

The Substantial Essence in Spinoza's Ontological Argument

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ABSTRACT Spinoza is standardly thought to understand a being whose essence involves existence as a being that necessarily exists. God exists because His nature says so, with nary an argument for His nature. I argue that this interpretation is mistaken, and that Spinoza includes between his definition of God and argument for His necessary existence an argument for the necessity of His essence. Spinoza then provides three a priori arguments for God's existence that rely crucially on His essence, and his second and third arguments illustrate the mechanism by which God's essence necessitates God. God's essence, I argue, plays a considerably stronger role in Spinoza's ontological argument than scholars have typically understood.

KEYWORDS Spinoza, substance, essence, ontological argument, *EIP*7, reason, power

DESCARTES APPEARS TO INTENTIONALLY DISTANCE his a priori argument for God from the conceptual orientation of earlier arguments by insisting that God's true and immutable nature is something that is real whether he conceives it or not.

I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be called nothing; for although in a sense they can be thought of at will, they are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures.¹

Descartes's idea of a triangle, for instance, is a conception of a true and immutable nature that may be conceived whether any actual triangles do or ever have existed, and that is neither invented by nor dependent on his mind. Descartes argues that his idea of God also refers to a true and immutable nature and that whatever we

¹René Descartes, AT VII.64/CSM II.44. For a conceptualist approach, see Anselm, for instance: "it is one thing for an object to exist in mind, and another thing to understand that an object actually exists. . . . And surely that-than-which-agreater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone [Aliud enim est rem esse in intellectu, alium intelligere rem esse. . . . Et certe id quo maius cogitari nequit, non potest esse in solo intellectu]" (*Proslogion*, 116–17, my translation).

Translations of Descartes are from John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. In citing Descartes, I include the pagination for the source of the passage in Adam and Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, before the location in Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch. I use the standard AT and CSM abbreviations to refer to these works, followed by volume and page number.

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clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to a true and immutable nature really does belong to it.² Since necessary existence clearly and distinctly belongs to God's nature, it follows, Descartes thinks, that God necessarily exists. If God's true and immutable nature is a central component in Descartes's argument for God's necessary existence, then we might expect a clear account of what this nature itself is. When pressed on this in the First and Second Sets of Objections, however, Descartes famously demurs and opts instead to insist on the truthfulness of his idea.³ This is unfortunate; if God's nature is the hook on which Descartes hopes to hang his argument for His necessity, it seems important that he sufficiently anchor the hook.

When Spinoza presents Descartes's argument in *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*, he ignores Descartes's appeal to a true and immutable nature and relies instead, like Descartes in the Replies, on the truthfulness of his idea.⁴ I will not speculate here as to why he omits the fact that Descartes's idea of God refers to a true and immutable nature, but, in his early works, Spinoza is considerably more committal about the reality of God's nature outside his conceiving it. He includes a note in his a priori argument for God in the *Short Treatise* and specifies again in his second argument that immediately follows, for instance, that his idea of God's nature refers to an eternal (by which I presume we can infer "mind-independent") essence or nature.⁵ And in the *Metaphysical Thoughts* he appends to *Descartes'*

²AT VIII.65/CSM II.45.

³Caterus worries that Descartes's idea of God is only an apprehension in his intellect and therefore incapable of making a positive claim about reality outside his mind (AT VII.99/CSM II.71–72). Mersenne seems to grasp that Descartes means for God's nature to refer to something distinct from Descartes's idea but asks for clarity on what this nature itself is. As Mersenne understands the argument, Descartes can conclude "not that God really exists, but only that he ought to exist if his nature is something possible or non-contradictory" (AT VII.127/CSM II.91). Descartes replies to each by insisting that our idea of God's nature is clear and distinct and, therefore, must be true (AT VII.116/CSM II.83; and AT VII.150/CSM II.107). Whatever merit there may be in this response, it does little to clarify the ontological reality of God's true and immutable nature. Indeed, competing explorations of the meaning and reality of Descartes's "true and immutable natures" and their role in his ontological argument continue to this day to be one of the dominant cottage-industries in Cartesian scholarship. See Anthony Kenny, "Eternal Truths"; Margaret Wilson, "Causal Axiom"; Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza*; Tad Schmaltz, "Immutable Essences" and "Platonism and Conceptualism among the Cartesians"; Vere Chappell, "Descartes's Ontology"; Lawrence Nolan, "The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures"; and Marleen Rozemond, "Descartes's Ontology of the Eternal Truths."

⁴Spinoza copies this definition, near verbatim, from Descartes's Second Replies: "When we say that something is contained in the nature or concept of something, that is the same as saying that it is true of that thing, i.e., can be truly affirmed of it" (DPPD9).

