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Spinoza on Fictitious Ideas and Possible Entities

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is twofold: to provide a valid account of Spinoza's theory of fictitious ideas, and to demonstrate its coherency with the overall modal metaphysics underpinning his philosophical system. According to Leibniz, in fact, the existence of romances and novels would be sufficient to demonstrate, against Spinoza's necessitarianism, that possible entities exist and are intelligible, and that many other worlds different from ours could have existed in its place. I argue that Spinoza does not actually need to resort to the notion of possible entities in order to explain the incontrovertible existence of fictions and fictitious ideas. In order to demonstrate this, I will first show how, according to Spinoza, true ideas of nonexistent things need not be regarded as fictitious ideas. Then I will show by which means Spinoza can justify the real existence of fictions and fictitious ideas in the human mind through our present knowledge of actually existing things, to conclude that fictitious ideas neither add anything to what we already know of things, nor do they increase the extent of the existing conceivable reality by demanding the existence of possible non-actualised entities.

KEYWORDS

Spinoza; necessity; contingency; fiction; essence; existence

Introduction

In a well-known criticism of Spinoza's philosophical system, Leibniz accuses Spinoza's necessitarianism of being "an opinion so bad, and indeed so inexplicable," that there is no need to waste too much time in refuting it.[1] Some years before, Leibniz also admitted that he had found himself "very close to the opinions of those who hold everything to be absolutely necessary."[2] In both cases, however, he quickly rules out Spinoza's necessitarianism by resorting to the existence of a particular kind of mental objects, namely fictions:

> I was pulled back from this precipice by considering those possible things which neither are nor will be nor have been. For if certain possible things never exist, existing things cannot always be necessary; otherwise it would be impossible for other things to exist in their place, and whatever never exists would therefore be impossible. For it cannot be denied that many stories, especially those we call novels, may be regarded as possible, even if they do not actually take place in this particular sequence of the universe which God has chosen.[3]

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The existence of merely possible entities, Leibniz says, is incontrovertibly attested by the existence of novels and romances, which describe states of affairs that are plausible and intelligible, but which do not obtain in the actually existing world. Leibniz's criticism of Spinoza is thus based on the assumption that there exist non-contradictory fictitious ideas which must indeed refer to some objects, whose existence must however be considered as merely possible: for, although their ideas truly exist, they do not exist as physical entities. Their actual existence is in fact excluded by the present conditions of things. Nonetheless, they could have existed, should the world have been different; and the world could have been different, since we can think of a multitude of different states of affairs including their actual existence, without falling into contradiction. Leibniz's point seems convincing, since it is Spinoza himself who defines singular things as "contingent insofar as we find nothing, while we attend only to their essence, which necessarily posits their existence or which necessarily excludes it."[4] Spinoza also says that we regard as possible a thing "whose existence, by its very nature, does not imply a contradiction—either for it to exist or for it not to exist—but whose necessity or impossibility of existence depends on causes unknown to us, so long as we feign its existence."[5]

On the basis of these elements, some Spinoza scholars have recently tried to defend Spinoza's position from Leibniz's attack, by arguing that Spinoza's system would actually provide sufficient elements for claiming the existence of merely possible objects. Syliane Malinowski-Charles, for example, extensively analyses passages from Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, arguing that the radical alternative between necessity and impossibility concerns only the actual existence of the objects, whereas any intelligible essence of an object is to be considered possible in itself, even though the object itself does not exist in the actual world.[6] Jon Miller distinguishes between two different uses of the concept of "possibility" in Spinoza: a "doxastic" one and a metaphysical (or "nomological") one. The first would concern our knowledge of the *ordo causarum*, the actualised causal network, according to which the actual existence of any object in the present world is either necessary or impossible. The second would concern the status of things which are compossible with the *ordo naturæ*, that is, the eternal laws of nature, according to which a multitude of different orders of necessary causes between things would be equally possible.[7] Both Malinowski-Charles and Miller conclude that Spinoza coherently maintains that there is an infinity of non-actualised possible entities whose existence, although incompatible with the actualised order of existing things, would not contradict in itself the general form of the eternal laws of nature. These non-actualised entities would be either contained in God's intellect (Miller) or in God's attributes (Malinowski-Charles) as merely possible entities, or true potentialities, and they would provide the external referent of true fictitious ideas (Malinowski-Charles).[8] This kind of reading of Spinoza effectively saves him from Leibniz's criticism, by making a proto-Leibnizian of Spinoza himself.[9]

In what follows I will put forward a different defensive strategy of Spinoza's position, providing at the same time a different interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics and the ensuing modal theory. I will argue that, in fact, Leibniz's criticism is unfitting, since Spinoza does not accept the very first premise of Leibniz's argument in favour of possible entities—that is, that fictitious ideas can be true with respect to the things they are said to feign, and that therefore they must necessarily be regarded as corresponding to something existing outside the actuality of the human mind which feigns. It is by accepting this premise, in fact, that Spinoza would be committed to the absurd consequences listed by Leibniz—that is, "that

all the romances one can imagine exist actually now, or have existed, or will still exist in some place in the universe."[10]

