

On the Eternity of Modal Essences in Spinoza's *Ethics*

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For who can bear to feel himself forgotten?

W. H. Auden, *Night Mail*

Abstract

This thesis offers an interpretation of Spinoza's claim that the essences of modes are eternal. Based on Spinoza's modal definition of eternity and his commitment to necessitarianism, I propose that what is meant by the eternal existence of modal essences is their necessary existence insofar as they express God's eternal nature, i.e. insofar as they are contained in divine attributes. Thus, the eternity of modal essences and their corresponding modes does not constitute a difficulty for Spinoza's metaphysics, since their existence *qua* eternal and *qua* existing with a limited duration are treated as two different aspects of one and the same existence. That being the case, I argue that Spinoza holds – without contradicting his other metaphysical commitments – that for the finite time that modes and their essences exist, they exist eternally.

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Introduction

Arguably the most uncompromising early modern rationalist, Benedictus de Spinoza is known for holding numerous positions that would today be considered, if not implausible, then at least weird. Those include his promotion of *necessitarianism*, i.e. the belief that everything metaphysically possible is actual and that the actual world is the only possible world, his commitment to perhaps the strongest version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), and his panpsychism, to name a few. In this thesis, I will inquire into another *prima facie* puzzling position that Spinoza held, namely his endowing the essences of modes (i.e. of particular things) with *eternal existence*. More still, Spinoza holds at once the eternity of modal essences *and* their finite temporal existence. In other words, given that, under my reading, the essence of a thing as formulated by Spinoza is inseparable from the thing in question, it would mean that Spinoza asserts that *for the finite time that the finite modes exist, they exist eternally*. I will argue that Spinoza manages to postulate that without creating contradictions or insurmountable tensions with his other metaphysical doctrines by virtue of understanding eternal existence as a kind of *necessary* existence. To introduce the problem that I am concerned with a bit more concretely, let me provide a brief sketch of the metaphysical background of Spinoza's philosophy.

Ethics, Spinoza's *opus magnum*, presents an ontology that is exhausted by one thing – *substance* (or “God, or Nature” [*Deus, sive Natura*]). The substance has an infinite number of *modes*, i. e. its modifications, which are expressed in at least two *attributes* – extension and thought. In everyday language, one could say that God, or nature is the universe in its totality whilst modes are particular things, or discernable chunks of reality or matter. God has an eternal and infinite essence

by virtue of which he exists (EIP20)¹, i.e. he is what Spinoza calls the *cause of itself* [*causa sui*] (EID1, EIP7D). God's modes also have essences, of which God is the efficient cause (EIP25). Unlike the essence of God, the essences of God's modes (or *modal essences*) do not involve existence (EIP24), meaning that modes do not necessitate their own existence. The task I undertake in the present text is that of providing a comprehensive interpretation of Spinoza's claim on the eternity of modal essences, a claim he appears to develop most explicitly in Part V of the *Ethics*. The motivation for this effort is threefold: *firstly*, the notion of essence is closely connected to multiple fundamental metaphysical doctrines of the *Ethics*, thus pressuring the reader to understand Spinoza's theory of essence adequately; *secondly*, postulating the eternity of modal essences seems to create tensions with Spinoza's other crucial commitments, perhaps most notably with *the parallelism doctrine*; *thirdly*, and finally, there is no consensus in the secondary literature regarding various aspects of Spinoza's theory of essence, and – to my knowledge – no secondary literature that would address the eternity of modal essences directly. Let me briefly expand on these aspects in that same order before concluding the introduction with some other preliminary remarks, including a roadmap of the thesis.

¹ I am using the translation of the *Ethics* found in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, translated and edited by E. Curley (Princeton University Press, 1985). Passages from the text are referred to in the following manner: roman numerals indicate the relevant *part*; A stands for *axiom*; P – for *proposition*; D – for *definition* when it follows directly after a roman numeral, and for *demonstration* when it comes after P; C – for *corollary*; S – for *scholium*; Exp – for *explanation*; L – for *lemma*; App – for *appendix*. Thus, for instance, “EVP29” refers to proposition 29 of part five, and “EIIIP27C3” – to corollary 3 of proposition 27 of part three.

A. The Importance of Spinoza's Theory of Essence

I will illustrate my claim on Spinoza's theory of essence being closely connected to some of the central doctrines of his metaphysics with two examples, the *conatus doctrine*, and the *scientia intuitiva* doctrine.

One of the key doctrines of the *Ethics* is the *conatus doctrine*. The link between the *conatus*, or a thing's *striving* to remain in existence, and essence is clear from Spinoza's definition of the former: "The striving [*conatus*] by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (EIIIP7). Though Spinoza's use of "actual essence" rather than simply "essence" is to be elucidated if one is to provide a proper overview either of his theory of essence,² or of the *conatus* doctrine, it is already clear from the quoted proposition that knowledge of the former is required to have an adequate understanding of the latter. The concept of *conatus*, in turn, is crucially important since it is foundational for Spinoza's influential theory of affects, and performs the metaphysical work of explaining the outcomes of interactions between things, for instance, why some are harder to destroy than others.

Another vitally important link is the one between Spinoza's theory of essence and his *scientia intuitiva* (or "intuitive knowledge") doctrine, which accounts for the highest epistemic activity, or "the greatest striving of the Mind, and its greatest virtue" (EVP5). Knowing things under this kind of knowledge is also termed by Spinoza as understanding them "from the point of view of eternity". The connection here is explained by the fact that "[w]hatever the Mind understands from the point of view of eternity, it understands not from the fact that it conceives the Body's present actual

² I address this issue in section 1.2.

existence, but *from the fact that it conceives the Body's essence from the point of view of eternity*" (EVP29, emphasis mine).³ Given that, as quoted here, a mode's essence is taken to be, in some sense, eternal, and thus directly concerns the question I am focused on, I will touch on the *scientia intuitiva* doctrine more extensively in Chapter II.⁴

B. Difficulties: Mode-Essence Inseparability and the Parallelism Doctrine

Halfway through Part V of the *Ethics*, Spinoza makes a puzzling announcement – “With this I have completed everything which concerns this present life” (EVP20S) – after which he proceeds to write on the (no less puzzling) eternal character of the essences of finite modes.⁵ Perhaps this part of the treatise, which Jonathan Bennett famously characterized as “rubbish which causes others to write rubbish” (Bennett 1984, 374) culminates in EVP23, where it is said that “[t]he human Mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the Body, but something of it remains which is eternal”. One obvious problem that this proposition raises has to do with Spinoza's *parallelism doctrine*, a difficulty I will now briefly highlight.

In EIIP7 Spinoza postulates that “[t]he order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things”. As Spinoza indicates in the following scholium, “the order and connection” are to be understood as order and connection within a series of causes and effects: “whether we conceive nature under the attribute of Extension, or under the attribute of Thought,

³ Translation slightly modified, see footnote 13 on p. 24.

⁴ Intuitive knowledge is discussed in section 2.2.