All English translations of Spinoza's works are from vols. I and II of Edwin Curley's *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. In citing Spinoza, I use the pagination for the source of the passage in the Gebhardt edition of Spinoza's *Opera* (G), followed by abbreviations for Spinoza's individual works and numerical references to part, book, or chapter (or some combination thereof) per common citation conventions. E.g. G I:15–18/KV I.1, which is on pages 15–18 in vol. 1 of Gebhardt, stands for *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, Part 1, Chapter 1. See Bibliography for a list of abbreviations. For citations to Spinoza's *Ethics* and *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*, I give only the standard geometric citation (e.g. EIP13Dem) because the geometric form of the text makes this an easier way to find the passage in Gebhardt. For these works I use standard abbreviations for proposition, demonstration, etc. E.g. EIP11Alt2 stands for *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 11 Alternative demonstration two. See Bibliography for a full list of such abbreviations.

⁵"Understand the definite nature [as that] by which the thing is what it is . . . as it belongs to the essence of a mountain to have a valley. . . . This is truly eternal and immutable, and must always be

Principles of Philosophy, Spinoza includes a chapter on the being of essence where, in response to those who question whether an essence “has any being outside the intellect,” he replies that this “must surely be granted” and, furthermore, that “an [essence] that is conceived clearly and distinctly, or truly, outside the intellect is something different from the idea” (G 1:238/CM I.2). I would like to explore more carefully how Spinoza understands and draws on God’s nature in his mature a priori argument for God. Unlike Descartes who refrains from offering a clear account of God’s true and immutable nature, I believe that Spinoza sets out in the *Ethics* to anchor the hook for God’s own reality by preceding this argument with an explicit argument for God’s eternal and mind-independent essence.

Spinoza’s a priori argument for God, which hereafter and following Kant I will refer to as the “ontological argument,” is standardly thought to secure the necessity of substance before securing the necessity of one substance in particular—God.⁶ Commentators read *E* IP7, where Spinoza states that “it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist,” as an argument for the necessity of substance, and *E* IP11, where Spinoza argues that “God . . . necessarily exists,” as an argument for God.⁷ The latter interpretation is certainly correct, but I believe the common interpretation of *E* IP7 puts the cart well before the horse. I argue that, in *E* IP7, Spinoza does not mean to secure the necessity of substance itself but, rather, the necessity of its nature; “it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist” means, I argue, that the nature of any substance is a nature that has to exist. If I am right, then Spinoza inserts between his idea or definition of God and his argument for God’s necessary existence an intermediate argument for the eternal and mind-independent reality of God’s essence. Furthermore, not only does Spinoza provide an account and argument for God’s essence, but his second and third ontological arguments illustrate the mechanism(s) through which God’s essence necessitates God. If so, then scholars have yet to appreciate the role that God’s essence plays in Spinoza’s ontological argument. Though my aim here is principally to defend this reading of Spinoza’s argument, if I am right it may also identify an important difference with and improvement on Descartes’s ontological argument.⁸

in the concept of a mountain, even if it does not exist, and never did” (G 1:15/KVI.1) and, in the second argument for God, “the essences of things are from all eternity and will remain immutable to all eternity” (G 1:15/KVI.1). We should include a cautionary note about “mind-independence” since, for Spinoza, everything whatsoever is conceived by God (*E* 2p3). I use “mind-independence” to mean that the object of a true idea about an essence is real outside and distinct from its being conceived by some finite intellect.

⁶For our purposes here, I will take an “ontological argument” to refer to any argument for God’s existence that is ostensibly a priori and that appeals in some important way to God’s nature. Specifically, I will take Spinoza’s second and third a priori arguments for the existence of God to be “ontological.”

⁷The standard reading is affirmed by William Earle, “Spinoza’s Ontological Argument”; Gueroult, *Spinoza*, 123; Don Garrett, “Spinoza’s ‘Ontological’ Argument,” 204–8; Alan Hart, *Platonic Commentary*, 17; Jonathan Bennett, *Study*, 73; Curley, *Geometrical Method*, 61; Vincent Carraud, *Causa sive Ratio*, 312; John Carriero, “Monism in Spinoza,” 43; Michael Della Rocca, “Rationalist Manifesto,” 13; Steven Nadler, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, 65; Kevin Harrelson, *The Ontological Argument*, 132–33; and Charlie Huenemann, *Spinoza’s Radical Theology*, 39.

⁸Spinoza’s first a priori argument in his early *Short Treatise* is an almost exact copy of Descartes’s, and he draws specifically from Descartes’s Second Replies in *Descartes’s Principles of Philosophy*, so he was likely familiar with Mersenne’s and Caterus’s concerns. I do not argue here whether Spinoza intended, if my interpretation is correct, to improve on Descartes’s argument, but his familiarity with