By considering selected passages from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Metaphysical Thoughts* and the *Ethics*, I will claim that Spinoza's theory of fictitious ideas is based on an account of human knowledge which is rigorously conceived as *a posteriori*. According to this view, the real existence of fictitious ideas in the human mind is exhaustively explainable through our present knowledge of actually existing things. So fictitious ideas neither add anything to what we already know of things, nor do they increase the extent of the existing conceivable reality by demanding the existence of metaphysically possible non-actualised entities. Fictitious ideas may certainly be fictions of existing things as they actually are: in this case, their status of fictitious ideas is only due to our present ignorance of the real existence of their object. Conversely, fictitious ideas whose objects do not exist in the actual world as they describe it, are to be considered as out-and-out false ideas, with no corresponding objects existing outside of the human mind. As a corollary, non-contradictory ideas of essences of things and true ideas of nonexistent things need not be regarded as fictitious ideas, nor do they need to correspond to possible entities.

Given the difficulty of the problem treated, the approach proposed is not intended to tackle elaborate criticisms concerning the whole structure of Spinoza's modal system.[11] Rather, it aims at offering a valid alternative account of Spinoza's theory, coherent with its basic tenets, and capable of demonstrating that Spinoza, contra Leibniz, does not actually need to resort to the notion of possible entities in order to explain the incontrovertible existence of fictions and fictitious ideas.

Essences, Existence, and Ideas of Nonexistent Things

Now, if we are to look for an account of fictions in Spinoza, the first and most important text we shall consider is his early and unfinished *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect*, where he discusses at length "what... fictitious... ideas are concerned with."[12] Next, we should immediately circumscribe the context and the aim of Spinoza's discussion of fictitious ideas, that is, "to distinguish and separate true ideas from all other perceptions, and to restrain the mind from confusing false, fictitious, and doubtful ideas with true ones."[13] This suggests that fictitious ideas are not to be considered as true ideas—and this suggestion, I argue, must be maintained until the very end of the analysis, as a principle. In the *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect* Spinoza also names a true idea an "objective essence," which "must agree completely with its formal essence."[14] If we stick to the Cartesian vocabulary Spinoza was implementing, as attested by his treatise on *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*, by "objective essence" we shall understand the essence of the thing "insofar as it is in the idea,"[15] and by "formal essence" we should understand the essence of the thing as it is "in the object of the idea," that is, outside the idea that represents it truly and adequately.[16] We must also note that, according to Spinoza, "a true idea... is something different from its object."[17]

From these premises, we can draw at least two conclusions. The first is that any true idea concerns an object, namely an essence, which must exist outside of the idea that represents it in the mind. The second is that any idea must also exist as an object in itself and, "as far as its formal essence is concerned, [it] can be the object of another objective essence."[18] Thus, as Spinoza will clearly say in the *Ethics*, both ideas and their objects exist either in different attributes (bodies in extension and ideas of bodies in thought), or in the same attribute (ideas and ideas of ideas in thought).[19]

We might now raise the question whether there is a difference between the thing and the essence of the thing, which is the object of the true idea. As we shall see, this difference can be reduced to the difference between the existence and the essence of the thing: "Every perception is either of a thing considered as existing, or of an essence alone."[20] Surprisingly enough, we seem to have here two different dimensions of the existence of things: the existence of the essences of things, objects of true ideas, and the existence of the things themselves. The same concept is invoked by Spinoza in a paragraph in *Metaphysical Thoughts*, which I find useful to quote here, since it both summarizes the things said so far and introduces us to the next problem—namely, the problem of the modal status of things:

> The questions that are usually raised concerning essence... are as follows: whether essence is distinguished from existence? and if it is distinguished, whether it is anything different from the idea? and if it is something different from an idea, whether it has any being outside the intellect? The last of these must surely be granted.
>
> To the first question we reply by making a distinction: in God essence is not distinguished from existence, since his essence cannot be conceived without existence; but in other things it does differ from and certainly can be conceived without existence. To the second we say that a thing that is conceived clearly and distinctly, i.e., truly, outside the intellect is something different from the idea.[21]

Spinoza puts forward three theses in the passage above. First, any essence grasped by a true idea is different from the idea itself, and it must exist outside the idea, that is, outside the intellect that has that idea. Second, essence and existence are not distinguished in God. This means that when I have a true idea of God's essence, I think God as necessarily existing, that is, I think God's existence as such. Third, the most controversial, the essences of all other things can be conceived without existence. Does this mean that existing essences of nonexistent things are "nevertheless something"?[22] Spinoza's answer is affirmative:

> The essences of non-existent modes are comprehended in their substances, and their *being of essence* is in their substances. … If any Philosopher still doubts whether essence is distinguished from existence in created things, he need not labor greatly over definitions of essence and existence to remove that doubt. For if he will only go to some sculptor or woodcarver, they will show him how they conceive in a certain order a statue not yet existing, and after having made it, they will present the existing statue to him.[23]

It is a fact, according to Spinoza, that the being of the essences of things is something, and it is something different from the being of the existence of things, since we can truly conceive a thing (e.g., a certain statue) without necessarily thinking it as existing, whereas, in the case of God, we must conceive It as necessarily existing, and we cannot separate in It the being of Its essence from the being of Its existence.

