

Handout 10: More on Spinoza's Metaphysics

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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MODES

As we have seen, for Spinoza all of what we ordinarily think of as distinct things—tables, chairs, you, and so on—are modes of, God. But what does this claim mean?

On the Cartesian picture that Spinoza is co-opting, a substance has an attribute and various modes that presuppose that attribute. A substance's attribute tells us what kind of thing it is; for Descartes there are only two attributes, thought and extension. Every other state or property of the substance, or as Descartes puts it, "everything else which can be attributed to" the substance, is a mode of that substance.¹ So, for example, consider the table. The table is (for Descartes, not Spinoza) a substance with the attribute of extension. The shape and size of the table are modes of the table—particular states or properties of the table that presuppose extension. By saying that these modes "presuppose" extension, Descartes means that it is impossible to conceive of them without conceiving of extension. To conceive of something having a certain shape or size is, in part, to conceive of it as being extended.

But Spinoza has argued that the table is not itself an extended substance, but is merely a mode of the one extended substance. It's tempting to think that this is just nonsense. How can a table be a state or property of something else?

To answer this question, let's take a step back and consider more carefully what a mode is for Spinoza. In 1d5, he defines *mode* as "that which is in something else and is conceived through something else." So given Spinoza's claim that the table is a mode, it is "in something else" and "is conceived through something else." Let's take each of these phrases in turn.

To say that the table "is in something else" implies a couple of things. First, it implies that the table was brought into existence by something else. And this is quite clearly correct: the table did not bring itself into existence; someone made it. Second, it implies that the table's continued existence depends upon something else. The table is not the explanation of its own continued existence; rather, something else is required to sustain its existence. This idea might sound strange to us, but in fact Descartes would have agreed with it. In the Third *Meditation* he writes that "the same force and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment that it lasts as would be required to create that same thing anew." For Descartes, finite substances

¹Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* I, 53.

are continually caused to exist by God. So neither of these implications of the claim that the table “is in something else” would have troubled Spinoza’s contemporaries.

To say that the table “is conceived through something else” has two related implications. First, it implies that the explanation for the table’s existence involves something distinct from the table. And given what we’ve just seen, this is no surprise. To explain how the table came into existence requires making reference to whatever made the table; to explain its continued existence requires making reference to whatever sustains it now. Second, it implies that explaining what the table *is* requires making reference to something distinct from the table as well. And this, too, seems right: in order to explain what the table is, you have to make reference to *extension*. Extension is a much more general phenomenon than the table. The table is merely one extended object; insofar as it is extended, its nature is common to many other things. So explaining the table requires conceiving of a much more general feature of reality than the table itself.

Given Spinoza’s definition of a mode, then, it is not so strange to say that the table is a mode. The strangeness arises from the fact that Spinoza seems to be saying that the relationship between the table and God is the *very same kind of relationship* as that between the table’s shape and size and the table itself. What we’ve just seen is that the table is *caused by* and *explained in terms of* something else. But this doesn’t mean that the table is a *state or property of* something else. Does it? Is Spinoza really suggesting that if A is caused by and explained in terms of something else, then A is thereby a state or property of something else?

Here is an argument that, for Spinoza, the following claims amount to the same thing:²

1. A is caused by or explained in terms of B.
2. A is a state or property of B.

Suppose that 1 and 2 describe fundamentally different kinds of relations. Each relation involves A’s being *dependent upon* B. This would mean that there are two fundamentally different ways for something to be dependent upon something else. Given the PSR, there must be an explanation for this difference. What could it be? Well, one obvious thought is that 1 is the dependence relation that obtains *between substances* and 2 is the dependence relation that obtains *between a substance and a non-substance*. But of course Spinoza has argued that there is only one substance. So if there is only one substance, we can’t appeal to this explanation to distinguish between causal-explanatory dependence on the one hand and state-property dependence on the other. What other explanation could there be? I think you will be hard-pressed to find one. And if there is no explanation for the distinction between 1 and 2, then given Spinoza’s severe version of the PSR, there *is* no distinction between 1 and 2.

Does being told that 1 and 2 describe the same relation make it less difficult to conceive of the table *as a state or property* of the one extended substance, God? I think so. Think of it this way: all it is for the table to be a property or state of the one extended substance is for the table to be caused and explained in terms of that substance.

²This argument is borrowed from Michael Della Rocca; see his *Spinoza* (Routledge 2008), pages 58 - 69, for a more detailed discussion, as well as references to further scholarly treatments of the issue.

NECESSITARIANISM

In ip16, Spinoza claims:

From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many ways; i.e. everything that can fall under an unlimited intellect. (Bennett, 9).