⁵ I say “finite modes” because in the following proposition quoted Spinoza talks of human beings, and, more importantly, infinite modes do not constitute a theoretical difficulty in regards to their eternal existence, as I demonstrate in section 1.3.

or under any other attribute we shall find one and the same order, *or one and the same connection of causes*” (EIIP7S, emphasis mine except “or” preceding “one and the same connection of causes”). However, given that a thing’s creation or its destruction are themselves events in a series of causes and effects, it is unclear how Spinoza’s parallelism can be maintained simultaneously with the thesis that the Mind is not destroyed together with the Body. Thus, the reading attempted in the present text has the resolution of this difficulty as one of its objectives.⁶

Besides that, there is perhaps an even more intuitively graspable issue with the statement of EVP23. As I will show later, the definition of essence that Spinoza provides in EIID2 suggests that a mode’s essence is inseparable from the mode in question (“to the essence of any thing belongs that [...] without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing”). That, when added to the fact that, at least *prima facie*, modes are not eternal in the temporal sense (obviously, things get generated and fall apart), creates a puzzle.

C. Secondary literature

Though there is a sufficient amount of useful secondary literature dedicated to topics more or less closely connected to the eternity of modal essences in the *Ethics*, to my knowledge, there is no text that would address this problem directly. However, I want to provide a brief overview of the most relevant secondary literature for my thesis. It largely falls into three categories: (1) literature that concerns Spinoza’s metaphysics overall, or some doctrines of it that, though do not relate directly to my research question, are illuminating in regard to it, (2) literature on Spinoza’s theory of

⁶ This task is taken up in section 2.4.

essence, and (3) literature on eternity in Spinoza. In (1), my main sources include the works of Gilles Deleuze (1990), Yitzhak Melamed (2013, 2018), and Michael Della Rocca (2008) which provide helpful large-scale efforts interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics (though I do not necessarily agree with them on various points relating to my thesis topic), as well as Michael Griffin (2013) and Don Garrett (2018), where one can find well-conducted reconstructions of Spinoza's *necessitarianism*, the position according to which everything metaphysically possible is necessary. Curley and Walski's (1999) reply to Garrett is also valuable in the latter context. Concerning (2), the sources that I consider most useful or relevant, either in support of my interpretation, or arguing for a different one, are Thomas Ward (2011), Karolina Hübner (2015), Mogens Laerke (2016, 2017), Sanem Soyarslan (2013), and Sebastian Bender (2022). Laerke, Hübner, and Bender provide helpful insights into multiple aspects of Spinoza's theory of essences, with Laerke even touching on the issue of the essences of nonexistent modes, and Hübner making the case for a reading under which non-unique "species-essences" are allowed, though, as I will point out later, I think that the latter argument does not help in regard to the issue at hand. Ward makes an important contribution by providing the reader with a recent case for a platonizing reading of Spinoza's theory of essence, under which Spinoza is taken to not commit himself to the principle of the univocity of being, and essences are endowed with a different ontological status than the modes themselves. While it is an important contribution to the debates surrounding the concept of essence in the *Ethics*, agreeing with Laerke, I take such an approach to be mistaken. Finally, Soyarslan makes an insightful addition to understanding eternal modal essences insofar as they are connected to Spinoza's *scientia intuitiva* doctrine. In (3), I turn mostly to Bruce Baugh (2020) and Melamed (2016), as well as Chantal Jaquet (2018). All three address Spinoza's conceptualization of eternity as opposed to temporality and

duration. Baugh, relying heavily on Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza, spends little time on eternity itself, but provides helpful insight on the nature of duration, Melamed highlights Spinoza's innovation of understanding eternity in modal terms within a historical context, and Jaquet – even though I eventually disagree with her in my reading – gives a helpful attempt at an overview of eternity in the *Ethics*, paying close attention to the definition of eternity provided in EID8. Tad Schmaltz's (1997) illuminating article on infinite modes in Spinoza can be attributed to both (2) and (3), since it touches on the topics of the essences of infinite modes and their eternal existence. Infinite modes, as I show in Chapter II, play a crucial mediating role in the explanation of how finite modal essences (as caused by God and contained in the attributes) exist eternally.

Of the works mentioned, the most helpful for the present endeavor are those of Melamed (2016), Jaquet, and Laerke: Melamed – in stating that eternity in Spinoza should be understood as a necessary existence rather than a notion that is linked to temporality in any way, Jaquet – in highlighting that the eternal existence of a mode is, like its durational existence, just one aspect under which we can perceive its (one and the same) existence, and Laerke – in explaining Spinoza's remarks about nonexistent modes in a way that asserts his commitment to the principle of univocity of being. With that in mind, the reader might question the originality of this thesis. The claim that Spinoza manages to sustain both the finite existence of modes and their eternity is itself not a groundbreaking novelty, indeed, one would likely arrive at it in an attempt to draw a consistent account from Spinoza's statements on the topic. Rather, the contribution of the current text consists in spelling out how the eternal existence of modal essences is situated within the context of Spinoza's grand metaphysical picture, and how this position of Spinoza does not get him in trouble.

D. Other Preliminary Remarks

First, let me recapitulate the thesis defended. I hold that by virtue of (1) being committed to necessitarianism and (2) understanding eternal existence as a necessary existence of a thing that is the cause of itself, Spinoza manages to hold both the finite durational existence of modal essences (and their corresponding modes), as well as their eternal existence. The latter means the existence of a mode *qua* contained in God's attributes, which I interpret as being an indispensable part of the only possible total series of causes and effects, taken either under the attribute of thought or that of extension.

Secondly, a methodological note. Given that the research I am planning to undertake is a hermeneutical effort that focuses on a certain text, the method by which I will proceed in the text that follows is that of finding textual evidence in Spinoza, and connecting and interpreting the findings in accordance the reading proposed, with the help of relevant secondary literature. The primary literature, in this case, is *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I and vol. 2, translated and edited by Edwin Curley, Princeton University Press, 1985 (vol. 1) and 2016 (vol. 2).

Finally, a word on the structure of the text. Chapter I provides a general reconstruction of Spinoza's theory of essence, in the course of which I will bring in and engage with various secondary literature where it is relevant. In this part of the text I will make a case for an interpretation of EIID2 under which the definition only allows for unique essences of particulars and touch on modal essences as defined under the two attributes known to human beings (Section 1.1.), address Spinoza's usage of the terms "formal essence" and "actual essence" (Section 1.2.), and explain why the essences of infinite modes do not constitute a difficulty like those of the finite modes in regards

to their eternity (Section 1.3.). In Chapter II, I will focus on Spinoza's understanding of eternity as a kind of necessary existence, namely, the existence of a thing which is the cause of itself (i.e. God; Section 2.2.), explicate Spinoza's commitment to necessitarianism which will serve as a theoretical backdrop for arriving at eternity of modal essences and their corresponding modes (2.3.), and address Spinoza's claims on the eternity of the mind (2.4.). I will demonstrate, as a result, that in the *Ethics* the difference between a mode's (and its essence's) eternal existence and its durational existence is an aspectual difference: a finite mode *qua* mode is not eternal, however, once considered "from the point of view of eternity", i.e., as contained in God's attributes and expressing his nature, a mode and its essence are eternal.

Chapter I. Spinoza on Modal Essences

1.1. On Definitions of Essence: EIID2, Physical and Mental Definition

Despite numerous uses of the notion of essence in Part I, Spinoza provides a definition for it in EIID2:

I say that to the essence of any thing belongs 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.

