes. Sure, without *this* or *that* mode he can, but it seems that necessarily all the modes, each in their own place and order, are needed to exist in order for God to have the nature he does in fact have. If a single mode would be different in any way, then God would have to be different also. This of course follows from the necessity of God's nature by which everything exists and produces effects in a certain and determinate way<sup>42</sup>. God and the modes, then, are connected in the most intimate kind of way, they are nothing separate from each other. But if this is the case, then can God really be conceived without the modes? True, Spinoza says explicitly that this can be done, but one must ask, however, what God would be like without the modes? Surely such a thing could not exist. So, isn't it the case that this kind of conception of God – without the modes – would be somewhat artificial conception of him because here we would be separating something from God that by his very nature is inseparable from him? God could not exist without the modes so how can he be conceived without them? In my view, conception like that would be a distorted one, provided what Spinoza says about the nature of God and the modes.

This does not mean, however, that every time in order to conceive God, we would have to conceive some particular mode as well, for example me. Surely God can be conceived without me. I do not exist necessarily like God does, and thus my essence does not involve

---

<sup>42</sup> See E1p29.

existence. I am conceived through God, but God is not conceived through me. But the picture here seems to me to be much more subtle. In order to conceive a forest, we don't need to think about *this* or *that* particular tree. The forest thus, as a whole, is prior to its parts, the individual trees. But the forest of course, in order to be a forest, needs the trees as well. If you take away all the trees, then the forest is no more.

When Spinoza says that “The essence of things produced by God does not involve existence”<sup>43</sup> he means that when looking at some particular thing, we cannot find anything in itself alone from which we could infer that it must exist. But the fact is that it must exist. For “In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way.”<sup>44</sup> So when being confronted with some particular thing, we must admit that it couldn't have failed to exist. It necessarily exists. But not because of its own nature, but because of its cause, that is, because of God. God is the only thing that exists from the necessity of his own nature and everything else exists necessarily from the nature of their cause, which is God.

That things are contingent or possible, then, is only due to the defect of our limited understanding. Singular things Spinoza calls contingent: “insofar as we find nothing, while we attend only to their essence, which necessarily posits their existence or which necessarily excludes it.”<sup>45</sup> And possible: “insofar as, while we attend to the causes from which they must be produced, we do not know whether those causes are determined to produce them.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, no singular thing is neither contingent nor possible when

---

<sup>43</sup> E1p24.

<sup>44</sup> E1p29.

<sup>45</sup> E4d3.

<sup>46</sup> E4d4.

zooming out and looking at it in its own and unique place, within the whole of nature, where it necessarily exists. So, in order to understand some particular thing, we need to go beyond it – it is never enough to limit our observation only to the thing in question – otherwise we would understand it only inadequately.

### 3. Conclusion

In this essay, I argued that existence itself is for Spinoza something that bears a fundamental nature. Existence is not something we could meaningfully debate whether it exists or not, for it is already here, making all this possible. Existence is not a concept through which we would be observing reality, it is rather like an ocean within which we are engulfed. Thus, we are always in contact with it, that is, we are always in contact with God.

This interpretation would make Spinoza a mystic – ‘mystic’ meaning someone who is in an immediate contact with God. And of course, this would make us all mystics, for it is impossible for anyone not to be in contact with God, namely, with infinite existence as such. Whether we acknowledge it or not, God is already here.

For Spinoza, existence is not anything static, it is all about power. This power is the unifying factor that works as a necessary connection between every singular thing there exists, and thus, the idea of these singular things being independent or cut off from each other is incomprehensible for Spinoza. Everything is the effect of some cause and

everything is the cause for some effect. And these singular things are not existing as if points in a void, they are rather modifications of the one, all-encompassing whole.

God, by the necessity of his nature is such that these singular things necessarily follow from him. Thus, they are not something that could be detached from the whole of which they are parts. Each of them is expressing God's infinite power in their own particular and determinate way. This means that God's nature is such that it is necessarily accompanied by these modes. But these modes cannot exist, nor can they be understood, by themselves alone, for their existence presupposes the whole which is prior to them, both in nature and in knowledge. Thus, nothing is contingent, everything is connected. Everything there exists is fundamentally an infinite unity, a unity which Spinoza calls God.



## Bibliography

Aristotle (1984), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. 2 vols. Princetown University Press.

Descartes, René (1985), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Koistinen, Olli (2021), “Spinoza’s Modal Theory” in Yitzhak Y. Melamed (ed.) *A Companion to Spinoza*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 222-230.

Melamed, Yitzhak Y. (2012), “Why Spinoza is Not an Eleatic Monist (Or Why Diversity Exists)” in Philip Goff (ed.) *Spinoza on Monism*. London: Palgrave, 206-222.

Spinoza, Benedictus (1985), *The Collected Writings of Spinoza*, vol 1. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley. Princetown: Princetown University Press.

Spinoza, Benedictus (2016), *The Collected Writings of Spinoza*, vol 2. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley. Princetown: Princetown University Press.