

## TWO

# Immanence and Causation in Spinoza

*Christopher P. Martin*

In chapter III of his *Short Treatise*, in what is a clear predecessor of E1p18, Spinoza argues that since God is the only substance, anything other than God can neither exist nor be understood without God, from which it follows that God is the cause of all things (ST I, iii). Spinoza then elaborates eight different respects in which this is so, the second of which notes that God is “an immanent and not a transitive cause, since he does everything in himself, and not outside himself (because outside him there is nothing)” (ST I, iii). This is in close alignment with his one explicit employment of immanent causation in the *Ethics*, in E1p18, where he argues that because God is the only substance, anything else that exists must inhere in, be conceived through, and caused by God. Because anything whatsoever is caused by and exists within God, God is an immanent cause of all things (E1p18dem). Spinoza appears in both works to understand an immanent cause as a cause whose effect exists within it.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that there is more to immanent causation, at least in Spinoza's later *Ethics*, than this initial reading suggests. While there can be little dispute that God is the ultimate cause of all things, or that everything whatsoever inheres in God, I will argue that these commitments, though suitable for explaining how God is the immanent cause of infinite modes, are insufficient for explaining how God is the immanent cause of individual finite modes. If the effect inhering in its cause is insufficient for explaining how God is the immanent cause of individual finite modes then we should entertain the possibility that there is more to immanent causation than an effect inhering in its cause.

After reviewing Spinoza's argument in E1p18 and raising a problem for thinking about immanent causation along traditional lines, I argue that we can better understand how God is an immanent cause of individual finite modes by understanding the causal efficacy between modes as an extension of God's causal efficacy. If I am right, then we should expand our understanding of immanent causation to include this feature.

## E1p18 AND THE INHERENCE READING OF IMMANENT CAUSES

Let's take a closer look at Spinoza's rationale in the *Ethics* for his claim that God is the immanent, not transitive, cause of all things:

Everything that is, is in God, and must be conceived through God (1p15), and so (by 1p16cor1) God is the cause of all things, which are in him. That is the first [thing to be proved]. And then outside God there can be no substance (by 1p14), i.e., (by 1def3), thing which is in itself outside God. That was the second. God, therefore, is the immanent, not the transitive cause of all things, q.e.d." (E1p18dem)

Spinoza appeals to E1p15 and E1p16cor1 to establish that God is the cause of whatever is in him before appealing to substance monism (E1p14) to establish that nothing exists outside of him. An immanent cause is a cause whose effect exists within it; if everything that exists is caused by God and exists within God then God is an immanent cause of all things. A transitive cause, by contrast, is a cause whose effect exists outside it. Because God is the only substance, anything else that exists must be a mode of God, and as such cannot exist outside God. From these two arguments, if God is the cause of whatever exists within him and nothing can exist outside him then God is the immanent cause of all things. Our focus in what follows will be on the first argument, namely, God's being the cause of whatever is in him.

A slightly more technical reading of E1p18dem might go as follows. According to E1p15, anything whatsoever that exists inheres in God and cannot be conceived without God.<sup>2</sup> Spinoza's rationale for this is fairly straight-forward (for a reader of Spinoza at least): only substances and their modes exist, and any mode of a substance is in and conceived through that substance. Because God is the only substance, anything else must be a mode of God, and therefore must be in and conceived through God. Anything whatever that is not God, then, inheres in God. E1p16 casts this inherence in causal terms; whatever inheres in God does so by following from God's nature.<sup>3</sup> With a corollary clarifying that God is the efficient cause of anything that follows from its nature, it follows from E1p15 and E1p16cor that God is the immanent efficient cause of all things.

We can best appreciate inherence as the mark of immanent causation by looking at Spinoza's doctrine of infinite modes. The infinite and eternal modes are those features or

expressions of God that follow immediately (meaning directly) from its nature (E1p21-23).<sup>4</sup> We can infer from the nature or definition of a circle as a line with one fixed point and one point in motion, for instance, that every line drawn from its center to its circumference will be equal. The equality of its radii is an inherent feature or expression of the circle that is not included in its definition but instead follows immediately from it. Just as the equality of its radii is a feature of the circle that follows from its nature alone, so too are the infinite modes features of substance that follow from its nature alone. Substance is an immanent cause of its infinite modes because they follow from and inhere in it alone.

The same can be said of God's finite modes. Spinoza writes in E1p33 for instance that "Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced." He reasons that the order of finite modes could be different only if God's nature were different, indicating that the existing order of finite modes is an entailment of God's nature, that is, God's nature unfolding itself. Because they are modes, they additionally inhere in God, meaning that they both follow from and inhere in God, making God their immanent cause.