In what follows I use “substantial essence” to refer to the essence or nature of substance and “God’s substantial essence” to refer to God’s nature or essence. I discuss this further on, but basically, *EIP7* plays a vital role in the argument for God’s necessary existence in *EIP11*, yet Spinoza leaves it to the reader to infer that whatever *EIP7* says about substance applies by extension and seemingly without remark to God.⁹ I find that using “substantial essence” and “God’s substantial essence” helps the reader to better understand *EIP7* and its role in *EIP11*. This is wholly heuristic; the interpretation I defend here would, to the best of my knowledge, be unchanged if I used “nature of substance,” “essence of God,” or similar locutions. Additionally, though at the risk of getting ahead of ourselves, let me also note that once we learn in *EIP14* that God is the only substance, for reasons explained below, it follows that God’s essence is and always was the only substantial essence. So while *EIP7* argues, on the standard reading, for the necessity of substance or, on the reading defended here, the necessity of its essence, we are welcome to understand the object of this proposition following *EIP14* to be God’s necessity, or the necessity of God’s essence. Again, I find that “substantial essence” and “God’s substantial essence” allows us to better connect these ideas.

I. SPINOZA’S SUBSTANTIAL ESSENCE

How we understand the contours of Spinoza’s ontological argument turns significantly on how we read *EIP7*, where he claims that “Ad naturam substantiae pertinent existere.” Most commentators interpret this as asserting that the nature of substance entails its existence, which is to say, that substance necessarily exists.¹⁰ The proposition itself is far from clear, however, and Spinoza’s argument does little to reveal its meaning. I defend a narrower reading of *EIP7* by arguing that Spinoza is affirming existence only of the *essence* of a substance; that he means to claim only that for any substance its “substantial essence” necessarily exists.¹¹ If so, then Spinoza is explicitly arguing for a mind-independent substantial essence in *EIP7*. In the next section, I argue that, looking back from *EIP14*, the dutiful reader should realize that the substantial essence of *EIP7* can only be God’s essence, making *EIP7* in effect an argument for God’s substantial essence.

The argument for *EIP7* proceeds as follows:

the Objections and early efforts to secure the reality of God’s nature apart from a mind thinking it incline me to suspect, principally with the interpretation defended here in mind, that he did. I leave the details and a dedicated defense of this claim for another time.

⁹The proposition states “God, or a substance consisting of . . .,” but the demonstration does not explain why the earlier proposition about the nature of substance applies in an argument for God.

¹⁰See n. 7. Gilles Deleuze is the only other commentator I am aware of who thinks Spinoza argues for the reality of God’s nature—by arguing for the reality of God’s definition—before arguing for the existence of God. Deleuze thinks Spinoza does not secure the reality of God’s essence until *EIP10S*, however, whereas I argue that *EIP7* is a direct argument for the reality of substantial essence (which, with *EIP14*, we recognize as God’s essence) (*Expressionism*, 75–76).

¹¹Charles Jarrett briefly entertains this reading (“Logical Structure,” 36–37); Alexandre Matheron discusses both interpretations before concluding that Spinoza favored the more aggressive alternative (“Essence, Existence, and Power,” 24–25); and Martin Lin acknowledges that *EIP7* “is not unambiguously the claim that substances necessarily exist” (“Spinoza’s Arguments for the Existence of God,” 273). Lin also notes, as I will argue as well, that the first argument of *EIP11*, where Spinoza draws primarily on *EIP7*, does not require this reading.

- (1) A substance, by IP6C, cannot be produced by anything else.
- (2) From (1), any substance will therefore produce itself; it will be its own cause.
- (3) A substance that must be its own cause is, by ID1, a substance whose essence involves existence.
- (4) The essence of substance, then, involves existence.

Before we address its meaning and rationale, we should correct a small but important omission. The argument as it stands is superficially invalid: Just because a substance cannot be produced by something else does not entail that it produces itself; premise (2) does not follow from premise (1). We can close this gap by noting that Spinoza is likely including as an implicit premise E1ax3, where he notes that “if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow.” *E* IP6 discusses substances as things that are “produced,” indicating that substances are effects or, incorporating E1A3, things that require causes.¹² Because any substance requires a cause (*E* 1A3), and nothing other than the substance can be its cause (*E* IP6C), a substance must be its own cause.¹³ This improves the argument for *E* IP7 but does little to aid our understanding what Spinoza means by it.

Let us grant that substances are entities that require a cause and that the only possible cause is the substance itself. According to *E* ID1, “By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.” Something that is self-caused, then, is definitionally equivalent to something whose nature involves existence, which is to say, something whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.¹⁴ But why are these equivalent expressions? What, exactly, does Spinoza mean by the claim that the nature of a self-caused being involves existence? And what does it mean to say about a thing—or its nature—that its nature cannot be conceived except as existing? The common interpretation, as noted earlier, understands *E* ID1 to mean that a self-caused being is a necessary being; that we cannot conceive of its nature without recognizing that the being itself must exist. Garrett and Bennett provide representative samples of this reading. Garrett, discussing *E* ID1, writes that “It is not obvious that having an ‘essence involving existence’ should entail having logically necessary existence, but that is the case for Spinoza” and, shortly thereafter, that according to *E* ID1, “a being whose essence involves existence will be one whose existence follows from its definition.”¹⁵ Bennett writes that:

¹²Suppose, for a stronger argument, that substances are not effects; that they are not things for which causes matter (see Harry Wolfson, *Philosophy of Spinoza*, 127). Spinoza’s entire argument would, on this assumption, be superfluous since, if a substance could exist without a reason or cause, there would be nothing stopping substances—God or otherwise—from randomly ceasing to exist as well, and little reason for Spinoza to provide four separate demonstrations of God’s existence in *E* IP11. For another argument for a broad reading of “effect,” see Garrett, “Spinoza’s ‘Ontological’ Argument,” 202–3.

