

Spinoza's Strict Necessitarianism: Contingency and Finite Modes

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of a strict necessitarian understanding of contingency in Spinoza in explaining the existence and causation of finite modes. In current literature, Curley and Walski argue that Spinoza may allow for possible world semantics. The consequence of such a claim is that the series of finite modes could have been other than it was without violating Spinoza's claim that everything necessarily follows from the nature of God. Curley and Walski take Spinoza to implicitly offer a concept of contingency considered as conditional necessity, where the nature of God alone is insufficient to create finite modes. This paper highlights important remarks made by Spinoza with respect to God's will and intellect. In highlighting such remarks, it becomes clear that Spinoza would not grant the inclusion of possible world semantics in his ontology. Spinoza is clear there is no contingency, and it is unclear how a possible world could be truly possible without existing. As such, while possible worlds may be convenient conceptual tools, they are ultimately grounded in deficiencies of human knowledge. In clarifying Spinoza's explanation of the will, intellect, and contingency, this paper advocates for the acceptance of Garrett's suggestion for explaining the hierarchy of modes. Garrett argues that, while a particular finite mode may not follow directly from the absolute nature of God, the entire series of finite modes follows directly from it. Importantly, the paper also clarifies the main motivation behind Curley and Walski's claim, which Spinoza makes in Part II of the Ethics. Spinoza suggests that it may have been the case that some particular finite mode had not existed. In offering interpretations of the will, intellect, and contingency, Curley and Walski are found to misuse Spinoza's claim. While God's nature does not necessarily create particular finite modes, the entire series of finite modes as a whole follows directly from God's nature. Each particular mode follows necessarily from God in virtue of their parthood in the infinite series of finite modes. It becomes clear that Curley and Walski overlook necessitarian resources in Part I of the Ethics, and in doing so fail to clarify accurately the explanatory gap between infinite and finite modes. In salvaging Garrett's position, we can begin to make meaningful progress towards filling this explanatory gap, and demonstrate the superior consistency of a strict necessitarian account of contingency.

1. Introduction

Spinoza is often taken to be a necessitarian, positing that the only possible world is the actual world. Throughout the Ethics, he makes it clear there is no room for contingency in his ontology. It is argued that the order and existence of all things depends on substance, or God, who necessarily exists. The nature of God is necessary, and anything in the world follows from his nature. Curley and Garrett offer two distinct interpretations of Spinoza's contingency. I will assess their accounts of contingency on an important interpretive problem in Spinoza's Ethics. Spinoza develops a hierarchy of modes in which finite modes are given a puzzling treatment. Spinoza argues

that finite modes do not follow directly from the absolute nature of an attribute, but holds that they exist necessarily and in God. Garrett suggests that finite modes may follow from an attribute in virtue of their membership within the whole series of finite modes. Maintaining a strong necessitarian interpretation of contingency, Garrett sees no reason to interpret Spinoza as allowing for other possible worlds. Curley and Walski argue that the explanatory gap in the hierarchy commits Spinoza to the possibility of other worlds, or another series of finite modes. I will appraise Curley and Walski's suggestion for interpretation and, in doing so, will problematize Curley's understanding of contingency in Spinoza.

2. Spinoza and Necessity

Spinoza is committed to the view that there is no contingency in the world. He holds that everything has necessarily followed from God's nature, and everything has been determined to exist and to act in a definite way from the necessity of God's nature. (Spinoza IP33dem) Spinoza infers from this that, had anything been of a different nature or determined to act differently, God's nature would have been different. (Spinoza IP33dem) For Spinoza, if we were to conceive of a different nature than what actually exists, we would conceive of a nature involving a necessarily existing God, and so this nature, too, would necessarily exist. (Spinoza IP33dem) This point is particularly striking, as surely we can conceive of a possible world where something went differently. For example, it certainly seems there is a possible world where I wrote this paper from a different translation. However, Garrett and Bennet interpret Spinoza as committed to the view that everything possible is actual. (Garrett 207) They portray Spinoza as a strict necessitarian, rejecting that there are any non-actual possibilities. Garrett holds Spinoza sanctioned "Everything that falls under the infinite intellect is actual." (Garrett 207) He then adds that, "Everything that is possible falls under the infinite intellect." (Garrett 207) By hypothetical syllogism, if something is possible, it is actual. As such, the actual world contains the only possible existents, and there is no contingency.