#### A PROBLEM WITH THE INHERENCE READING

This reading of immanent causation is grounded in Spinoza's explicit remarks on the matter, captures well the immanence of infinite modes, and resonates with his remarks on the immanence of individual finite modes. It does not, however, explain how God is the immanent cause of individual finite modes. I would like to raise two problems with this reading before proposing that we expand it to include God's causal efficacy.

One problem with the inherence reading of immanent causation is that Spinoza restricts God's being a participant in the cause of a finite mode to God being expressed through its finite cause, but these causes are transitive. As Spinoza argues in E1p28, finite modes come about only through the efficacy of other finite modes.<sup>5</sup> The causal relation between finite modes is, however, typically transitive. This is evident enough when, for instance, Spinoza specifies that a mother who produces a child does not share the existence of her child since one can perish without affecting the other (E1p17s). A mother can perish without affecting her child only if the

mother and child are distinct existences, that is, only if the child exists apart from its mother.<sup>6</sup> Assuming this is typical of finite causes, finite causes are typically transitive.

The problem arises once we take note of the way in which Spinoza depicts God's involvement. "The idea of a singular thing which actually exists has God for a cause not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea of a singular thing ..." (E2p9).<sup>7</sup> God is the cause of some finite idea not because God is an infinite being that encompasses all finite ideas but, rather, because the finite cause is a finite and determinate expression of God.<sup>8</sup> But as we just saw, finite causes are transitive. If God produces individual finite modes only because God is expressed through their finite and determinate causes and these causes are transitive then God's causing individual finite modes is transitive. So while it is of course true that all modes inhere in God, how God is the immanent cause of individual finite modes is unclear.

Additionally, I think the inherence reading of immanent causes fails to take notice of passages where Spinoza appeals specifically to God's causal efficacy in explaining how God is a cause of finite mode. Spinoza draws upon E1p16 in E1p25s, for instance, to note that "God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself." God's causal responsibility for all things is here cast not in terms of inherence but instead in terms of efficacy; God is the cause of all things on account of the efficacy that produces all things being only ever an extension of the efficacy necessitating God's own existence. Spinoza adds in E1p29dem and E1p34dem that God's power is the cause both of God's existence and of everything that follows from it, which he affirms in E1p36dem as the claim that "whatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate way the power of God, which is the cause of all things." If God conceived as an infinite being (and, suggestively, therefore a being that encompasses all things) does not explain how God is an immanent cause of individual finite modes then perhaps God's causal efficacy does.<sup>9</sup>

#### GOD'S IMMANENT CAUSATION AS GOD'S CAUSAL EFFICACY

I have already shown that Spinoza on several occasions explains God being the cause of all things by appealing not to inherence but, rather, to God's causal efficacy. I believe that this aspect alone captures how God is the immanent cause of individual finite modes and therefore

that we should include it in our understanding of how God is the immanent cause of all things. I support this suggestion by first showing that finite natures are always included in finite causes and arguing that Spinoza intends for these natures to serve as proxies for the causal efficacy of God and its laws. I then show that finite modes are immanent causes precisely when their behavior follows from their own natures. If finite modes are immanent causes when their behavior follows only from God's efficacy as it is expressed through their own natures then God's immanent causation of individual finite modes may be nothing more than their following entirely from its efficacy. If God is an immanent cause of individual finite modes because of its efficacy then we should expand our understanding of immanent causation to reflect this.

Let's begin by noting Spinoza's curious inclusion of finite natures in finite causes. He writes in the digression on bodies that "All modes by which a body is affected by another body follow both from the nature of the body affected and at the same time from the nature of the affecting body" (E2p13adda1"). This is true, of course, for ideas as well: "The idea of any mode in which the human body is affected by external bodies must involve the nature of the human body and at the same time the nature of the external body" (E2p16). For any finite effect where one mode is affected by another, the effect follows from and involves the natures of whatever modes are involved in the cause and its effect.<sup>10</sup> Causal relations between different finite modes, then, always involve the natures of both the affecting and affected modes.