At this point, I think it is of the utmost importance that we grasp the purpose of Spinoza's argument in favour of the distinction between the essence and the existence of a thing, if we are to avoid interpretive errors. One of these errors, as I will demonstrate, is to regard Spinoza's theory as committed to a multilayered ontology, as it were, where essences of things are provided with a kind of existence which is separate and distinct from the existence of those things of which they are the essences. Indeed, it seems to me that the only reason why Spinoza insists on the distinction between the being of essence and the being of existence is to explain what for him is empirically incontrovertible evidence—namely, that we cannot have a true idea of God as not existing, while, conversely, we can actually have true ideas of not actually existing things, as proved by everyday experience. The referent of a true idea of a not actually existing object must be something real outside the intellect, but cannot be

the actual existence of the thing itself, since the thing itself is not actually existing. However, Spinoza is neither saying anywhere that we can truly conceive one and the same thing as indifferently existing or not existing, nor is he claiming that we can truly conceive an existing thing as not existing or vice versa. Rather, what Spinoza is saying is that we can truly conceive the same essence of a thing without considering whether the thing actually exists or not: it is an *epistemological* problem that Spinoza is directly facing, not an *ontological* one. It is an epistemological problem, though, whose ontological drawback is immediately entailed by Spinoza's theory of truth, according to which "a true idea must agree with its object,"[24] and the object of a true idea must exist outside the intellect. The first assumption of Spinoza's theory of true knowledge, commits him to the claim that, if an object does not exist, the corresponding true idea must be the idea of a nonexistent object. The second assumption, instead, commits him to two theses that stand against each other in apparent contradiction. On the one hand, a true idea of a nonexistent object must nonetheless have an existing referent outside the intellect; on the other hand, since all true ideas must have an existing referent outside the intellect, the mind cannot "understand more things than Nature could bring about."[25] Any solution to this apparent contradiction, therefore, must affect the ontological discourse (i.e., in which sense things are said to be) in order to deal with the epistemological problem (i.e., in which sense things are said to be known) from which Spinoza departed. On the ontological level, Spinoza's solution involves the denial of any metaphysical contingency. On the epistemological level, it involves the reduction of any comprehension of possibility and contingency to a defect of our knowledge, which can be emended. Such a strong drawback on the plan of modality is a direct consequence of the solution Spinoza adopts, which requires the commitment to a strong version of the principle of sufficient reason.

> For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence. ... But this reason, or cause, must either be contained in the nature of the thing, or be outside it. E.g., the very nature of a square circle indicates the reason why it does not exist, viz. because it involves a contradiction. On the other hand, the reason why a substance exists also follows from its nature alone, because it involves existence. But the reason why a circle or triangle exists, or why it does not exist, does not follow from the nature of these things, but from the order of the whole of corporeal Nature. From this [order] it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now or that it is impossible for it to exist now.[26]

Spinoza can maintain that we can have true ideas of essences of nonexistent things and still claim that nothing is in the intellect which is not in nature, since, according to him, nature brings about at any time the existing reason or cause of either the actual existence or else of the actual nonexistence of any determinate essence.[27] By attending to what actually nature offers to my knowledge, I can therefore always deduce the relative existence or nonexistence of a same essence as an effect depending on and involved in the idea of an actually existing cause.[28] That is to say, I can always grasp the essence of a thing by referring to a sufficient reason or cause for that thing to exist or not to exist, and say whether that sufficient reason is actually given or not in nature—whether a certain thing does necessarily obtain or not, according to the present condition of things. When a thing is said to exist actually (when it is present, or it obtains, so to say), it is because also the idea that posits its actual existence is said to exist actually. Conversely, when a thing does not actually exist (when it is not present), we can still know its essence as it is comprehended in the relevant attribute (extension for bodies, thought for ideas), through the existing idea that excludes its actual presence, for this existing idea says something true both as to the essence and as to the existence of

the thing it excludes: namely, that it is necessarily the case that that thing, which is clearly intelligible as a mode of a certain attribute, does not exist here and now.[29] In this sense, I argue, Spinoza says that all essences of things are always "contained" and "comprehended" in God's attributes, and there is always a true idea of them: either as actually existing modes, or else as not actually existing modes, intelligible as such within the causal network.[30]