Spinoza argues that "Things could not have been produced by God in any other way or order than is the case." (IP33dem) One may dispute that Spinoza intends the statement's application to be just the attributes and infinite modes. In this case, finite modes may be wider in their scope of possibility. However, Garrett cites the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, where "he proposes that we should 'attend to the order of Nature' (TIE 65), as the chief remedy against the formation of imaginative "fiction" concerning the existence of particular durational things..." (Garrett 210) The purpose of the passage is to argue that the "existence of particular durational things", or finite modes, must depend on the "order of Nature", or God's Nature. Otherwise, the order of Nature could not remedy fictions regarding the existence of finite modes. (Garrett 210) Curley writes, "We may say...that for Spinoza the actual world is the only possible world...Or we may say, as I should prefer to, that for Spinoza every truth is a necessary truth." (Curley, 83) Curley is justified in talking about truths rather than things, because his claims will hold for existential propositions (e.g. That apple is red). (Curley 89) He contends that "all truths are necessary, but not all truths are necessary in the same sense; some are necessary in a sense which allows, even requires, that in another equally legitimate sense they are not necessary but contingent."

(Curley 83) This is a contentious claim, as Spinoza makes indefatigable efforts to demonstrate there is absolutely no contingency.

Curley thinks Spinoza's system has two distinct senses of necessity. Some truths are "absolutely necessary, in... that their denial is explicitly or implicitly self-contradictory... But others are only relatively necessary. Their denial does not involve a contradiction, either explicitly or implicitly." (Curley 89) By this, Curley means that some truths will be necessary because their falsity would be self-contradictory, and others only necessary relative to something else. The truth of something relatively necessary "is grounded in the fact that they follow logically from other propositions which are true, propositions which give an efficient causal explanation of them." (Curley 90) In short, a relative necessity depends on some efficient causal explanation. If we are talking about existential propositions, a relative necessity denotes a thing belonging to a chain of efficient causes. Curley believes this allows for a weak necessitarian interpretation of Spinoza, where, although there is no contingency, he is taken to be less modally restrictive.

To assess whether Spinoza is a strong or weak necessitarian, it is helpful to test Curley and Garrett's interpretations against a prominent explanatory gap in Spinoza's modal system. Not only will the proceeding analysis help to clarify whose interpretation of Spinoza's contingency is more plausible, but it will bring a suggestion of Garrett's into view that makes a plausible suggestion towards a solution of the explanatory gap. Spinoza explains from the infinite essence or definition of an attribute follows an infinity of things. There are also infinite attributes of God, and so, following necessarily from his divine nature are infinite things in infinite ways. (Spinoza IP16dem) Spinoza identifies an infinite intellect which understands the totality of things in each way it may be conceived. (Spinoza IP16dem) Thus, from the necessity of the nature of God there necessarily follows everything within the scope of the infinite intellect and everything that exists (which are the same). (Spinoza IP16) Furthermore, whatever is determined to exist and to act has been determined to do so by God. (Spinoza IP28dem) Otherwise, God would not be the cause of all things. Moreover, any mode necessarily following from the absolute nature of an attribute is also infinite and eternal. (Spinoza IP28dem) However, particular things, or finite modes, do not directly follow from the absolute nature of attributes. A finite mode expresses an attribute in a definite and determinate way. (Spinoza IP25cor.) Insofar as the finite mode exists, it must be determined by God. Confusingly, a finite and determined thing could not be determined directly from the absolute nature of an attribute, as it is not infinite or eternal. (Spinoza IP28dem) Spinoza cryptically writes: "Therefore, it must have

followed, or been determined to exist and to act, by God or one of his attributes insofar as it was modified by a modification which is finite and has a determinate existence.” (Spinoza IP28dem)