¹³Jarrett, “Logical Structure,” 37 and Lin, “Spinoza’s Arguments for the Existence of God,” 273–74, adopt similar re-constructions to close this gap; Bennett gives the additional premise a quick nod of agreement as well (*Learning from Six Philosophers*, 122). Gueroult appeals instead to *E* IP8S2, where Spinoza explicitly evokes a principle of sufficient reason (*Spinoza*, 123). If we can fill a gap with something Spinoza has already argued for then I think that is preferable to drawing upon a later argument and therefore concur with Jarrett and Lin’s emendation.

¹⁴“Per causam sui intelligo id, cujus essentia involvit necessario existentiam, sive id, cujus natura non potest concipi nisi existens” (*E* ID1), reiterated in *E* IP7Dem as “ipsius essentia involvit necessario existentiam, sive ad ejus naturam pertinent existere.”

¹⁵Garrett, “Spinoza’s ‘Ontological’ Argument,” 203, then employs this reading of *E* ID1 in his analysis of *E* IP7. Gueroult similarly notes that *E* IP7 is meant to secure the necessary existence of substance (*Spinoza*, 123).

In *E ID1* [Spinoza] offers as a definition of ‘cause of itself’ something that is really a substantive claim—namely, that if we are to make sense of the concept of self-causedness we must take it to be the concept of ‘having a nature which must be instantiated.’ This is then used in *E IP7dem*: a substance cannot be caused by anything else (and must be caused by something), so it must be the cause of itself, which has to mean that its nature is necessarily instantiated.¹⁶

For Garrett, Bennett, and the other proponents of this interpretation, Spinoza follows Descartes in understanding an essence involving existence as an essence whose subject necessarily exists (Garrett), that is, an essence that is necessarily instantiated in its subject (Bennett).¹⁷

I believe that the common interpretation is mistaken. In what follows, I argue that Spinoza first secures the necessary existence of substantial essence (*E IP7*) and only later, in *E IP11*, argues for the necessity of its instantiation in God. If this is correct, then Garrett, Bennett, and other proponents of the common interpretation fail to recognize that Spinoza includes between a true idea or definition of God and God’s own necessary existence an argument for the necessity of God’s substantial essence. Before defending my interpretation, I would like to raise three concerns with the common interpretation.

First, the common interpretation commits Spinoza to a blunder that he was aware of and likely sought to avoid. A careful reader of the common interpretation might grant that God’s substantial essence would mandate His own reality yet question whether there is any such essence; without God’s essence, there is no God. Spinoza was certainly aware of this concern, as it closely resembles a question raised by Oldenburg in a letter to Spinoza in 1661:

do you understand clearly and without doubt that, merely from the definition you give of God, it is demonstrated that such a being exists? When I reflect that definitions contain only our mind’s concepts, that our mind conceives many things which do not exist . . . I do not yet see how I can infer God’s existence from the concept I have of him. (G 4:10/Ep. 3)

Spinoza replies by scolding Oldenburg for failing, as a good philosopher must, to know the difference between a fiction and a true idea (G 4:13/Ep. 4). True ideas agree with some object, fictitious ideas do not. Spinoza’s intention, then, was clearly for there to be an object for our idea of God. The question is whether, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza secures the reality of this object by a simple definition (*E ID1*), or whether he seeks to argue for its reality by arguing in *E IP7* for the necessity of the essence itself. Leibniz criticizes Descartes’s argument for moving too fast and

¹⁶Bennett, *Study*, 73.

¹⁷Della Rocca, “Spinoza’s Substance Monism,” 13 and *Spinoza*, 49–50, also endorses the common interpretation, but does so by appealing to Spinoza’s argument in *E IP11Alt*, that nothing can prevent substance from existing. Spinoza does argue as such in *E IP11Alt*, but he arrives at this conclusion by drawing on more than *E IP7*—he needs in addition his claim that “for each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason.” This, Spinoza thinks, makes it evident that the subject of a substance must exist. I read this appeal to a principle of sufficient reason as a genuine contribution of *E IP11Alt* meaning, in contrast to Della Rocca, that though the conclusion facilitated by this principle extends the ontological implication of *E IP7*, we should locate this conclusion in *E IP11Alt* and not read it back into *E IP7*. My thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to clarify this point. Hart, *Platonic Commentary*, 17, also reads *E IP11* into *E IP7*.