Of course, no clearly intelligible counterfactual hypothesis regarding the possible existence of nonexistent things could be drawn by feigning the existence of something whose existence is presently excluded, for we cannot in any way have an idea as to how a thing could be caused to exist and to act consequently in a time and a place that is clearly conceived in such a way so to exclude the present existence of that very thing. That would simply be an aberration. Nonetheless, all things contained in and comprehended through God's attributes must exist, at a certain point, because God is simply so omnipotent that he can assign to each thing "a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence." So that the whole network of causes (which is God Itself and which must therefore necessarily exist by reason of Its only essence)[31] must be eternally actual and must eternally account for both the necessary existence of a certain thing at a certain time, and the necessary nonexistence of the same thing at another time. I see no other better way in which to make sense of the following crucial paragraph in the *Ethics*:

> From God's supreme power, or infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things, have necessarily flowed, or always follow, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles. So God's omnipotence has been actual from eternity and will remain in the same actuality to eternity. And in this way, at least in my opinion, God's omnipotence is maintained far more perfectly.
>
> Indeed—to speak openly—my opponents seem to deny God's omnipotence. For they are forced to confess that God understands infinitely many creatable things, which nevertheless he will never be able to create. For otherwise, if he created everything he understood [NS: to be creatable] he would (according to them) exhaust his omnipotence and render himself imperfect. Therefore to maintain that God is perfect, they are driven to maintain at the same time that he cannot bring about everything to which his power extends. I do not see what could be feigned which would be more absurd than this or more contrary to God's omnipotence.[32]

Evidently, the consequences on the modal plan are enormous. Spinoza says: "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,"[33] and "Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced."[34]

> I have shown more clearly than the noon light that there is absolutely nothing in things on account of which they can be called contingent. ...
>
> A thing is called contingent only because of a defect of our knowledge. For if we do not know that the thing's essence involves a contradiction, or if we do know very well that its essence does not involve a contradiction, and nevertheless can affirm nothing certainly about its existence, because the order of causes is hidden from us, it can never seem to us either necessary or impossible. So we call it contingent or possible.[35]

I cannot fail to read these statements in the *Ethics* as a staunch denial of any form of metaphysical contingency—a denial which sounds perfectly coherent with Spinoza's overall modal metaphysics, according to the interpretation provided above. There are no such things as possible things, and "there is absolutely nothing in things on account of which they can be called contingent." All our understanding of possible and contingent entities is reduced

to a defect of knowledge, that is, to a lack of knowledge: either we do not conceive clearly an essence, or else we are ignorant about whether a sufficient reason for its existence or nonexistence is given in nature or not. Two further passages in the *Ethics* IV (p12, dem, and p13, dem) are also quite clear on this regard: we assume things to be contingent or possible, respectively, only to the extent that we do not know the causes that posit and exclude their actual existence, or because we know those causes only confusedly.[36] I must therefore agree with Edmund Hollands when he says that "Spinoza invariably defines possibility as a notion due to the limitations of our intellect, and having no objective validity. The real division is between Necessity and Impossibility, and between these there is no middle ground."[37] Furthermore, to conclude the section, I would take advantage of another well formulated claim from Hollands's article, which brilliantly summarizes the main point of my reading of Spinoza's basic modal metaphysics, and brings us back to the first problem from which we departed—namely the modal status of fictions: "Every 'essence' which is not merely fictitious has existence at some time or other; it exists by the same right as the systematic whole in which it is given a place, and, as it were, at one stroke with it."[38]

To argue whether this whole account of nature and its underpinning modal structure are consistent with themselves and effectively tenable, is beyond the purpose of this article. To be sure, this is just a sketch I have drawn of Spinoza's metaphysics, in order to get rid of the preliminary impasse determined by the problem of true ideas of nonexistent things. It is just a possible interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics and the relevant modal framework. At least it coheres with two fundamental Spinozistic claims: that God's creation must be really infinite and that it must be wholly intelligible—that is a way of saying that "whatever we conceive to be in God's power, necessarily exists."[39] Moreover, it gives an account of how existing ideas of nonexistent things can be thought to be true and to refer to a real object outside the intellect, so as to avoid resorting to fictitious ideas in order to explain them (which move would contradict our very first principle, i.e., that fictitious ideas cannot be said to be true with respect to what they feign).

With this interpretation of Spinoza in hand, I turn to the final part of my article—the analysis of Spinoza's theory of fictitious ideas in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, to see whether it withstands Leibniz's criticism without resorting to metaphysical contingency, namely, to the existence of merely possible entities, as hypothesised.

Fictitious Ideas and the Objects of Fictions

The fundamental role played by the distinction between essence and existence in Spinoza's theory of fictitious ideas has been well analysed and investigated by Malinowski-Charles,[40] so I will limit myself to summing up the most fundamental points, to show how they fit well into the general scheme of Spinoza's metaphysics provided above. Once again, we see that the distinction between essence and existence follows initially from an epistemological concern, that is, from the problem of finding the referent of fictitious ideas.