I take it that this definition implies that each thing has its unique essence. There are at least a couple different ways in which one could argue for the uniqueness of modal essences. One such way is through understanding modal essences in causal terms. As Della Rocca points out, Spinoza follows the Aristotelian tradition according to which the essence of a thing is what is explained by its *real definition*, or “the definition of a thing states its essence” (Della Rocca 2008, 93). On the topic of the definition of a thing, Spinoza notes in EIP8S2 that “the true definition of each thing neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined”. In Letter 60 to Tschirnhaus, he adds: “I pay attention to one thing only: that the idea *or* definition of the thing expresses the efficient cause” (Spinoza 2016, 433). Recall also that Spinoza seems to understand the relation of being-conceived-through and that of being-caused-by as coextensive. Della Rocca shows this convincingly by appealing to EIA4 (“knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause”) and the fact that “Spinoza *defines* substance and mode in terms of conceptual connections and *on this basis* goes on to conclude (e.g. in [EIP6C] and [EIIP6]) that there cannot be causal connections between substances or between modes of different attributes”

(Della Rocca, 44). Add to that the definition of a mode as “that which is in another through which it is also conceived” (EID5), and it will become clear that “the essence of a mode is to be caused by other things” (Della Rocca 2008, 93).⁷ Or, more generally, as Della Rocca puts it, “the essence of a thing is to have certain causes” (94), and for a thing to have a certain essence means being caused or explained by other particular things, i.e., as the quote from Letter 60 above says, its real definition states its essence. To use Della Rocca’s example, if one considers that two different things, x and y , have the same essence, because these are two distinct things, there must be some property F that x has and y lacks. That property would partly explain why x is x (and not y), and thus – given the coextensiveness of what causes a thing and what makes it intelligible – F would be a part of what causes x ’s existence *qua* x , thus making x and y different in essence after all.

Another, perhaps simpler way to arrive at the uniqueness of essences of particular things is demonstrated by Bender. Accentuating the wording of EIID2, especially the second part of the definition that comes after the semicolon, Bender notes that “for Spinoza the relation between a thing and its essence is symmetrical”, thus universal essences are ruled out, since they can be conceived without their corresponding particulars, that is, in Spinoza’s terms, “conceived without the thing” (Bender, 290). In her commentary on EIID2, Soyarslan also states that the “relation of reciprocity [between an essence and the thing it is the essence of] has the important consequence that each thing has its own essence and that no two things share the same essence” (Soyarslan, 31). Likewise, Laerke states, without much elaboration, that “[e]ssences remain singular, such as Spinoza’s own basic definition of essences clearly suggests they are”, directing the reader also to

⁷ Here, “a mode” and its “essence” respectively are used in a general sense: the essence of an unspecified mode is to be caused by other things, but of course, the essence of a particular mode is stated through its particular causes.

EIIP10CS, where Spinoza practically restates the definition with all the same clauses that signify a reciprocal relation between a thing and its essence (Laerke 2017, 21).

However, Hübner made perhaps the strongest available case against the exclusively particularist reading of EIID2, which has to be addressed. The main motivation for assuming some sort of more general species-essences that pertain to multiple particular things is Spinoza's usage of "nature" (which, alongside "form", is used synonymously with "essence") in cases like EIVP36S (where "to know God" is described as "a good that is common to all men, and can be possessed equally by all men insofar as they are of the same nature") or EIVP35D ("insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, they must do only those things that are good for human nature, and hence, for each man"). However, one must also consider the fact that Spinoza's ontology only allows for particulars (Hübner, 8-9), expressed in the *Ethics*, for instance, in EIIP40S1, where Spinoza highlights how ideas of universals are formed in human beings "because so many images (e.g. of men) are formed at one time in the human Body that they surpass the power of imagining [...] And [the mind] expresses this by the word *man*, and predicates it of infinitely many singulars. For, as we have said, it cannot imagine a determinate number of singulars". However, Spinoza seems to also allow for ideas of universals to not necessarily be formed on faulty grounds: one can form universal notions "from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things" (EIIP40S2, III). But importantly, even if ideas of species-essences are based on common notions and true properties of things, they still enjoy only *objective* – i.e. mind-dependent – being, whilst *formal* – or extra-intellectual – being is reserved only for particulars.⁸ Hübner recognizes that herself, stating that our habit of formulating general ideas about certain classes of entities that fit the

⁸ The Cartesian distinction between formal and objective reality is addressed in greater detail in the following section.

description of “species-essences” is “something like an innate ability or a spontaneous tendency of finite minds to abstract, compare, and generalize” (19). And though Hübner’s account indeed makes sense of some of the occasions on which Spinoza uses “essence” or “nature” in a clearly non-singular way, I think that such “species-essences”, if anything, are characteristic products of the “second kind of knowledge” (or “reason”), and thus are proper instances of Spinoza’s epistemology rather than his ontology. Spinoza describes such notions as “Metaphysical beings, *or* universals, which we are used to forming from particulars” (EIIP48S). And, as Spinoza says in EIIP40S1, “Those notions they call *Universal*, like Man, Horse, Dog, etc.” signify confused ideas, and the most general universals, in scholastic tradition called *transcendentals*, “like Being, Thing and something” are nothing but “ideas that are confused in the highest degree”. I take it that the fact that only unique essences possess formal reality is the reason why Spinoza says in EIP8S2 that “if 20 men exist in nature [...], it will not be enough [...] to show the cause of human nature in general”. Note how he adds in the following sentence that “the cause why these 20 men exist and consequently, *why each of them exists*, must necessarily be outside of them” (EIP8S2).

Essence as defined by EIID2 is nothing of the “species-essence” sort but is a thing like all other formally real things. One thing that confirms this is the fact that Spinoza gives a *physical definition* of essence in what is traditionally referred to as the “physical digression” of Part II, where the essence of a body is defined as a certain *fixed ratio of motion and rest* that is held between parts of the body, giving that body the status of an *individual* (EIIL3A2”D, EIIL4). I struggle to see how one could draw a parallel from this to a case of “species-essences” of like things like “men”. Overall, in providing a physical definition of essence, Spinoza seems to proclaim it to be a mode: a modal essence, like all other things, is caused to exist by God (EIP25). The reader also receives what looks

like a definition of a modal essence under the attribute of thought, where it is an “idea, which expresses the essence of the body under a species of eternity, *a certain mode of thinking*, which pertains to the essence of the Mind, and which is necessarily eternal” (EVP23, emphasis mine).

Reading a mode’s essence as unique and inseparable from its corresponding mode explains why Spinoza characterizes a thing’s ceasing to exist as an event in which it loses its essence or takes on another essence. Consider, for instance, Spinoza’s description of Seneca’s suicide in Part IV: “...hidden external forces so dispose his imagination, and so affect his Body, that *it takes on another nature, contrary to the former*, a nature of which there cannot be an idea in the Mind (by [E]IIP10)” (EIVP20S, emphasis mine). This is why, a thing’s essence is what makes a thing what it is: the essence of x is why it is x , and not y .