forcing itself on its reader: "Real demonstrations, on the other hand, generally fill the mind with some solid nourishment."¹⁸ Given Spinoza's familiarity with this concern, and especially since by his own words he is attributing existence to a nature and not yet its actual substance, I find it more likely that Spinoza pauses in *E IP7* to nourish his reader with a short defense of the existence of substantial essence before turning to the necessity of its instantiation.¹⁹

Second, we should not saddle Spinoza's definitions with substantive metaphysical claims when more plausible alternatives are available. As discussed earlier, Garrett and Bennett maintain that *E ID1* defines a self-caused being as a necessarily existing being (Garrett), or a being whose essence is necessarily instantiated (Bennett). But in his definition of a self-caused being, Spinoza specifies, not that a self-caused being is necessary but, rather, that its *essence* is necessary, that is, that its *essence* cannot be conceived except as existing. When he later argues for God's existence, he claims specifically that *God* necessarily exists (*E IP11*). If we can safeguard Spinoza from the charge that he smuggles deep metaphysical claims into his system through his definitions, then I think, at least until convinced otherwise, we should do so.²⁰ I suggest that we concede the merit of Bennett's objection—that *E ID1* is too substantive for an undefended definition—but rather than foisting it against the *Ethics* raise it instead against the common interpretation's reading.

Third, the common interpretation renders Spinoza's four arguments for the existence of God superfluous and does not explain why the argument that draws upon *E IP7* requires an additional premise. If the common interpretation is correct, then Spinoza need only have noted from *E ID6* that God is a substance and concluded, by *E IP7*, that he necessarily exists. But this is not how he argues; instead, he deploys four separate and complicated arguments for God, only one of which draws on *E IP7* (*E IP11*). Furthermore, when he does draw on *E IP7*, he appeals to *E IA7* in addition, which connects the contingency of a thing with the contingency of its essence.²¹ Briefly, if God did not exist, then, by *E IA7*, God's essence would not involve existence, which contradicts *E IP7* (*E IP11*idem). If Spinoza means for *E IP7* to mandate that a substance necessarily exists, then it is a wonder why he needs *E IA7* at all and does not make do instead with a simple corollary to *E IP7* reminding the reader that God is a substance. We might defend the number of arguments and machinery employed in *E IP11* by suggesting that Spinoza is simply reinforcing what is admittedly a central claim of book I, but his appeal to an axiom relating the contingency of a thing to the contingency of its

¹⁸G. W. Leibniz, "Letter to Countess Elizabeth," in *Philosophical Essays*, 237. See also "Critical Thoughts on the General Part of The Principles of Descartes," in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 386.

¹⁹Suggesting that a substantial essence is identical with its substance should not matter since, even if this did reflect Spinoza's ultimate position, we should respect that his language is tailored at the outset to differentiate between the nature of a substance and its subject (see also n. 28).

²⁰While this, too, is a metaphysical claim, I argue and further explain later that it neatly falls in line with Spinoza's truthmaker argument which, briefly, is that a substantial essence is necessary because it is the only possible truthmaker, whether its subject exists or not, for the truth that it alone is capable of producing its subject.

²¹"If a thing can be conceived as not existing, its essence does not involve existence" (*E IA7*). The common interpretation would read this axiom, along the lines of their reading of *E IP7*, as a claim about the subject of the essence. I discuss this axiom later, see, in particular, n. 51.

essence suggests that what *EIP7* says about an essence should not immediately be read as a claim about the thing with that essence.

Each of these concerns express in one way or another a general criticism of this reading, which is that it puts the cart well before the horse. We all know that Spinoza will eventually argue that God's substantial essence entails God's own necessary existence, meaning that he does ultimately think that at least one substantial essence necessitates its subject. We should be wary, however, of reading this deep and important claim into the definitions and propositions Spinoza relies on in his march toward God's necessity. I propose a more restricted interpretation of *EIP7* as an argument for a substantial essence.

Let us start with *EID1*, where Spinoza defines "cause of itself" as "that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing." Suppose, as a literal reading would certainly indicate, that *EID1* means only the following: By cause of itself I understand that whose essence has the necessary feature of existence, that is, that whose nature can be conceived only as an existent nature. On this reading, *EID1* is claiming that for any entity that is its own cause, its nature or essence necessarily exists. This would be in marked contrast to other essences like those included in the infinite and eternal modes that, because they are produced by something else, may or may not exist.²² So understood, the argument for *EIP7* would link *EIP6C*—that substances are self-caused beings—with *EID1*—that self-caused beings have necessarily existent essences. If so, then *EID1* and its application in *EIP7* represent an argument for a mind-independent substantial essence.²³ In what follows, I argue that the language of *EIP7*, Spinoza's account of truth in *EIA6* and employment of this in *EIP7Dem*, and his explanatory review of *EIP7* in *EIP8S2* each lend considerable weight to this reading of *EIP7*. Though the common interpretation is well entrenched, I think these arguments, especially in conjunction with the problems with the common interpretation identified above, should persuade us to adopt my reading of *EIP7*.