> Since every perception is either of a thing considered as existing, or of an essence alone, and since fictions occur more frequently concerning things considered as existing, I shall speak first of them—i.e., where existence alone is feigned, and the thing which is feigned in such an act is understood, or assumed to be understood.[41]

The ensuing entanglement between the three plans of the philosophical discourse—epistemological, ontological, and modal—is an expected consequence: indeed, we find it

in the paragraph immediately after the one just quoted, expressed in terms which should now sound familiar.

> I call a thing impossible whose nature implies that it would be contradictory for it to exist; necessary whose nature implies that it would be contradictory for it not to exist; and possible whose existence, by its very nature, does not imply a contradiction—either for it to exist or for it not to exist—but whose necessity or impossibility of existence depends on causes unknown to us, so long as we feign its existence.[42]

To sum up, there are things whose essences involve contradiction with respect to their existence, so that their existence is simply impossible, and they are impossible to conceive as existing. Then there are things whose essences imply necessary existence—that is, God—and which, therefore, exist necessarily and are necessarily conceived as existing. Finally, there are things whose essences do not involve any contradiction with respect to their existence, and whose reason to necessarily exist or not is always given in nature. A sufficient reason for their actual existence or nonexistence always exists, that is to say, but might be ignored. The conclusion is consequential:

> If its necessity or impossibility, which depends on external causes, were known to us, we would have been able to feign nothing concerning it.
>
> From this it follows that, if there is a God, or something omniscient, he can feign nothing at all.[43]

Fictitious ideas manifest only lack of knowledge with respect to the essence of a thing (I do not realise that I am feigning a thing whose essence involves by itself the impossibility of existing),[44] or else with respect to the existence of a thing (I attribute existential predicates to an object without considering whether it exists and why it exists). If I knew that object truly, I would only predicate either its necessary nonexistence, or its necessary existence, as they are posited by their essences or by the external causes. In both cases I would have a more precise and complete knowledge of the object in question. Nonetheless, insofar as fictitious ideas seem to add something new to the things I know, they seem to demand an external referent, as it was for the essences of nonexistent objects. Let us return, then, to the preliminary point, that is, to identify the referent of fictitious ideas. Spinoza is extremely clear:

> Afterwards, when we speak of fiction that concerns essences, it will be clear that the fiction never makes, or presents to the mind, anything new, but that only things which are in the brain or the imagination are recalled to memory, and that the mind attends confusedly to all of them at once. Speech and a tree, for example, are recalled to memory, and since the mind attends confusedly, without distinction, it allows that the tree speaks. The same is understood concerning existence.[45]

I can juxtapose ideas of things I know to exist or to have existed, and form an image of a thing so confused that I am not able to deduce from its essence the reason of its necessary impossibility. As a result, I can falsely ascribe existence to things that cannot exist in any way, and which are, *sensu stricto*, even impossible to conceive clearly as existing.[46] In any case, the real and only referent of my fiction will remain some images of things that I have formed in time, through my experience of the world: I have composed the fictitious ideas referring to them only. The same applies to fictions about things conceived clearly, or fictions that concern only the existence, and not the essence, of things. These fictions can be formed only on the basis of our knowledge of existing things, and they reveal that what we know is incomplete (or inconclusive, as it were) as to the way of existing of some object: "I feign that Peter, whom I know, is going home, that he is coming to visit me, and the like.

Here I ask, what does such an idea concern? I see that it concerns only possible, and not necessary or impossible things."[47]

What is to be noted here is that what I feign and hold as possible in this fiction about Peter is that Peter may come and visit me, and not the essence of Peter itself, which is assumed to be known and to refer to something real, namely to Peter. Peter is not a possible thing, as far as I know him. What I feign, rather, is that Peter exists in some ways, the actuality of which needs to be explained through an external cause. All of those ways of existing that I fictitiously attribute to Peter can be derived from what I already know to exist, or to have existed—that is, Peter and many other things—and, as fictions, they do not need to refer to any existing or nonexisting thing other than Peter and my acquired knowledge of what presumably is meant by "to go home" or "to come and visit me." Conversely, insofar as all the ways of existing I fictitiously attribute to Peter lack an explanation with regard to their reason of being actual or not, their ideas will inevitably deliver only a partial knowledge of themselves and of Peter's real existence. None of them describes a possible state of affairs; all of them partially describe the really existing one. Thus I hold as correct Miller's affirmation that, according to Spinoza, "we feign because we know something but not everything."[48] With regard to the things feigned, in fact, a fiction is always conceived by Spinoza as a kind of incomplete or partial knowledge of things.[49] To be sure, what is feigned, as Spinoza himself says, concerns what is possible, but this does not mean at all being committed to the claim that there exists anything like a possible thing or state of affairs in nature (or elsewhere). On the contrary, what is conceived as possible, is conceived as such because it is not understood completely, through the real reasons or causes that posit or exclude its essence and actual existence. Spinoza therefore says, "I feign this so long as I see no impossibility and no necessity. For if I had understood this, I could have feigned nothing at all."[50]