This shows that finite natures are involved in any behavior wherein finite modes are made to act in some way by other finite modes. Spinoza elsewhere writes that finite natures are also involved in behaviors which are caused entirely by the mode itself. "[W]e act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by 3def1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone" (E3def2).<sup>11</sup> If these actions can be understood through our nature alone then they follow from our nature alone (cf. E1ax4), meaning that we are active when our actions follow from our nature alone. Combining this with the passages noting that modes affecting other modes involve the natures of both the affecting and affected modes, which we should call 'passive behavior',<sup>12</sup> we can conclude that a mode is acted on (passive) when its action follows from its nature working alongside the natures of whatever other modes are affecting it and that a mode is active when its behavior follows from its nature alone.<sup>13</sup> Because

all behavior is either active or passive, the causal activity of finite modes always follows from and involves their natures.<sup>14</sup>

This is a curious thing. We have a rough sense of God's involvement in finite causes, namely, that anything whatsoever is ultimately God's nature unfolding itself or, better yet, that any causal efficacy is only ever an extension of God's causal efficacy. We can also certainly appreciate what the modes (or even just their features) contribute to causes; Clara is attracted to Dirk for instance because Dirk has broad shoulders and a generous disposition. We can additionally appreciate Spinoza's note that causal actions occur always in accordance with nature's fixed and unchanging laws (E3pref).<sup>15</sup> While we can appreciate how these elements might be involved in finite causes, the inclusion of finite natures is a mystery. Spinoza does note in E2p13addax1" that the involvement of natures explains how the same mode can be affected differently (because the natures of its different causes are different) and that different modes can be affected similarly (if the natures of their causes are the same), but he nowhere explains how involving natures in finite causes explains this.

We can shed light on the inclusion of finite natures in finite causes by noting Spinoza's elision between natures and laws. Recall from E3def2 that finite modes are active when they act from their own nature and passive when their behavior follows from their own nature working in concert with other natures. Spinoza glosses this definition in E4p2dem by noting that we are only a partial cause of an effect that "cannot be deduced from the laws of our nature alone." He later refers to E3def2 as meaning that "a man acts entirely from the laws of his own nature when he lives according to the guidance of reason..." (E4p35cor1).<sup>16</sup> In both applications Spinoza understands laws as efficacious components of finite natures to refer in some intimate way to nature's laws. We are passive when the laws of our nature are insufficient to determine our action, whereas we are active, that is, live in accordance with reason, when the laws of our nature alone determine our action. If laws are intimately tied to our natures then it is reasonable to suggest that Spinoza means for the causal efficacy of our natures to refer in some intimate way to nature's fixed and unchanging laws. If we combine these passages with the oddity of including natures in finite causes and the curious absence of nature's laws we can conclude, I think, that Spinoza regards natures in finite causes as a kind of substitute or proxy for nature's laws.<sup>17</sup>

As mentioned earlier, laws are fixed and unchanging constants in nature (E3pref). Many commentators understand this to imply that laws are among the infinite modes, meaning that

laws are instances of the infinite and eternal expressions of God's causal efficacy.<sup>18</sup> I think that Spinoza means with the elision of natures and laws to imply that finite natures are how God's causal efficacy is expressed in the finite order. Just as laws express God's causal efficacy in infinite and eternal ways, so too do finite natures express God's causal efficacy in finite and determinate ways. Thus when Spinoza notes that God is the cause of all things in the same respect in which God causes itself (E1p25s), or that the power through which God exists is the cause of all things (E1p36dem), we should understand him to mean that the efficacy expressed through the laws of nature is the selfsame efficacy through which finite natures compel finite behavior. If so, then we have a portrait of how God is a cause of individual finite modes, namely, in virtue of the efficacy that brings about any finite behavior being only ever an extension of God's causal efficacy.

I believe that this analysis, brief as it may be, provides a foundation for understanding how God is an immanent cause of individual finite modes. I develop this view by identifying where finite modes are their own immanent causes and using this as an illustration of God's immanent causation in the finite order. Let's consider, then, where finite modes are their own immanent causes.

The human mind is best served, Spinoza thinks, when it infers from its current adequate ideas additional adequate ideas. This, of course, is the third kind of knowledge; knowledge which "proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (E2p40s2).<sup>19</sup> We begin with our adequate idea of God's essence (E2p47) and deduce from this adequate ideas of other things (E2p47s).<sup>20</sup> This process culminates in the mind's highest virtue which, Spinoza tells us, is its possessing an adequate idea of God (E4p28). The mind's greatest virtue lies then, in rough overview, in expanding its collection of adequate ideas by inferring from its existing adequate ideas additional adequate ideas. Since the additional adequate ideas arise from, further express, and are contained within the mind itself, this process is eminently immanent.<sup>21</sup> When the human mind is best realizing its greatest good it is doing so, then, by engaging in immanent causation.