In *EID1*, Spinoza defines something that is its own cause as something whose essence involves existence, and in *EIP7* he shows that existence pertains to the nature of substance. Unlike his later affirmation in *EIP11* that God necessarily exists, or *EIP14* that no substance other than God can be or be conceived, Spinoza restricts his remarks in *EID1* and *EIP7* to the nature or essence of a self-caused being; unlike later occurrences, existence is predicated in these instances of an essence, not its instantiation. In *EID1* Spinoza uses *involvere* to denote this relation, and in *EIP7* he replaces this with a cognate, *pertinere*. The "*x* involves (*involvit*) *y*"

²²There is a range of alternate conceptions of what the essence or essences amidst the infinite modes are (see Gueroult, *Spinoza*, 321–22; Schmaltz, "Spinoza's Mediate Infinite Mode," 210–14; Christopher Martin, "The Framework of Essences," 500–507; Garrett, "Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body," 289–90; and Nadler, "Spinoza's Monism," 234–36). I will not enter this discussion here except to note that my interpretation of *EIP7* may assist our understanding of essences in general and my interpretation of Spinoza's second and third ontological arguments may assist our understanding of how other essences follow from God's nature.

²³Spinoza's version of this claim in the *Short Treatise*, though not definitive, also supports my reading of *EIP7*: "Existence belongs, by nature, to the essence of every substance, so much that it is impossible to posit in an infinite intellect the idea of the essence of a substance which does not exist in Nature" (G 1:116/KVApp).

locution, like the “y pertains (*pertinet*) to x” locution, means that x has the feature of y, or that it includes y within it.²⁴ An essence involves existence means, then, that the essence has the feature of existence. Whether its subject or instantiation also has this feature—something Spinoza is explicit about only later—is as of *E IP7* an open question. If we attend just to the language of *E ID1* and *E IP7*, then, we have good reason to interpret them as claims only about a substantial essence, not its instantiation.²⁵

Some may argue that a substantial essence is identical to the substance itself.²⁶ This certainly reflects much of the medieval thinking about God, especially as regards His simplicity, and likely resonates with Descartes.²⁷ I believe that there are strong grounds to dispute reading Spinoza in this way, but given the contentious nature of this issue, let me note that I wish to focus here only on the language of and rationale for *E IP7*.²⁸ Even if we later discover that a substance is identical with its essence, Spinoza’s language and rationale are nevertheless tailored at the outset of his argument to refer only to “the nature of a substance.” Thus, although identifying God with God’s essence, or substance generally with its essence, may alter how we understand *E IP7*, I do not think it should change how we read the proposition. Similarly, when we learn in *E IP14* that no substance other than God can be or be conceived we are welcome to go back and think about *E IP7* now as a claim specifically and only about God’s essence (or God), but I think it would be a mistake to read *E IP7* as such.

Reading *E IP7* in the light of Spinoza’s truth axiom provides another strong indication that, in *E IP7*, he means to secure the necessity only of substantial essence, not its instantiation. In *E IA6*, Spinoza states that “A true idea must agree with its object,” which I understand to mean that for every true idea, there is an object that accurately expresses or constitutes its content. In *E IP7dem* (drawing upon *E IP6C*), Spinoza argues that any substance, because it cannot be produced by anything else, will be its own cause. Ask, with *E IA6* in mind, what the object of this truth—that any substance must be its own cause—might be. If the object were anything other than the self-caused object, then the truth would cease to agree with its object. Conversely, the object of this true idea cannot be the object’s actual

²⁴*Involvere* is also used in this way in *E IA4*, *E IA5*, and *E IA7*. Zachary Gartenberg, “Spinozistic Expression,” 6–7, interprets *involvere* in a strictly conceptual manner. Its use in *E IA7* in particular suggests, however, that Spinoza intends for it to carry an ontological dimension as well.

²⁵The argument for *E IP7* relies crucially on *E ID1*. As such, we cannot determine whether the argument for *E IP7* supports the common reading or my reading without first determining whether *E ID1* defines a self-caused being as a being whose essence necessarily exists or a being that itself necessarily exists.

²⁶See Earle, “The Ontological Argument in Spinoza,” 552.

²⁷See Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 55–57, or Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 132–33, for two instances of the medieval view. Descartes likens separating God’s essence from God’s existence to separating a mountain from its valley (AT VII.66/CSM II.46, see also AT VII.383/CSM II.263).