Conclusion

The object described by a fictitious idea is, if not at all impossible with regard to its essence, at least inexplicable with regard to its existence: any true explanation about its existence, would immediately reveal whether it is either impossible or necessary for it to exist. It is a necessary consequence of all of this that all fictions and fictitious ideas that have true essences as their objects, once clearly developed and understood, shall fall under two and only two categories of thought: either they express counterfactuality, or else they obtain without referring to their external object—no other possibility is admitted. Hence they are false in any case, and no object corresponding to what they are said to feign is needed to provide an account and an explanation of their actual existence in the mind and their positive meaning. We have already seen on what basis Spinoza denies both any epistemological validity and any ontological consistency to counterfactuals. Suffice it to recall here that they are just ideas of things whose existence must be conceived as impossible, because it is incompatible with the corresponding states of affairs within which those same things are supposed to exist. Otherwise stated, if the things feigned do not obtain in the real world, they could never obtain within any of the states of affairs which is assumed, either fictitiously or not, as existing.[51] There is no place for such things as non-contradictory ideas of counterfactuals within Spinoza's system: counterfactuals have neither any ontological reality, nor any logical coherency. In short, counterfactuals are out-and-out contradictory ideas.

If my interpretation is correct, it is easy to see how Leibniz's criticism of Spinoza's necessitarianism, which is based on the possible existence of the things described by fictions, completely misses the target: for Spinoza has all the theoretical instruments (epistemological, ontological, and modal) to consistently reply to Leibniz that what we call novels, romances and the like, either describe merely impossible states of affairs, or else they reproduce their objects as they must effectively be in the (only) real world.

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Notes

1. All English quotations of Spinoza's texts are from *The Collected Writings of Spinoza*, vol. 1, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). For Spinoza's works, I use the following abbreviations: E = *Ethics* [followed by the part number; ax = axiom; def = definition; dem = demonstration; p = proposition; schol = scholium]; CM = *Metaphysical Thoughts*; KV = *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* [the division into sections is the one proposed by Christoph Sigwart, also followed by Curley; app = appendix]; PPC = *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* [followed by the book number; def = definition]; TIE = *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* [followed by the section number; the division is the one proposed by Carl Hermann Bruder, also followed by Curley]; OP = *B.d.S. Opera Posthuma* (Amsterdam, 1677); NS = *Nagelate Schriften van B.d.S.* (Amsterdam, 1677).
   For Leibniz's works, I use the following abbreviations and editions: H [followed by the page number] = *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E. M. Huggard (LaSalle, PA: Open Court, 1985); and L [followed by the page number] = *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and trans. Leroy E. Loemker, 2d ed. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989).
   Liebniz, H 234: "Spinoza… appears to have explicitly taught a blind necessity, having denied to the Author of Things understanding and will, and assuming that good and perfection relate to us only, and not to him. … As far as one can understand him, he acknowledges no goodness in God, properly speaking, and he teaches that all things exist through the necessity of the divine nature, without any act of choice by God. We will not waste time here in refuting an opinion so bad, and indeed so inexplicable."
2. Liebniz, L 263.
3. Liebniz, L 263. "Unless someone imagines," Leibniz adds, "that there are certain poetic regions in the infinite extent of space and time where we might see wandering over the earth King Arthur of Great Britain, Amadis of Gaul, and the fabulous Dietrich von Bern invented by the Germans." See also H 234–35: "My own opinion is founded on the nature of the possibles, that is, of things that imply no contradiction. I do not think that a Spinozist will say that all the romances one can imagine exist actually now, or have existed, or will still exist in some place in the universe. Yet one cannot deny that romances such as those of Mademoiselle de Scudéry, or as *Octavia*, are possible."
4. Spinoza, E IV, def3.
5. Spinoza, TIE §53.