What can come within the scope of infinite intellect? The answer seems to be: everything possible. An infinite intellect can grasp any possible being or state of affairs. Thus in this passage Spinoza appears to be claiming that everything that is possible follows “from the necessity of the divine nature.” But what does this mean?

It is customary to distinguish between what is *possible* and what is *actual*. An actual being or state of affairs is anything that did, does, or will exist. A possible being or state of affairs is anything that *could* exist. Most of us believe that some possible states of affairs are not, never were, and never will be, actual. For example, it is natural to think that while I am not, never was, and never will be a plumber, I could have been one. Thus it is natural to think that the set of all possible beings or states of affairs is larger than the set of all actual beings or states of affairs.

Here are two interpretations for ip16. The first is very tame, and the second much less so:

IP16-A

For any possible state of affairs S , it follows from the necessity of the divine nature that S is possible.

IP16-B

For any possible state of affairs S , it follows from the necessity of the divine nature that S is actual.

According to interpretation A, Spinoza is merely stating that any possible state of affairs is possible in virtue of the divine nature which is, after all, nothing more than the nature of substance. If you want to know, for example, why it is possible that I could have been a plumber, on this interpretation ip16 is telling us that this possibility follows from the nature of substance.

According to interpretation B, Spinoza is making the bold claim that every possible state of affairs is actual. This means, for example, that if I was not, am not, and never will be a plumber, then the state of affairs *GP is a plumber* is not possible. Now consider some non-actual state of affairs like *GP is not a philosophy professor*. If the only non-actual states of affairs are the impossible ones, this state of affairs is impossible. Thus according to interpretation B, Spinoza is making the claim of necessitarianism:

NECESSITARIANISM

For any actual state of affairs S , it is impossible that $\neg S$; i.e., for any actual state of affairs S , it is necessary that S .

There are strong textual reasons for supposing that Spinoza was a necessitarian. Consider the following propositions from later in Book 1 of the *Ethics*:

IP29

In Nature there is nothing contingent; all things have been caused by the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way (Bennett, 14).

IP33

Things could not have been produced by God in any way or in any order other than that in which they have been produced (Bennett, 15).

“Contingent” usually means “actual but not necessary”. So by denying in IP29 that anything in nature is contingent, Spinoza appears to be committing himself to necessitarianism. IP33 also seems to involve such a commitment.

Because necessitarianism is such a strong and unpopular claim, some interpreters have attempted to absolve Spinoza from commitment to it. Instead, they think that Spinoza is committed only to the weaker and more common thesis of determinism:

DETERMINISM

Let S = a contingent state of affairs occurring at time t , L = the laws of nature, and C = all states of affairs obtaining prior to t . For any S , it is necessary that $L + C \rightarrow S$.

The idea behind determinism is that the laws of nature, plus everything leading up to a particular event, fully determine the occurrence of that event; i.e., given the laws and the antecedent conditions, it was necessary for that event to occur. Determinism is implied by necessitarianism, but not vice versa.

It is clear that Spinoza is committed to determinism. Suppose that, given the laws of nature and everything that has occurred until t , it were nonetheless possible for a certain event either to occur or not to occur at t . Suppose the event occurs. What explains why it occurred, instead of not occurring? Well, not the laws of nature, nor any prior events. It does not seem that anything else *could* explain its occurrence. Thus we would have a violation of the PSR: an occurrence without a complete explanation. Given Spinoza’s commitment to the PSR, he wouldn’t allow such unexplained occurrences.

How could a determinist avoid necessitarianism? There are two ways: by saying that the laws of nature are contingent, or by saying that the initial conditions in the universe are contingent. Either way, the necessity of $L + C \rightarrow S$ does not imply the necessity of S , since the antecedent $L + C$ is contingent. Is either option open to Spinoza?

Spinoza would not allow that L is contingent. The laws of nature are among what Spinoza calls “infinite modes,” and Spinoza is quite clear that infinite modes are necessary (IP21, IP23). The laws governing extended things simply follow from the nature or essence of extension, and as such are necessary; they are, in effect, true by the definition of extension. That leaves us with the possibility that some states of affairs which obtained before t are contingent. If this were so, then there was some possible state of affairs which God did not bring about. What explains why God didn’t bring about something that he could have? Given that God is infinitely powerful, it is not clear what could explain this; as IP16 says, *infinite* things follow from the divine nature. The PSR, together with God’s infinite nature, seems to rule out the possibility of contingency in C . So it seems that Spinoza cannot deny necessitarianism once he has embraced determinism.