²⁸Briefly, suppose that God’s essence is identical with God. We learn in *E IP15* that the essence of man is contained within God (*E IP15*). If God is identical with God’s essence, then the essence of man would also be contained within God’s essence. But God’s essence is necessarily instantiated (*E IP11*), and as Spinoza argues in *E IIP10*, if the essence of man were included in God’s essence then individual men would also necessary exist. Individual men do not necessarily exist (*E IA1*), showing that the essence of man cannot be included in God’s essence. God and God’s essence, then, cannot be the same.

much less necessary existence since all *E IP6* and *E IP6C*—the premises used to support *E IP7*—show is that a substance can only be self-caused. The necessity or even just actuality of a self-caused substance would go well beyond the truth that its nature alone is capable of producing it.²⁹ The argument for *E IP7* read alongside Spinoza's truth doctrine indicates, then, that *E IP7* is meant to affirm the reality of a substantial essence, not its instance.³⁰

Finally, two aspects of Spinoza's clarificatory review of *E IP7* in *EIP8S2* separately support the reading I propose here. He begins his clarification of *E IP7* in *EIP8S2* by noting that "if men would attend to the nature of substance, they would have no doubt at all of the truth of *E IP7*. Indeed, this proposition would be an axiom for everyone, and would be numbered among the common notions." That a self-caused being is definitionally equivalent to a necessarily existing being is, I think, a far cry from a common notion, much less an axiom that everyone would readily agree to. His belief that every truth has an object whose truth it conveys, or that a truly independent being cannot be causally dependent on something else, while perhaps not universally accepted are, nevertheless, considerably more common, even axiomatic, than the aggressive claim that any being that is its own cause necessarily exists. If Spinoza really does think *E IP7* is axiomatic, it is likely that he intends for it to secure a subdued as opposed to substantive metaphysical claim.

A closer look at his appeal to the causal and conceptual independence of substance in the scholium adds a second considerable line of support for my reading. Spinoza understands the independence of a substance to require that it can neither be produced nor even understood through anything else.³¹ As he argues in *EIP6Alt* and reiterates in *EIP8S2*, if a substance were caused by something else, then we could not adequately conceive of it without also conceiving of whatever causes it, which would violate its conceptual independence.³² Spinoza illustrates this by contrasting a true idea of a mode (a dependent particular) that does not exist with a true idea of a substance that does not exist: "though [nonexistent modes] 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" (*E IP8S2*). Fa-shir, the kitten I rescued who would much later die from a respiratory infection, is a nonexistent mode. Though Fa-shir does not currently actually exist outside my recollection of her, her formal and objective eternal essences do.³³ I take

²⁹Gueroult also reads *E IP7* as identifying a certain truthmaker for substance, but instead of restricting the object of the truth of *E IP7* to the essence suggests instead that the object is the necessary existence of the substance itself (*Spinoza*, 124–25).

³⁰Leibniz thinks that Spinoza, like Descartes, fails to establish the possibility of substance before arguing for its actuality, a concern he raises in his reading of *E IP7* ("On the Ethics of Benedict de Spinoza," in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 199). If the idea of a self-caused being is consistent, however, then its truth requires that its essence exist, so if Spinoza does restrict himself to the consideration of a self-caused substance then the logical coherency of this minimal idea should be enough to secure, with his truth doctrine, the necessity of its essence.

³¹"By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing" (*E ID3*).

³²For an intriguing discussion of the depth of Spinoza's commitment to conception, see Samuel Newlands, "Another Kind of Spinozistic Monism."

³³These essences are the objects, or means, by which we can have true ideas of nonexistent modes (*E IP8S2*); see also *EVP23*, *E IIP8*, *E IIP8C*, and n. 22 for more on this issue.

Spinoza to mean by this that Fa-shir's eternal essence follows from some cause, and it does so independent of Fa-shir's actual existence; I can comprehend her essence at any time, then, by comprehending whatever other eternal essences produce it. Spinoza continues, "But the truth of substances is not outside the intellect unless it is in them themselves, because they are conceived through themselves" (*E IP8S2*). Unlike the essences of nonexistent modes that may be conceived by comprehending their cause, the essence of a nonexistent substance, because of its conceptual independence, can only be conceived through itself. The only way to conceive an essence for a substance that does not exist, then, is by conceiving its essence itself.³⁴ If so, then the mere conceivability of a nonexistent substance mandates that its essence, the subject of its conceivability, exist. This seems to be another iteration of the truth axiom argument: there is a truth about a substance whether it actually exists or not, but given its conceptual independence, this truth is possible only if its object—a substantial essence—necessarily exists. The clarification of *E IP7* in *E IP8S2*, then, provides another strong indicator, while reinforcing the strength of the truth axiom argument from earlier, that *E IP7* is meant to secure the necessity of substantial essences, not their instances.

Let us take stock. The standard interpretation of *E IP7*, though well-entrenched, saddles Spinoza with a blunder he was aware of, requires that his definition of a self-caused being carry unnecessary ontological weight, and burdens *E IP7* with more argumentative heft than he thought it could bear. The reading I defend, by contrast, is suggested by the language of *E ID1* and *E IP7*, reflects Spinoza's truth doctrine, and is supported by his review of *E IP7* in *E IP8S2*.