6. Syliane Malinowski-Charles, "De la possibilité des fictions littéraires chez Spinoza," *Teoria* 32.2, 3d series, *Spinoza nel XXI secolo* 7.2 (2012): 247–65.
7. Jon A. Miller, "Spinoza's Possibilities," *The Review of Metaphysics* 54.4 (2001): 779–814.
8. See Miller, "Spinoza's Possibilities," 803–8, and Malinowski-Charles, "De la possibilité des fictions littéraires chez Spinoza," 258–62.
9. Even though big and fundamental differences between the two philosophers are still acknowledged. For neither Malinowski-Charles, nor Miller, for example, argue that Spinoza would ever admit a set of possible things whose existence can be explained according to different laws of nature, as it was for Leibniz.
10. See note 3. For an exhaustive analysis of Leibniz's criticism of Spinoza, see Sébastien Charles, "Le possible comme critique du Spinozisme: Leibniz et la fiction," *Science et Esprit* 67.1 (2015): 17–33.
11. For criticism of this kind, see Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's "Ethics"* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1984), 111–24. Bennett's analysis has prompted studies that focus only or mainly on the topic of Spinoza's account of modality, and which are worth considering, such as Richard Mason, "Spinoza on Modality," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 36.144 (1986): 313–42, and Samuel Newlands, "Spinoza's Modal Metaphysics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL=< http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/spinoza-modal/>.
12. Spinoza, TIE §51.
13. Spinoza, TIE §50.
14. Spinoza, TIE §41 and §42.
15. PPC I, def3.
16. PPC I, def4. See also KV I, 1, 8 and KV II, app2, 7. It is to be noted that in the *Ethics* Spinoza will drop the concept of "representation" as a valid epistemic category to explain the relationship entertained by the true idea and its corresponding existing object, in explicit opposition to Descartes' epistemology.
17. Spinoza, TIE §33.
18. Spinoza, TIE §33.
19. Spinoza, E II, p1 and p2. Actually, there is a third and fundamental consequence that follows from these premises, since they seem sufficiently strong to immediately bind Spinoza to a form of parallelism between true ideas and their objects, as can be seen later in TIE §41: "The idea is objectively in the same way as its object is really. So if there were something in Nature that did not interact with other things, and if there were an objective essence of that thing which would have to agree completely with its formal essence, then that objective essence would not interact [note by Spinoza: 'To interact with other things is to produce, or be produced by, other things'] with other ideas, i.e., we could not infer anything about it. And conversely, those things that do interact with other things (as everything that exists in Nature does) will be understood, and their objective essences will also have the same interaction, i.e., other ideas will be deduced from them, and these again will interact with other ideas."
20. Spinoza, TIE §52.
21. Spinoza, CM I, 2. In the CM Spinoza dedicates a full chapter to "Real Beings, fictitious Beings, and Beings of Reason" (CM I, 1), a full chapter to "What are the being of Essence, the being of Existence, the being of Idea and the Being of Power" (CM I, 2), and a full chapter to "Concerning what is necessary, Impossible, Possible, and Contingent" (CM I, 3). Notwithstanding their being Spinoza's longest exposition available on the subject, they are almost unemployable without a preliminary exegetic work. As reported by Lodewijk Meijer's *Preface* to the volume, amongst the claims exposed by Spinoza "there are many that he rejects as false, and concerning which he holds a quite different opinion" (Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 229; see also Ep13). Amongst these claims, some that make the reliability of the CM very problematic with regard to our selected topic are "That creatures are in God eminently" (CM I, 1) and, most important of all, "That God, if he acted necessarily, is not infinitely powerful" (CM II, 10). Moreover, some passages concerning necessity in CM I, 3 seem to be outright contradictory, especially when Spinoza awkwardly refers the modal

category of "necessity" to "essences" (the "necessity of essence") to distinguish it from the "necessity of existence" in existing things ("the former depends on the eternal laws of nature, the latter on the series and order of causes"), and concludes a few paragraphs later that "the necessity of really existing is not distinct from the necessity of essence," and that the order of causes are the same laws of nature. Miller correctly cannot and does not employ this passage to defend his interpretation of Spinoza as distinguishing between an *ordo naturæ* and an *ordo causarum*. Unfortunately, there is no other place in Spinoza's works where such a distinction is so clearly expressed (and rejected at the one and the same time), and the few other passages which Miller explicitly regards as proofs are subject to interpretation (E II, x1; E I, p33, schol1; TIE § 12; TP II, 8).

22. Spinoza, E V, p23, dem.
23. Spinoza, CM I, 2. Spinoza's vocabulary is inaccurate in this context, or, better said, it reflects the Cartesian theory: by "their substances" Spinoza means in fact infinite extension (with regard to the essences of bodies) and infinite thought (with regard to the essences of ideas). According to Spinoza's theory, as exposed in his later *Ethics*, infinite extension and infinite thought are not substances, but God's attributes (see E I, p10, schol; E II, p1 and p2; see also KV II, app2, 10).
24. Spinoza, E I, ax6.
25. Spinoza, TIE §76, 2nd note.
26. Spinoza, E I, p11, dem2. The substance whose necessary existence can be deduced by attending to its essence alone is, in fact, God. The reason why I call this a "strong version" of the principle of sufficient reason, is that it requires at least two conditions, which might be both questionable. The first is the identity, as to their effects, between ontological causation and logical entailment. The second is that a sufficient reason or cause be provided both for the existence and for the nonexistence of the same thing.
27. This interpretation has been proposed and developed by Mogens Lærke in "Aspects of Spinoza's Theory of Essence: Formal essence, non-existence, and two types of actuality," in *The Actual and the Possible: Modality and Metaphysics in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Mark Sinclair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
28. This seems to be coherent with the fundamental axiom expressed in E I, ax4: "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause."
29. I am not considering here the more complex case of what Spinoza scholars call "immediate infinite modes" and "mediate infinite modes."
30. Spinoza, E II, p8, cor and schol: "The 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. … From this it follows that so long as singular things do not exist, except insofar as they are comprehended in God's attributes, their objective being, or ideas, do not exist except insofar as God's infinite idea exists." See also E I, p8, schol2: "This is how we can have true ideas of modifications which do not exist; for though they do not actually exist outside the intellect, nevertheless their essences are comprehended in another in such a way that they can be conceived through it."
31. That is to say that God is cause of Itself (*causa sui*), both on the ontological level (God's essence is the only cause of its necessary existence) and on the epistemological level (by the knowledge of God's essence we necessarily know God as existing): "By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing" (E I, def1).
32. Spinoza, E I, p17, schol.
33. Spinoza, E I, p29.
34. Spinoza, E I, p33.
35. Spinoza, E I, p33, schol1.
36. See Spinoza, E IV, p12, dem: "Insofar as we imagine a thing as contingent, we are not affected by any image of another thing that posits the thing's existence; but on the other hand… we imagine certain things that exclude its present existence. But insofar as we imagine a thing in the future to be possible, we imagine certain things that posit its existence." We see from