Spinoza maintains that finite modes must follow or have been determined to exist and act by God or an attribute. Nevertheless, he explains the way in which this relation is achieved is through another finite mode. Spinoza also notes that there is an eternal chain of causation between the finite modes, each following necessarily from God’s nature and the mode prior to itself *ad infinitum*. (Spinoza IP28dem) Spinoza cautions the reader against taking this to mean God is the remote cause of finite modes. (Spinoza IP28schol.) While finite modes do not directly follow from God or the absolute nature of an attribute, they are still in God, or conjoined causally with God. Spinoza is unclear about how exactly finite modes are to follow from God’s nature, but not the absolute nature of an attribute. Finite modes are, according to Curley, relatively necessary, so the scope of possibility in the Ethics is important. I will first consider an insight of Garrett’s, and then a suggestion made by Curley and Walski, who I will go on to assess against textual reference. Garrett notes that, for Spinoza, finite modes follow from the attribute “insofar as it is considered to be affected by some mode.” (Garrett 196) While finite modes do not follow from the absolute nature of an attribute, this is not to be contrasted “with failing to follow from the attribute at all, but rather with following from the attribute as that attribute is considered in a different way.” (Garrett 196) In other words, one ought not interpret Spinoza as claiming that finite modes follow from anything other than an attribute, but rather that they follow from the attribute conceived in a different way. This is a contentious claim, as it is unclear why the way one conceives of the attribute will change the kinds of things that follow from it.

Garrett explains that it is entirely consistent with Spinoza’s ontology to suggest that “the whole series of finite modes follows from the absolute nature of the attributes. His claim is only that no individual finite mode follows from it.” (Garrett 198) As such, no finite mode will “follow, considered independently of its membership in this series, from the nature of an attribute.” (Garrett 198) The point, for Garrett, is that finite modes certainly depend on their membership in the series of infinite finite modes to come into being. However, insofar as the entire series of finite modes follows from the absolute nature of an attribute, then the finite modes will follow (in virtue of their membership in the series) from the attribute. As Garrett writes, “each finite mode would follow from the nature of an attribute, but only in virtue of its membership as part of the one consistently constructible or maximally perfect series of finite modes.” (Garrett 198) That is to

say, finite modes follow from the nature of an attribute in virtue of their membership in the only constructible series of finite modes. Garrett reads Spinoza as a strong necessitarian, so the actual set of finite modes will be the only set.

3. Spinoza’s Modes

Garrett argues that his suggestion for explaining the existence of finite modes as consistent with what Spinoza says in IP28, as a finite mode “would follow from an attribute only insofar as the attribute is considered to be affected by particular modes...” (Garrett 198) The result of his proposal is a suggestion that the whole series of finite modes be a whole over and above the individual finite modes. This would mean that the whole series follows directly from the absolute nature of an attribute and is consequently an infinite mode. Hence, the entire series is necessary in the regular sense Spinoza intends it, and the individual parts exist necessarily in virtue of their membership. The way we conceive of the attribute is important, as to understand finite modes, we must understand attributes as affected by the various determinate modifications of them. Insofar as we understand finite modes as following (in virtue of their membership in an infinite mode) from the nature of attributes, the proposed view is “compatible with there being only one possible total series of such modes.” (Garrett 199). Curley and Walski claim that Spinoza must concede to the notion of possible worlds. They identify two ways in which something may necessarily follow from God. Something can follow from God unconditionally, when it follows without the assistance of anything else. (Curley and Walski 245) That is to say, a mode follows unconditionally when it necessarily follows directly from the absolute nature of an attribute. (Curley and Walski 246) Infinite modes will necessarily follow from God unconditionally. Something can also follow from God conditionally, when it requires something beyond features intrinsic to God’s nature in order to actualize. (Curley and Walski 246) These will be finite modes. Curley wishes to reinterpret Spinoza as saying “Everything which falls under an infinite intellect follows in some way (either conditionally or unconditionally) from the necessity of divine nature.” (Curley and Walski 245) Everything that exists falls under the scope of the infinite intellect, all of which necessarily follows in some way from God. The way things follow from God will determine whether they are unconditionally or conditionally necessary. (Curley and Walski 246) While it seems to be purely a reiteration of Curley’s interpretation of Spinozistic contingency, they are now using the language of things rather than necessary truths.