1.2. On “Formal” and “Actual” Essence

One can be tempted to interpret EIP25 as saying that God does not cause modal essences to exist but rather causes them to be *instantiated*. Such an interpretation would usually assume that modal essences, when they are not instantiated, have some kind of being that is different from existence, thus proposing a platonic view of modal essences. For instance, this is exactly what Ward does, basing his view on Spinoza’s seemingly opposing usage of “formal essence” [*essentia formalis*] and “actual essence” [*essentia actualis*], and stating that formal essences are “produced by the divine essence *prior to and independent of the creation of finite modes*” and that finite modes are their formal essences “actualized” (Ward, 21, emphasis mine). Similarly, Schmaltz holds that “the formal essence

of a thing (as opposed to its actual essence) does not presuppose the actual existence of that thing” (Schmaltz, 216). This presents me with a chance to comment on this important pair of notions.

Contrary to platonizing interpretations like that of Ward, I agree with Deleuze who read Spinoza as a philosopher belonging to “the great tradition of univocity” (Deleuze, 48). This means that Spinoza is committed to the principle of univocity of being, i.e. that in his metaphysics things either exist or they don’t, with no room for any middle ground like the realm of the possible, *or* that existence is said of all existing entities in one and the same sense. The first thing one can think of in support of this claim is EIP25S which states that “God must be called the cause of all things *in the same sense* in which he is called the cause of himself” (emphasis mine). Given that *cause of itself* is defined as that which necessarily exists (EID1), God causes himself *to exist* and not to be instantiated, since any pre-instantiated state of God is impossible. Thus, by the “in the same sense” clause, God must cause all things (and their essences, as EIP25 states) to exist. On a similar note, in EIP33S, one of the propositions that explicitly pronounce Spinoza’s commitment to necessitarianism, Spinoza rejects any talk of the potential or possible as an ontological category, stating that we only call a thing “contingent or possible” because “the order of causes is hidden from us”. Let me now return to the notions of formal and actual essence.

Given that Spinoza is a Cartesian,⁹ one would understandably lean towards reading “formal” as opposed to “objective” rather than “actual”. The distinction between formal and objective reality is presented, for instance, in Descartes’ *First Set of Replies*. As Descartes puts it, ““objective being’ *simply means being in the intellect*”, following that up with an example of one having an idea of the

⁹ Indeed, the first and only work to be published in Spinoza’s lifetime under his name is Descartes’ “*Principles of Philosophy*”, a detailed and revisionary treatment of Descartes’ metaphysics.

Sun, where “the idea of the Sun is the Sun itself existing in the intellect – *not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens*, but objectively existing, i. e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect” (CSM II, 74-75, emphasis mine). Thus, formal being is possessed by a thing insofar as it *exists* or is *actual* (CSM II, 28), but objective being is the being possessed by a thing insofar as it is within intellect. As Laerke shows, Spinoza, too, opposes *formal essence* to *objective being*, if anything (Laerke 2017, 24-25). Thus, though (by EIP16) all things have objective being because they are in God’s intellect (i.e. God, unsurprisingly omniscient, has ideas of all things), they also have formal being insofar and so long as they exist. The difference is that things have formal being not insofar as they are contained in the divine intellect but rather insofar as they are contained in God’s attributes.¹⁰ One might be tempted to think of those as the same, since all ideas are in God’s intellect, however, God’s intellect is not equal to the attribute of thought, since, as Spinoza explains in Letter 64 to Schuller (Spinoza 2016, 439), divine (or “absolutely infinite”) intellect is itself a mode of thought, albeit an infinite one.

Finally, if “formal” just means existing or real in an extra-intellectual manner, why use “actual essence”? Laerke points out that besides the famous EIIIP7 where the actual essence of a thing is equated to the “striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being” (the statement of the so-called *conatus doctrine*), and EIVP4D, where it is used similarly, the notion does not come up anywhere else in the *Ethics*. He demonstrates, I think convincingly, that “Spinoza uses the term ‘actual’ to qualify both essence and existence”, and that in both cases “actuality adds nothing new to what it qualifies but only serves the purpose of highlighting a specific aspect already implied in the

¹⁰ The interpretation of being contained in God’s attributes is where I slightly digress from Laerke, as will be explicated in section 2.4.

notions of essence and existence” (Laerke 2017, 37). The aspect in question is that of the causal properties of a mode as dictated by its essence viewed under the *conatus doctrine* (i.e. which affects it can withstand and produce, etc.). The fact that the adjective “actual” does not come up in further reiterations of EIIP7 (Laerke 2017, 34) testifies to the fact that actuality is implied. Now I will turn to infinite modes in order to conclude this chapter’s presentation of Spinoza’s theory of modal essences.

1.3. Note on Infinite Modes

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza distinguishes between finite and infinite modes. Before approaching the properties of infinite modes, first one has to take into account the two senses in which Spinoza uses the term “infinite”. As he explains in EID6Exp, an infinite thing is either “absolutely infinite” or “infinite in its own kind”. The only absolutely infinite thing is the substance since it has infinite attributes of it (of which every single one has nothing in common with the others: see ELA5, EIP2D, and EIP10S), and all other infinite things are only infinite in their own kind. It is clear in the case of modes since each mode is a mode of a certain attribute, and thus even an infinite mode, say, of extension, though being infinitely extended, is in a sense limited by being contained in the attribute of extension alone. In other words, one can rightfully deny other attributes of it. However, “if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and *involves no negation pertains to its essence*” (EID6Exp, emphasis mine).

Spinoza introduces infinite modes in EIP21, which reads: “All the things which follow from the absolute nature of any of God’s attributes have always had to exist and be infinite, *or* are, through

the same attribute, eternal and infinite”. As noted by Schmaltz, in the context of modes, following “from the absolute nature” of an attribute is opposed to following “from that attribute as modified by a finite thing” (i.e. following from other finite mode); Spinoza demonstrates this by pointing out the fact that in the former case, only the nature of the attribute could limit what follows from it, and since only a finite thing can limit another finite thing (by EID2), what follows from the nature of an attribute must necessarily be infinite (Schmaltz, 214).

In the aforementioned Letter 64, Spinoza makes a further distinction concerning infinite modes: there are (1) infinite modes that are “produced immediately by God”, and (2) “those produced by the mediation of some immediate modification” (Spinoza 2016, 439). Usually in Spinoza scholarship these two kinds are referred to as *immediate* and *mediate infinite modes* accordingly. EIP21 clearly states that at least all immediate infinite modes are eternal (and, on my interpretation of EIID2, the same goes for their essences), and EIP22 says the same of “[w]hatever follows from some attribute of God insofar as it is modified by a modification which, through the same attribute, exists necessarily and is infinite” (i.e., of mediate infinite modes). Oddly, Spinoza decides to leave out “eternal” this time, though the demonstration of this proposition “proceeds in the same way as the demonstration of the preceding one” (EIP22D). Given this, as well as the fact that Spinoza’s only example of a mediate infinite mode is “the face of the whole Universe, which, *however much it may vary in infinite ways, nevertheless always remains the same*” (Spinoza 2016, *ibid.*, emphasis mine), I take it that mediate infinite modes are also eternal. It is hard to see how a mode produced by a (by definition) eternal attribute and its eternal and infinite mode could itself

not be eternal. If both immediate and mediate infinite modes are eternal, so are their essences, which is why it is only the finite modes that concern me in the present text.¹¹

1.4. Conclusion of Chapter I

This chapter presented a few core theses of Spinoza's theory of essence, more specifically, in regard to essences of modes. In section 1.1., I provide a case for a reading of EIID2 as a definition that commits Spinoza to uniqueness essences and thus rules out species-essences, though the latter possess objective reality and thus can be epistemologically useful. Following this, in 1.2. I comment on Spinoza's usage of "formal essence" and "actual essence", demonstrating that the two are not opposed in Spinoza given his inheritance of the metaphysical terms "formal" and "objective" from Descartes, as well as his commitment to the principle of univocity of being, thus rejecting any platonizing interpretations of "formal essence" as a sort of un-actualized essence. Finally, I address infinite modes in 1.3. in order to show that they are of no interest directly in the present inquiry since Spinoza explicitly posits them to be eternal without conceptual or intuitive difficulties that arise in the case of the eternity of finite modes. However, this section was necessary, given that infinite modes play an important role once Spinoza's necessitarianism is considered, as will be explicated in the following chapter.