Though certainly a worthwhile start for locating immanent causes in the finite order, given the rarity of this feat I suggest we look for more prevalent instances of immanent causation in the finite order. We can do so, I propose, if we consider partial causes. Unlike an adequate cause "whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it," an inadequate or partial

cause is one whose “effect cannot be understood through it alone” (E3def1). Dirk’s gift is an inadequate or partial cause of Clara’s smile since we need to include, alongside the gift, Clara’s fondness for pearls, the luster of the pearls themselves, etc. Recalling the language of E2p13addax1” and E2p16, the affect of Clara's smile involves the natures of Clara, Dirk, and the pearls; all three are partial causes and collectively they are an adequate cause of Clara's smile. Given that Clara's smile is a feature of Clara, meaning that it is contained within her, and furthermore that her nature is part of its cause, we might reasonably suggest that Clara's nature is a partial immanent cause of her smile.<sup>22</sup> Generalizing, because the natures of affected modes are always involved in the cause of their affects, finite natures are always partial immanent causes of affects of their mode. And if parts of a cause can be immanent alongside other parts that are transitive then immanent causation is much more prevalent in causal relations between finite modes than we might think.

This raises a difficult question however, namely, whether a cause can be both immanent and transitive or, more perspicuously, in part immanent and in part transitive. If not, if any transitive component in a cause renders the cause itself transitive, then the vast majority of finite causes will be transitive, making it difficult to identify frequent, genuine instances of immanent causation in the finite order. Though a discussion of the ontology of causes is beyond the purview of this chapter, I would like to offer one piece of evidence in support of immanent and transitive components working alongside one another in finite causes. Dirk's nature and the nature of the pearls are transitive causes of Clara's smile only from the perspective of separate finite modes. From God's point of view, Dirk's, the pearls', and Clara's natures are contained within the same corporeal substance as Clara's smile. Since the three natures and Clara's smile are all contained within the same substance, the natures are immanent causes of Clara's smile. This move recalls Spinoza's frequent contrast between ideas as they are conceived through a finite mind with those same ideas as they are conceived through God's mind. As he explains in E2p28 for instance (though keeping with Clara's smile and Dirk's gift), the idea in Clara's mind of her smile is inadequate since it follows from her nature and the natures of Dirk and the pearls despite the latter existing external to Clara. The idea of Clara's smile in God's mind, by contrast, is adequate since none of the natures are external to the corporeal substance encompassing Clara's smile.<sup>23</sup> If the idea of Clara's smile in God's mind is adequate, and the idea in God's mind would understand Clara's nature as a partial immanent cause of her smile, then Clara's nature is a

partial immanent cause of her smile. Though this issue is by no means closed, I think we can tentatively conclude that since the nature of a finite mode is included in any of its active or passive behaviors, individual finite modes are often if not always partial immanent causes of their behavior. Immanent causes, then, are considerably more prevalent in the finite order than we might typically think.

With this we have the ingredients in place to propose a sharper picture of how God is the immanent cause of individual finite modes. Immanent causes amongst finite modes, whether complete or partial, occur when a finite mode's behavior is caused by its nature. If its nature is a kind of proxy for nature's laws, then a finite mode is an immanent cause when and to the extent that its behavior follows from the laws that are written into its nature. Once we recognize these laws as instances of the immediate or mediate expression of God's causal efficacy we understand that individual finite modes are immanent causes when their behavior follows from their own expression of God's causal efficacy. Because finite modes are finite and determinate instances of God, finite immanent causes should explain how God too is an immanent cause. The extension of God's causal efficacy into the causation of finite behavior explains, then, how God is an immanent cause of individual finite modes.

I argued earlier that the inherence reading, while adequate for explaining how God is an immanent cause of the infinite modes, does not explain how God is an immanent cause of individual finite modes. If causal efficacy does then we should include it in our understanding of God's immanent causation.

---

<sup>1</sup> See also Spinoza's brief mention of God as an immanent cause in the first dialogue following chapter II of Part I of the *Short Treatise*. I use the term 'effect' to denote the product of a cause. I use the term 'affect' to denote any change that a mode undergoes (cf. E1def3).

<sup>2</sup> As you can see, the second argument in E1p18dem is redundant since Spinoza's arguments for E1p15 already secure that nothing can exist outside of God.

<sup>3</sup> The careful reader may recognize that E1p15 and E1p16 refer to possibly distinct sets of modes. From E1p15 we know that anything whatsoever that exists is a mode of God. When Spinoza transitions into the causal terminology of E1p16 however, he is discussing only those modes that follow from the divine nature. It is unclear whether the

---

set of all modes whatsoever is isomorphic with the set of modes that follow from the divine nature. That Spinoza understands them to be the same is evident, however, by his interchangeable use of “God” and “God’s nature” in E1p15dem. If any mode whatsoever is contained in God then it is also contained in God’s nature (E1p15). From E1p16&cor, any modes that are in God or God’s nature are so only by following from, i.e., being caused by, its nature.