To motivate this, Curley points to Spinoza’s argument that the essence of man (a finite mode) does not involve

necessary existence. (Spinoza IIA1) According to the order of nature, it can also happen that this or that man does exist, or that he doesn't. (Spinoza IIA1) Moreover, things could not have been produced in any other way or order than is the case. (Spinoza IP33) Thus, Curley finds it plausible to reconcile Spinoza's attack on contingency with talk about possible worlds. It is helpful to think about the direct relations finite modes actually have. That is, finite modes follow directly from other prior finite modes to infinity, and so, we can conceive of the entire chain of finite causes as the series of finite modes. Curley asks, "...if finite modes require for their explanation an infinite series of prior finite modes as their causes, in addition to the attributes and infinite modes – then why should we expect them to share the absolute necessity of their partial cause?" (Curley and Walski 253) Curley identifies finite modes as following conditionally from God insofar as attributes are only partial causes of the finite modes. Additionally, an adequate explanation of a finite mode includes the prior series of finite modes, in which there is no mode following unconditionally from an attribute. As such, finite modes directly follow only if they are taken in the context of the series of finite modes. Curley cautions against thinking that no finite mode would follow from the nature of an attribute if it were considered independently of its membership in the series of finite modes. (Curley and Walski 253) For example, Garrett suggests the series of finite modes is "one consistently constructible or maximally perfect series of finite modes", and that no particular thing outside of its context will follow necessarily. (Curley and Walski 253) Curley sustains that it may be question-begging to assume that there is exactly one constructible and maximally perfect series of finite modes. Moreover, it would seem that in establishing the actual series of finite modes as maximally perfect requires it be compared to another possible series. (Curley and Walski 253) The series of finite modes is an additional proposition required to bring about the existence of it. Importantly, this series of finite modes is determined insofar as an earlier state of the world will produce the next in a determined way given the nature of God. However, the absolute nature of an attribute is not itself enough to bring about a finite mode. This allows us to talk about possible worlds in which the series of finite modes may have been different, as it is explanatorily distinct from anything necessarily following from the absolute nature of attributes.

Spinoza's elimination of the will and a discussion about the intellect may challenge Curley's point. Spinoza makes it clear that he is avoiding any personalisation of God when he eliminates the will as that which God acts from. (Spinoza IP32cor. 2) It is not the case that God chooses to create the world, but rather that God acts from his own necessity. In other words, the only 'performative'

act of God is being itself. For Spinoza, freedom belongs only to something that exists in itself, and acts from itself. (Spinoza IA7) Thus, for God to be free, he must act from his own necessity and not from a will. Perhaps, then, the question of possible worlds loses much of its purpose if there is no act of will that ever brings the world into existence in the first place.

Given a will, God would have to choose a world according to some general principle, perhaps, adequate knowledge of the good. In this case, it is important that there be real non-existent possible worlds to consider, as it is in the comparison of possible worlds that the actual world is willed or chosen. Spinoza is insistent that finite modes necessarily follow from God's nature, even if it is in virtue of a series of finite modes. Undoubtedly, the actual series exists because God gives each mode its being and conception, however, Curley argues the way the series causally interacts with finite modes still makes a difference. It would seem that, for the distinction of conditional necessity to be a strong one, the series of finite modes would have to be one of multiple possible series. Curley does not want to close this door, as he criticizes Garrett for assuming there is only one constructible series of modes that is maximally real and perfect. However, Spinoza himself seems insistent that the actual eternal series of finite modes is the only possible one. Spinoza argues in IP30 that anything contained within the intellect, finite or infinite, must necessarily exist in nature. (Spinoza IP30dem) In nature, we know there is only one substance. So, no modes, other than those in God, can exist or be conceived of. (Spinoza IP30dem) The finite and infinite intellects must, therefore, comprehend only the attributes and modes that are actually in God. (Spinoza IP30dem) Thus, it would seem that, for Spinoza, there is no way to even truly conceive of a different possible series of finite modes than is actually the case. This is because only everything that is the case is conceivable. It seems that the elimination of God's will and Spinoza's comments about the intellect synthesize a clearer account of a strict necessitarian picture. If God had a will, then he would have to, by some principle, choose what is included in the actual world (including the series of finite modes). This would also require God to conceive of these possible series, and so, contained within the infinite intellect would be all of these conceptions. The problem with this is that all of the purported non-existent possible worlds would necessarily follow from God and, thus, exist. Spinoza avoids the conception of possible worlds in two ways. First, the elimination of will prevents God from necessarily conceiving of any non-existent possible worlds. Second, the scope of the intellect, suggesting that the only conceivable things are contained within the intellect, and everything contained within the intellect actually exists.