¹¹ The reader could notice that in EIP21 Spinoza talks of the eternity of infinite modes as linked to duration ("*have always had to exist* and be infinite"), contrary to how I claimed to understand eternity in the Introduction. This peculiarity is addressed in Section 2.2., after my reading of Spinoza's notion of eternity is introduced. Subsequent sections explain how infinite modes, though *sempiternal*, are *eternal* in the proper, modal sense.

Chapter II. Eternity

2.1. Preamble: *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*

Imagine a musical score that – instead of being written in the usual form of a book where one has to flip its pages to progress from its opening note to the last one – is written down in such a manner that the note staff makes a circle, complete and nowhere interrupted. It would then be up to the performer to decide where to begin the piece. The *Ethics* – both the text of the work, and the grand metaphysical account it presents – is akin to such a score, where the key doctrines are interconnected and it is up to the interpreter to decide on the starting point: should one explain Spinoza's ontology “top-down”, starting with the necessarily existing God and going from there to his modes, or “bottom-up”, starting, maybe more intuitively, with the modes, and then arriving at God, is their own decision. One could even, so to say, start in the middle, with the attributes, as those that the divine essence consists of and also that which contains all the modes. The difficulty is accentuated by the fact that the tripartite structure of substance, attributes, and modes, is basically the structure *of* the substance, since there is nothing else in the universe, as substance *is* the universe (or “nature”). This peculiarity – that in Spinoza one utilizes a plethora of different concepts without trespassing any ontological thresholds – is why Deleuze & Guattari characterized Spinoza as “the vertigo of immanence” (Deleuze & Guattari, 48). Perhaps, nowhere is this feature of Spinoza's metaphysics more apparent than when it comes to his notion of eternity. What I am trying to prepare the reader for is the fact that eventually the key distinctions drawn in this chapter, though necessary and important, are *aspectual* rather than *real* ones. To understand what I mean by an aspectual distinction, consider one that will be quite helpful in the context of this chapter, namely the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, “producing” or “naturing nature” and

“produced” or “natured nature” accordingly (recall that one of the meanings of *natio* is “birth”). In

EIP29S, Spinoza explains the distinction as follows:

For from the preceding I think it is already established that by *Natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, *or* such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, i. e. (by [EI]P14C1 and [EI]P17C2), God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause.

But by *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, *or* from any of God’s attributes, i.e., all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.

Thus, one and the same nature can be either *natura naturans* or *natura naturata* depending on the conceptual optic one decides to approach reality with.

2.2. On the Definition of Eternity and Intuitive Knowledge

Spinoza defines eternity in EID8. It is useful to consider both the definition and the explanation that follows:

By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing.

Exp.: For such existence, like the essence of a thing, is conceived as an eternal truth, and on that account cannot be explained by duration or time, even if the duration is conceived to be without beginning or end.

The concluding remark of the explanation instantly signifies a crucial aspect of Spinoza’s understanding of eternity, namely, that it is *not* to be taken as *sempiternity*, that is, an intratemporal existence at all moments of all time. Instead, eternity is characterized as a kind of necessary existence. Indeed, Spinoza returns to EID8 towards the very end of the *Ethics*, highlighting that “Eternity is

the very essence of God as this involves necessary existence” (EVP30D), and notes in EIP33S2 that “in eternity, there is neither *when*, nor *before*, nor *after*”.

Instead, eternity is defined in modal terms. *Prima facie* puzzling “existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing” is existence of a self-necessitating being, i.e. God that is the cause of himself, as pointed out by Melamed (Melamed 2016, 156-157). Then why not just define eternity as “existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from God as the cause of himself”? The seemingly glaring circularity of the definition can be explained by the fact that it is placed in the text before it is demonstrated that a substance exists necessarily as something which is the cause of itself (EIP7), that God is that substance, and that there is, and could be, only one substance (EIP14). After all, the “geometric order” of the *Ethics*, even if it actually does not succeed at this, is used in attempt to write a book in which the order of presentation is the same as the explanatory order of its contents.

If EID8 is just a characterization of God’s existence, how does Spinoza postulate the eternity of modal essences? Perhaps eternity, as per Jaquet’s reading, “is a property that substance and modes have in common” (Jaquet, 371)? Spinoza seems to reject this explicitly in his famous Letter 12 to Meyer, where eternity and durational existence are clearly delineated, the former as belonging to the substance, the latter – to its modes:

I call the affections of Substance Modes. Their definition, *insofar as it is not the very definition of Substance*, cannot involve any existence. So even though they exist, we can conceive them as not existing. From this it follows that when we attend only to the essence of modes, and not to the order of the whole of Nature, we cannot infer from the fact that they exist now that they will or will not exist later, or that they have or have not existed earlier. From this it is clear that *we conceive the existence of Substance to be entirely different from the existence of Modes*.

The difference between Eternity and Duration arises from this. For *it is only of Modes that we can explain the existence by Duration*. But [we can explain the existence of Substance by Eternity, i.e., the infinite enjoyment of existing, *or* (in bad Latin) of being. (Spinoza 1985, 202, emphasis mine)

Through the crucial addition – “insofar as [the definition of modes] is not the very definition of Substance” – Spinoza both (1) asserts that modes *qua* modes are not eternal, but also (2) implicitly suggests that there is a way in which it would not be wrong to proclaim them to be eternal, which would somehow define modes with “the very definition” of substance. Let me address these two moments in order.