<sup>4</sup> Kristina Mechelski defends a different and unique reading of the infinite modes in chapter three of this volume.

<sup>5</sup> “Every singular thing ... 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 ...” (E1p28).

<sup>6</sup> We also find a characterization of finite modes as transitive causes following a discussion of God as an immanent cause in ST II, xxv1. Thanks to Stephen Zylstra for directing me to this chapter.

<sup>7</sup> We see this claim first in E1p28. I have chosen to discuss it within the confines of E2p9 because this proposition more perspicuously delineates God’s involvement.

<sup>8</sup> As E1p28 makes clear, this is true for modes of each of the other attributes.

<sup>9</sup> Sophie Lavéran also discusses a broader reading of immanence than mere inherence in her chapter on the Finite Modes in chapter four of this volume.

<sup>10</sup> Spinoza justifies E2p16 in large part by referring back to E2p13addax1” (see E2p16dem). This suggests that the “follows from” locution in E2p13addax1” is synonymous with “involves” in E2p16.

<sup>11</sup> Spinoza defines an adequate cause in the preceding definition as a cause “whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it” and a partial or inadequate cause as a cause whose effect “cannot be understood through it alone” (E3def1). If we act when some action can be understood through our nature alone (E3def2), then our nature is its whole or complete cause.

<sup>12</sup> Spinoza continues E3def2 by noting that “we are acted on [passive] when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause.”

<sup>13</sup> Spinoza is referring to what we might call the action’s immediate cause. It is unclear whether such actions further require that the cause’s cause, or that cause’s cause and so forth be included in the finite nature. God’s involvement in such causes will be addressed in the next section.

<sup>14</sup> We could push for the stronger claim that causal relations between finite modes are restricted to relations between their natures, meaning that finite natures are the only causally efficacious components in finite causes. I will not review this issue here.

<sup>15</sup> “Nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, i.e., the laws and rules of nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same.”

<sup>16</sup> This is reminiscent of Spinoza’s remarks in TIE that “The essences of singular, changeable things ... [are] to be sought only from the fixed and eternal things, and at the same time from the laws inscribed in these things, as in their true codes, according to which all singular things come to be, and are ordered” (101).

<sup>17</sup> For another route to this conclusion, we might argue that finite natures are finite instances of eternal essences (see E5p22, E2p45, and E2p8cor) and that eternal essences and nature’s fixed and unchanging laws are infinite modes. If

---

so, then Spinoza may refer to finite natures because he understands finite natures as the finite instances of nature's eternal essences and laws. For further elaboration and different defenses of this view see Christopher Martin, "The Framework of Essences in Spinoza's Ethics," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16 (2008), 489-509 and Don Garrett, "Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind That Is Eternal," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics* ed. Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 285-292.

<sup>18</sup> I argue for this view in Christopher Martin, "The Framework of Essences". See also Yirmiyahu Yovel, "The Infinite Mode and Natural Laws in Spinoza," in *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics* ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991) 79-96 and Edwin Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969) 47-49 and 59. Kristina Meshelski challenges the understanding of laws of nature as infinite modes in chapter three of this volume.

<sup>19</sup> See John Grey's "Reason and Knowledge in Spinoza" in this volume for further discussion of reason and Spinoza's second and third kinds of knowledge.

<sup>20</sup> "The human mind has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence" (E2p47). The scholium adds that "... God's infinite essence and his eternity are known to all. And since all things are in God and are conceived through God, it follows that we can deduce from this knowledge a great many things which we know adequately, and so can form that third kind of knowledge of which we spoke in E2p40s and of whose excellence and utility we shall speak in Part 5."

<sup>21</sup> Though Spinoza doesn't address this issue, with parallelism this notion would carry over to the body, meaning that the bodily expressions that follow from the bodily correspondent of adequate ideas would be instances of immanent causation as well.

<sup>22</sup> For an effect that is contained only partially within Clara we can additionally conclude that Clara's nature is again a partial immanent cause of this effect relative to the extent to which her nature contributes to the effect and to the extent to which the effect is contained within her. I will not pursue this more attenuated sense of immanent cause here, except to note that the rationale should be the same.

<sup>23</sup> The analogue, of course, is the mind's production of adequate ideas by drawing only upon its other adequate ideas. The causes themselves are distinct, but their being contained in the same mind renders the causality between them immanent rather than transitive. Spinoza's worm in the blood thought-experiment in ep. 32 is another illustration of this idea.