Therefore, if a possible world were truly conceivable (and truly possible), it would have to exist. There is still a strong temptation, however, to think we can conceive of possible worlds. Notwithstanding the temptation, Spinoza may still suggest this is a lapse in human knowledge. Perhaps it is a function of the human imagination that we consider what could have happened, when in reality all that could have happened actually exists. Perhaps, in other hypothetically conceivable possible worlds, there exists some contradiction or some absence of causation that excludes them from nature. That is to say, it may be a result of the human intellect that we 'conceive' of possible worlds, and Spinoza may suggest such notions are not useful with respect to God's nature.

4. Conclusion

In understanding the series of finite modes as a whole consisting of parts, we can conceive of it as infinite and eternal, insofar as it is an eternal and infinite chain of being. Thus, the entire series follows from the absolute nature of an attribute and, therefore, necessarily exists. Insofar as finite modes are treated as parts of a necessarily existing whole, surely each of those parts will also exist necessarily in virtue of it. However, it is not the case that 'Spencer Gravelle' follows in this way, as it is disconnected from the eternal and infinite series of causes that determine its possibility. Curley cautions against this point, suggesting that how something is conceived shouldn't make a difference for its necessity. Nevertheless, it seems the point may run deeper than this. The parts of the series may only be conceivable when they are considered within the series. To understand the full extent of how God causes things, it seems important to consider that 'Spencer Gravelle' is created only as a part of an infinitely vast state of the world, and that state of the world is itself only a temporal part of an infinite whole. There will be no conditions under which God causes the existence or non-existence of 'Spencer Gravelle' outside of its parthood in an infinite series of finite modes. Curley overlooks some important necessitarian resources from Spinoza. I have suggested that the elimination of the will and the nature of the intellect make it unlikely that Spinoza wanted to concede to any talk about possible worlds. Although it is difficult to give an account of finite modes clearer than the midday sun, more clarity seems found in a strict necessitarian reading of Spinoza like that of Garrett. While Curley attempts to block Garrett's suggestion that the series of finite modes follows directly from God's nature, I have suggested that perhaps Garrett's reading can be vindicated in the light of the aforementioned sections. Beyond a criticism of Curley and Walski's interpretation of the modality of finite modes, the inconsistencies with the text reflect an error in interpretation regarding contingency. It seems that in widening the scope of

possibility, Curley has allowed for explanation that Spinoza was clearly against. Given the truth of Curley's two senses of necessity, it certainly follows that there is more than one series of finite modes, but there is far more evidence in the text to reflect a strong necessitarian reading of Spinoza. Garrett's suggestion seems more plausible in the context of the Ethics because it remains true to the proposition that everything possible is actual. Garrett's proposal is a sign that a strict necessitarian position on contingency in Spinoza is correct, and it reveals plausible suggestions for interpretation regarding the hierarchy of modes. Unfortunately, if Spinoza ought to be read as a strict necessitarian, this leaves open many issues regarding moral responsibility. However, it is evident that Curley's interpretation of necessity and contingency is insufficient for aiding in such problems.

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