Firstly, why are modes *qua* modes not eternal? In the beginning of the quoted excerpt, Spinoza basically restates EIP24 – “The essence of things produced by God does not involve existence”, since “that whose nature involves existence (considered in itself), is its own cause, and exists only from the necessity of its nature” (EIP24D). Clearly, a finite mode is not a cause of itself but is instead caused to exist in a certain way by other finite modes: as Spinoza puts it a few propositions later, each “singular thing, *or* any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence [...] and so on, to infinity” (EIP28). *Prima facie* it contradicts what I said of infinite modes in section 1.3. However, as Melamed notices, in his discussion of infinite modes in EIP21-23, Spinoza, despite defining eternity in atemporal terms, characterizes the eternity of infinite modes as sempiternal existence (Melamed 2016, 158-161). This is evident, for instance, in Spinoza using the phrase “suppose that at some time [God’s idea, i.e. immediate infinite mode of thought] *did not exist or will not exist*” in his *reductio* demonstration, as well as in the resulting claim that whatever “follows necessarily from

the absolute nature of some attribute of God, *cannot have a determinate duration*, but through the same attribute is eternal” (EIP21D, emphasis mine), signifying that in this case eternity is understood as an indeterminate, limitless duration, i.e. sempiternal existence. This sempiternal usage of “eternity” appeared in Spinoza’s earlier works and can be understood, as Melamed puts it, as a “second best” notion of eternity that is still “altogether different” from eternity proper as found in God (Melamed 2016, 160-161).¹²

Then, how can one say of a mode that it is eternal? To refer to such a way of approaching a mode Spinoza uses the phrase *sub specie aeternitatis*. Curley, in effort to stay as close to the original text as possible, translates it literally as “under a species of eternity”, but given that *specie* here is the ablative of *species*, which in turn means “sight” or “appearance” (probably semantically related to the greek *eidos*), I use “from the point of view of eternity” so as to retain the optical undertone of the original phrase.¹³ Though such an approach is first described in Part II, Spinoza provides a helpful explanation in Part V, where knowing or understanding a mode from the point of view of eternity is explicitly and extensively treated. In EVP29S, he says that

We conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, *or* real, we conceive from the point of view of eternity, and to that extent they involve the eternal and infinite essence of God (as we have shown in [E]IIP45 and [EII]P45S).¹⁴

¹² While this is true of infinite modes *qua* modes, I will later show that modes are also properly eternal once considered to be contained within (and following from) God’s attributes, thus making it the case that infinite modes are both *sempiternal* and *eternal*. Keeping in mind that the present text commits itself only to the *Ethics*, I will continue using eternity in the sense in which it is defined in EID8.

¹³ All citations from the *Ethics* that include *sub specie aeternitatis* are modified in this regard.

¹⁴ Anticipating a possible objection, I will add that this does not come in tension to Spinoza’s commitment to univocity of being, since he does not claim that there are two different kinds of reality, but that “*we conceive* things as actual in two ways”.

The first of the mentioned ways to conceive a thing as actual, “in relation to a certain time and place”, is clearly signifying durational existence, since for Spinoza time is merely a mental device humans use to determine duration, or, as he puts it in Letter 12, “Measure, Time, and Number are nothing but Modes of thinking, or rather, of imagining” (Spinoza 1985, 203). The latter remark is added because time arises from mere experiential regularity (see, for instance, EIIP44C1S), and thus it is based on experiences that follow “without any intellectual order” (EIIP40S2). As Baugh shows, instead of such notions as “before” and “after” a proper understanding of duration would require to use “sufficient reason” and “conclusion” accordingly, or cause and effect (Baugh, 215).

Let me now address conceiving things as actual from the point of view of eternity. EIIP45, which Spinoza refers to, reads: “Each idea of each body, or of each singular thing which actually exists, necessarily involves an eternal and infinite essence of God”. It is proved through noticing that singular things can be conceived only with God as their cause (recall that by EIID2 a thing cannot be conceived without its essence, and that the definition of a thing states its essence *or* its cause), considered under the attribute of which the mode in question is a mode of. Given that each attribute involves God’s eternal and infinite essence (since an attribute is what constitutes it by EID4), an idea of a singular thing necessarily involves it. In the following Scholium, Spinoza adds:

By existence here I do not understand duration, i.e. existence insofar as it is conceived abstractly, and as a certain species of quantity. For I am speaking of the very nature of existence, which is attributed to singular things because infinitely many things follow *from the eternal necessity of God’s nature* in infinitely many modes (see [E]IP16). I am speaking, I say, of *the very existence of singular things insofar as they are in God*. For even if each one is determined by another singular thing to exist in a certain way, *still the force by which each one perseveres in existing follows from the eternal necessity of God’s nature*. (EIIP45S, emphasis mine)

In a word, to conceive a thing from the point of view of eternity is to think of it insofar as it is *in* God, who is the cause of himself, i.e. a being whose nature necessitates its existence. Note that Spinoza highlights that we can perceive finite things existing “from the eternal necessity of God’s nature”. This way of knowing things is what he calls “intuitive knowledge” [*scientia intuitiva*] or “the third kind of knowledge”. Characterized in EVP25 as “The greatest striving of the Mind, and its greatest virtue”, intuitive knowledge is explained as the kind of knowledge that “proceeds from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge *of the essence of things*” (EVP25S, emphasis mine). Once one recalls that (1) an attribute is what constitutes God’s essence, and (2) that “actual essence” of the thing is its striving to persevere in existence, it is clear that Spinoza’s characterization of intuitive knowledge here is in line with EIIP45S: “For even if each one is determined by another singular thing to exist in a certain way, still the force by which one perseveres in existing follows from the eternal necessity of God’s nature.”

As it is also clearly evident from EIIP45S, intuitive knowledge *or* knowing things from the point of view of eternity is based on Spinoza’s commitment to necessitarianism, since what is known in intuitive knowledge is nothing but the “eternal necessity of God’s nature” manifested in infinitely many modes. Now I shall proceed to explicate Spinoza’s necessitarianism, which serves as a theoretical background for understanding the eternal aspect of the existence of modes and their essences.

2.3. Necessitarianism

With propositions like EIP16 (“From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes”), EIP29 (“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”), and EIP33 (“Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced”), it should come as no surprise that Spinoza holds that everything is necessary. However, it is a subject of a polemic whether Spinoza’s necessitarianism implies a belief that the actual world is *the only* possible world (or, alternatively, whether Spinoza’s necessitarian model allows for a plurality of possible worlds that could come into being). When I talk about Spinoza’s necessitarianism, I affirm that (1) what is meant by necessitarianism is the view that the actual world is necessarily the only possible world, and that (2) the necessity in question is a *metaphysical* one. The latter means that though different worlds *per se* can be imagined without contradiction (that is, they are *logically possible*, or their concept doesn’t involve a contradiction within itself), with Spinoza’s metaphysical commitments in place, they are impossible.

The main proponents of such a position, according to which in Spinoza everything that is metaphysically possible is actual, are Garrett and Griffin. Contrary to them, Curley and Walski hold that there is a plurality of worlds (i.e. of total series of modes) that are in agreement with God’s nature. Curley and Walski mainly rely on the fact that Spinoza differentiates between the necessity of God as a *causa sui* and that of modes as those which have God as its cause (Curley & Walski, 246): God is the being that exists by virtue of his nature alone, but the “essence of things produced by God does not involve existence” (EIP24). That is why, when defining freedom and necessity, Spinoza

distinguishes between a thing “which exists from the necessity of its nature alone” (which he calls “free”, of course only such thing is God), and a thing that is “called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner” (EID7). Accordingly, Griffin calls these two different ways in which a thing might be necessary *intrinsic* and *extrinsic*, a terminology I will adopt in the present text. Curley and Walski treat extrinsic necessity as a weaker kind of necessity and claim that Spinoza asserts causal determinism of modes rather than absolute necessity of the actual world in all its minute details, promoting so-called “moderate necessitarianism”. However, as Griffin notes, it is “unclear how the fact that the necessity is derivative (extrinsic, in my terminology) should make it less strong” (Griffin, 74). It seems rather that intrinsic and extrinsic necessity are not different in their strength, and being intrinsically necessary does not mean necessary existence in the strongest sense of the word. Instead, “absolute necessity is the strongest sense of the necessity available in Spinoza’s system”, and it is absolute necessity that is equal to the necessity of contemporary modal logics (Griffin, 73). As for the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic necessity, Griffin explains it as follows:

“X is intrinsically necessary” is shorthand for “X is absolutely necessary because X’s existence follows from its essence.” So X does transmit its necessity – its absolute necessity – to its logical consequences. And “X is extrinsically necessary” is shorthand for “X is absolutely necessary because X’s existence is entailed by something absolutely necessary”. (ibid.)