this passage that possible or contingent things can only be "imagined" by the mind. That is, according to Spinoza's vocabulary, that the ideas through which we regard things as possible and contingent are inadequate with respect to their objects, i.e., they lack knowledge as to the actual existence and the causes of existing of their objects; see E II, p17, schol: "The mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack an idea that excludes the existence of those things that it imagines to be present to it. For if the mind, while it imagined nonexistent things as present to it, at the same time knew that those things did not exist, it would, of course, attribute this power of imagining to a virtue of its nature, not to a vice."

37. Edmund H. Hollands, "Possibility and Reality," *The Philosophical Review* 19.6 (1907): 604. See also Mason, "Spinoza on Modality," 327.
38. Hollands, "Possibility and Reality," 608.
39. Spinoza, E I, p35.
40. Malinowski-Charles, "De la possibilité des fictions littéraires chez Spinoza," 250–58.
41. Spinoza, TIE §52.
42. Spinoza, TIE §53. The use of "existence" rather than "essence" regarding "possible" things in this passage, has caused trouble to readers: see Curley's note to the English translation in *The Collected Writings of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 24, n. 39.
43. Spinoza, TIE §54. The original text from OP has been emended: see Curley, *The Collected Writings of Spinoza*, vol. 1, 24, n. 40.
44. As examples of impossible objects, or, better said, of objects whose existence is impossible because of their contradictory essence, Spinoza mentions chimeras and square circles (see KV II, 16, 4, note; CM I, 1; CM I, 3; TIE § 54).
45. Spinoza, TIE §57, note 1.
46. Spinoza, TIE §61: "When the mind attends to a fictitious thing which is false by its very nature, so that it considers it carefully, and understands it, and deduces from it in good order the things to be deduced, it will easily bring its falsity to light. … If by chance we should say that men are changed in a moment into beasts, that is said very generally, so that there is in the mind no concept, i.e., idea, or connection of subject and predicate."
47. Spinoza, TIE §52.
48. Miller, "Spinoza's Possibilities," 787. See also 786: "It is necessary for us to know something lest we not possess any propositional attitudes whatsoever. Since feigning is a propositional attitude, we must have some knowledge in order to be able to feign. In the example, if the speaker did not know anything about Peter, he would not be uncertain about Peter's actions. He would not wonder whether Peter would go home, or come to him, or whatever, because he would not wonder anything about Peter: he could not, since he did not know him. A little bit of knowledge is necessary if one is to feign." I am not fully convinced that such a reduction of the feigning to a propositional attitude is entirely tenable, especially in light of Mason's warnings about interpreting Spinoza "in purely *de dicto*: terms": "Not only does Spinoza omit to express his views in the *de dicto* terms of standard modal logics: his claims are uniformly and relentlessly *de re*" (Mason, "Spinoza on Modality," 318). Notwithstanding Mason's correct remarks, however, it seems to me that a fundamental difference between a *de dicto* and a *de re* account of necessity can be envisaged on another level, at the core of the whole Spinozist system, demarking the difference by which God is said to exist necessarily (*de re*), and it is necessary therefore (*de dicto*) that all creatures either exist or not. This needs to be investigated. Be that as it may, I thought it useful to quote Miller, since his analysis brilliantly grasps the main point concerning fictitious ideas, namely, "that we must have some knowledge in order to be able to feign."
49. See also Spinoza, TIE §73: "it is certain that inadequate ideas arise in us only from the fact that we are part of a thinking being, of which some thoughts wholly constitute our mind, while others do so only in part."
50. Spinoza, TIE §56.
51. On this point, see also Mason, "Spinoza on Modality," 322: "One imagines that Spinoza would not have sought to deny that sentences such as 'Jan de Witt might not have been assassinated'

could have been used meaningfully. Nor, of course, would he have been concerned with discovering the truth conditions for the use of such sentences. In so far as he could be said to have any contact with this sort of approach then it could only be to deny that the conditions suggested by counterfactuals could ever obtain."