If it is the same absolute necessity that characterizes the existence of God and his modes, the latter must be eternal given EID8. However, what needs clarification is how – in Spinoza’s system of substance, attributes, and modes – the necessity of the divine nature is transmitted to modes. Particularly, the difficulty here is the postulation made in EIP28, according to which finite modes can only exist and be determined to produce certain effects insofar as they are caused by other finite

modes, “and so on, to infinity”. What serves as the missing link between attributes and finite modes are infinite modes.

An immediate infinite mode as that which follows from the absolute nature of an attribute (EIP21) must be absolutely necessary. A mediate infinite mode (i.e. one that is produced by an attributed insofar as it is modified by an immediate infinite mode) must also be absolutely necessary since both the attribute and the immediate infinite mode in question that produce it are absolutely infinite. The only mediate infinite mode that Spinoza explicitly introduces is the “face of the whole universe [*facies totius universi*]” of Letter 64, which “however much it may vary in infinite ways, *nevertheless always remains the same*” (emphasis mine). Clearly, Spinoza is talking about the same thing when in the physical digression of Part II he says that “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*” (EIIP13L7S, emphasis mine). An individual is defined as an aggregate of bodies that are organized in “a certain fixed manner”, i.e. with a fixed ratio of motion and rest, or an essence taken under its physical definition (EIIP13L3A2”Def).

One could say that because the bodies that make up the infinite individual or the face of the whole universe, can vary in infinite ways without changing the individual itself, it comes to support Curley and Walski’s claim. However, by EIP4 two things are distinct “either by a difference in the attributes of the substances or by a difference in their affections”. The latter are clearly modes since a mode is defined as “the affections of a substance” (EID5), thus if the infinite individual would have included a different set of finite modes, or was a different total series of modes, it would have been a different individual. Therefore, because the infinite individual is absolutely necessary, the actual

world is the only possible world. This is how – returning to understanding modes from the point of view of eternity – modes can be said to “involve the eternal and infinite essence of God” (EVP29S).

Before I will proceed to conclusion, there is one more difficulty to be addressed, which I will turn to now, namely, Spinoza’s position of the eternity of the mind.

2.4. “The Human Mind Cannot Be Absolutely Destroyed with the Body”

Part V of the *Ethics* is probably the most eloquent and beautiful section of the treatise. Subtitled “On the Power of the Intellect, *or* on Human Freedom”, it sketches out the final goal towards which one should strive – blessedness, or “Freedom of Mind” – and brings the book to its famous closing sentence: “But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare” (EVP42S). Unfortunately, this part of the text is just as enigmatic as it is poetic. A reader realizes that she is receiving a handful to interpret once Spinoza boasts in EVP20S that he has “completed everything which concerns this present life” and that after this threshold “it is time now to pass to those things which pertain to the Mind’s duration without relation to the body”. Already at this point, two considerable problems can be detected: (1) as I noted in the introduction, Spinoza’s proclamation of the mind outliving the body seems to be violating the parallelism of EIID2, creating a difficulty which has to be addressed and (2) this existence of the mind that is “without relation to the body” is characterized in terms of duration. The latter aspect is particularly puzzling, keeping in mind Spinoza’s explicit urge *not* to understand eternity in temporal terms, and adding to it the fact that in EVP23 it is said that “The human Mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the Body, but

something of it remains which is *eternal*” (emphasis mine). To add to the confusion, in the demonstration of this proposition Spinoza says the following:

But we do not attribute to the human Mind any duration that can be defined by time, *except insofar as it expresses the actual existence of the Body*, which is explained by duration, and can be defined by time, i.e. (by [E]IIP8C), we do not attribute duration to it except while the Body endures. However since what is conceived, with a certain eternal necessity, though God’s essence itself (by [EV]P22) is nevertheless something, this something that pertains to *the essence of the Mind will necessarily be eternal*, q.e.d. (EVP23D, emphasis mine)

To clear things up, Spinoza adds in the following scholium, that

There is, as we have said, *this idea, which expresses the essence of the body from the point of view of eternity, a certain mode of thinking, which pertains to the essence of the Mind, and which is necessarily eternal*. And though it is impossible that we should recollect that we existed before the Body – since there cannot be any traces of this in the body, and eternity can neither be defined by time nor have any relation to time – still, *we feel and know by experience that we are eternal*. For the Mind feels those things that it conceives in understanding no less than those it has in the memory. For the eyes of the mind, by which it sees and observes things, are the demonstrations themselves. (EVP23S, emphasis mine)

The crucial clue that Spinoza leaves is his mention of EIIP8C, which states that “ideas of singular things, *or* of modes, that do not exist must be comprehended in God’s infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things, *or* modes, are contained in God’s attributes”. God’s infinite idea, or his intellect, is used as an example of an immediate infinite mode in EIP21. Spinoza highlights in EIIP8D that what exists is “objective being, *or* ideas”, not the things themselves. In order to affirm this and not violate the parallelism doctrine of EIID2, one would have to hold that while the nonexistent things have objective being in God’s intellect, they do not have *formal* being. This is quite a puzzling claim to make, however, it appears to me as the best way to make sense out of the durational aspect of the mind’s *postmortem* existence. To my knowledge, Laerke is the only

author who has developed a reading of the immortality of the mind and the nonexistent modes of such sort. His reading hinges on Spinoza's formulation of the PSR as found in EIP11D2 ("For each thing there must be assigned a cause, *or* reason, as much for its existence, as for its nonexistence") and holds that when a thing does not exist it is conceived by God "*qua* non-existing by virtue of him conceiving also the determinate reasons of its non-existence" (Laerke 2016, 273).

His reading is praiseworthy for its conceptual creativity. Laerke also interprets a nonexistent mode being contained in its respective attribute in a similar manner, relying on the statement found in EIIP7C, namely that "whatever follows formally from God's infinite nature follows objectively in God from his idea in the same order and with the same connection". Thus, as he puts it, one should understand nonexistent modes "contained in the attributes in a determinate way *qua* excluded from existing" (Laerke 2017, 30). In an example he provides, adequately comprehending how a nonexistent ice cream that was eaten by me the other day is contained in an attribute would mean having as the object of one's thought the "ice-cream *qua* eaten, [...] expressed in the attributes in virtue of my existence as the cause of its disappearance" (31).

While I am postulating something essentially similar, I prefer to put it in a slightly different manner. I understand a mode being contained in an attribute as being a part of the total causal series of modes under the said attribute (i.e., being part of the infinite mode of the attribute in question). Given that such an infinite mode is produced directly from the nature of an attribute, it is eternal (both in the proper sense since it follows from God's nature, and sempiternally insofar as it is a mode). An infinite attribute as the infinite individual has in itself the infinity of finite modes which constitute its parts, thus making it the case that the infinity of finite modes is, in a sense, produced all at once, once the infinite mode of that attribute is put into place. Thus, infinite modes play a

crucial role in Spinoza's metaphysics, bringing together the two aspects of finite modes' existence: both their eternal existence insofar as they are indispensable parts of the absolutely necessary infinite mode (i.e., a total causal series of finite modes), and their durational existence insofar as each finite mode is caused to exist in a determinate manner and with a certain duration by other finite modes. This is what I refer to when I am saying that for the finite duration that finite modes exist, they exist eternally.

The *prima facie* very confusing position that Spinoza holds on the eternity of the mind can thus be explained as follows. The part of the mind that contains adequate ideas is sempiternal insofar as those ideas are part of God's intellect (i.e. they have objective being within God's idea), and the said part is also eternal since (by EVP23S) it expresses the essence of the corresponding body from the point of view of eternity (i.e. it is formally contained in the attribute of thought, just as the essence of the body in question is contained in the attribute of extension, thus complying to EIID2).

2.5. Conclusion of Chapter II

This Chapter is concerned with the conceptual core of the thesis, namely, Spinoza's notion of eternity and its application to the notion of modes and their essences. In section 2.1., I introduced Spinoza's distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, which is important because it maps neatly on the distinction between the eternal existence of a mode and its durational existence, accordingly. In section 2.2. I address the definition of eternity that Spinoza provides in EID8, accentuating the fact that Spinoza defines eternity as an existence with a certain modal rather than temporal status, namely that of a self-necessitating being that is the cause of itself (only such thing is,

of course, God). Further in this section I proceed to what Spinoza calls knowing or understanding a mode “from the point of view of eternity”, which is also referred to as the third kind of – or “intuitive” – knowledge. To perceive or know a mode from a point of view of eternity means understanding it *qua in* God, or contained in God’s attributes, and being necessarily caused by his divine nature, as opposed to understanding it as produced by other modes. Section 2.3. addresses Spinoza’s commitment to necessitarianism. Here I show, contrary to some readings of the relevant propositions of the *Ethics*, that Spinoza is committed to a so-called “strong” necessitarianism, i.e. that he holds that the actual world is the only metaphysically possible world. Finally, in 2.4. I address Spinoza’s position regarding the eternity of the mind, where I demonstrate that his confusing remarks on the issue in Part V can be explained if one asserts that the part of the mind that contains adequate ideas is sempiternal (since all adequate ideas are in the divine intellect, and the latter is a sempiternal infinite mode), and that the mind is also eternal in the proper, modal sense, since it is contained in one of the divine attributes, namely the attribute of thought.

Conclusion: Piecing It Together

I hope to have presented all the aspects needed to comprehend Spinoza's account of the eternity of modal essences in such a way that does not create contradictions or any insurmountable difficulties when considered together with his other metaphysical commitments. Given that Spinoza was never too concerned with things like how counterintuitive his positions might be, and to a degree often seems to have disregarded clarity in many of his formulations, the attempted reconstruction of his position, just like the view itself, is probably rather convoluted. In this conclusion, I will try and present it as a straight story.

Spinoza defines eternity as “existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing” (EID8). “The eternal thing” here refers to God, more precisely, God as a being that is the cause of itself. As such an entity, God exists absolutely necessarily (by virtue of his essence, as per EID1). The same goes for each of the infinite number of his attributes (of which human beings only know two, extension and thought), as by their definition they are constitutive of his essence (EID4). Each attribute produces infinite modes that express its eternal nature. Infinite modes are referred to as either immediate if they are produced immediately, or mediate if they are produced as a result of the attribute being modified by an immediate infinite mode. If one considers, for instance, the attribute of extension, the mediate infinite mode would be what Spinoza calls “the face of the whole universe” or the infinite individual that is nothing but the total causal series of finite modes of extension, *or* bodies. Given that for Spinoza, two different things are such “either by a difference in the attributes of the substances or by a difference in their affections” (EIP4) – the latter being modes – an infinite mode is what it is (and not a different infinite mode) by virtue of every finite mode contained within it. Thus, if a finite mode is perceived

in the context of such an infinite mode, i.e. as an indispensable part of the total series of modes, it is eternal. Such an approach to understanding a finite mode is signified by Spinoza as understanding or perceiving it “from the point of view of eternity”, and it is in virtue of being an indispensable part of an infinite mode that a finite mode gets to express God’s eternal and infinite essence (as the essence of a certain attribute). Given that for Spinoza – due to his commitment to strong necessitarianism – the actual world in all its minute details is the only possible world, once the conceptual optic of “the point of view of eternity” is applied, everything is eternal. I think this consequence, taking into consideration the modal definition of eternity in EID8, is not any more implausible than Spinoza’s strong necessitarianism, so if one embraces the latter, the former should not be too great of an issue to accept.

However, perceiving a mode from the point of view of eternity is not the only way we can conceptually approach it. If one considers a finite mode in terms of its durational existence, i.e. as produced and determined to exist in a certain manner by other finite modes (rather than necessarily caused to exist by God in virtue of his nature), it is not eternal. This means that one and the same existence of a finite mode can be viewed as eternal or durational (or temporary) depending on the conceptual view that the mode in question is approached with, which is what Spinoza means when he says that “we conceive things as actual in two ways” (EVP29S). This difference can also be terminologically grasped as a difference between understanding a finite mode *qua* it is contained in God’s attributes (or simply is “in God”) and understanding it *qua* finite mode, i.e. that which is essentially caused to exist by other finite modes.

Because of this, it is correct to say that in Spinoza's world, for the finite time that some things exist, they exist eternally.¹⁵ Within this conclusion and multiple times in previous discussions I have been switching between modes and their essences. This is because the definition of essence provided in EIID2 ("to the essence of any thing belongs that [...] without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing") characterizes an essence as something which is inseparable from the thing that it is the essence of: when there is the essence of a thing, there is also that thing, and vice versa. This, in turn, rules out any universal essences or "species-essences", which is important for the reading presented in this thesis, since those cannot be presented as indispensable parts of a total causal series (indeed, it hard for me to imagine a species-essence as occupying any position in a row of causes and effects), which is how I interpret modes and their essences taken from the point of view of eternity.

What non-metaphysical implications does this all have? The fact that we are all eternal might sound reassuring, and it seems like this is what Spinoza is going for in his account of the eternity of the mind in Part V of the *Ethics*. As he says in EVP32C, "from [intuitive knowledge] there arises Joy, accompanied by the idea of God as its cause". However, this kind of joy is hard to achieve, as it would mean joy in regard to all things – since everything is eternal – many of which we are usually opposed to: sickness, death, suffering, war, etc. Thus, in a usual sense, knowledge of one's own eternity is probably as reassuring as Spinoza's radical solution to questions of theodicy (everything is perfect) – that is, not very much. In other words, this joy of eternity is foreign to our normal, all too human outlook, and arriving at this joy is, like "all things excellent", as difficult as it is rare (EVP42S).

¹⁵ I say "some things" here because some modes, namely infinite ones, exist sempiternally, unlike their finite counterparts.

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