2. FROM SUBSTANTIAL ESSENCE TO GOD'S SUBSTANTIAL ESSENCE

I take the above to offer a compelling case for a narrower reading of *E IP7* as an argument for the mind-independence of substantial essence, not substance itself. This does not yet demonstrate a clear attempt to ground God's substantial essence, however, since Spinoza is discussing *naturam substantiae*, not *naturam Dei*, and when he later refers specifically to God's nature, he appears to take its mind-independence for granted.³⁵ Does Spinoza follow *E IP7* with an argument for the mind-independence of *God's* substantial nature?

³⁴Spinoza does note elsewhere in the scholium that "it must be confessed that the existence of a substance, like its essence, is an eternal truth," which we may well take as strong evidence for the aggressive reading of *E IP7*. I have argued, however, that this is unsupported by the language of *E ID1* and *E IP7*. And when Spinoza again glosses the conclusion of *E IP7* nearer the end of the scholium, he does so by noting that "since it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist . . . its definition must involve necessary existence, and consequently its existence must be inferred from its definition alone." Spinoza's language in this gloss recalls the specification of existence as a feature of the nature of substance (though here it is the definition, a synonym for the nature, which must exist) from which Spinoza concludes only that the existence of the substance can follow from its definition alone, not that it necessarily does so. So even if Spinoza does fall into his eventual claim in the scholium in the passage cited above, he quickly returns to the narrower reading supported by his preceding language and argument.

³⁵In *E IP11A1*Alt, for instance, Spinoza states that the reason or cause that prevents God from existing or that takes his existence away would have to be within God's nature or outside it, and proceeds to argue that since it cannot be outside God's nature it must be within it. We might interpret such remarks as arguments for God's nature—God's nature is the only possible explanation for God's (not existing—but Spinoza seems clearly to be simply including God's nature within his argument for God's own existence. See also *E IP11S*.

Some propose that Spinoza intends for his definition of God to be a real definition, meaning that it delineates and refers to a certain mind-independent objective being—in this case, God’s substantial essence.³⁶ If so, then God’s substantial essence would, for better or worse, be present in Spinoza’s system from the start. While I agree that Spinoza means for his definition of God to be a true definition, and that true definitions have some object (*E IA6*), I think the inference that his definitions are saddled with ontological weight is premature.³⁷ Spinoza, as I read him, aims instead to *earn* the truth and ontological implication of this definition. He certainly understands his definition of substance to capture some truth, but as I have argued here, Spinoza nevertheless argues explicitly for its object—mind-independent substantial essence. The same is true, I think, for God’s substantial essence except that with *E IP7* in place the inference to God’s substantial essence is so immediate that Spinoza leaves it for his reader. In the first proof for *E IP11*, Spinoza establishes that God’s essence involves existence, for instance, only by noting that by *E IP7* it would be absurd to conceive otherwise. He does not remind his reader that God is a substance or include a note that *E IP7* applies to any substance including God; he instead takes it as obvious, given *E IP7*, that God’s essence must involve existence.³⁸

I think we can go further still and conclude that *E IP7* can be understood after the fact as an argument specifically for God’s substantial essence. This is extraneous once Spinoza secures substance monism in *E IP14*, but the rationale is nevertheless illuminating. We learn in *E IP14* that “except God, no substance can be or be conceived.” If we understand this to imply that God’s substantial essence is the only substantial essence that can be or be conceived, then though we of course cannot conclude as much at the time, if *E IP7* secures the reality of substantial essence and there is in fact only one substantial essence, then *E IP7* is in spirit, though not letter, an argument for God’s substantial essence. We can unpack this as follows. Substances cannot produce one another since their doing so would violate their causal and conceptual independence (*E IP6Alt*). And as Spinoza explains in his second proof for *E IP11*, this applies as much to their existence as their non-existence, meaning that one substance cannot be the reason or cause for another substance existing or *not* existing. Let us now assume that there are multiple internally consistent substantial essences. We would then understandably ask why the subject of God’s substantial essence exists but the subjects of these other substantial essences do not.³⁹ As I show later, Spinoza’s first

³⁶Deleuze, for instance, thinks Spinoza’s definition of God is the only true definition (*Expressionism*, 20). See also Garrett, “Spinoza’s ‘Ontological’ Argument,” 203; Harrelson, *The Ontological Argument*, 23; and, for a characteristically clear presentation of this issue, Nadler, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, 44–48.

³⁷I agree with Kristina Meshelski, “Two Kinds of Definition in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” 212–13, who has a nice account of how definitions may be true without carrying inherent ontological weight.

³⁸Alternatively, it could be that Spinoza meant for the proposition itself, where he writes not simply that God necessarily exists but that God “sive substantia constans infinitis attributis” necessarily exists, secures the inference. It would be rare for Spinoza to embed a premise for a claim in the claim itself however, and if he does, the inference is again immediate enough that Spinoza does not think it requires anything other than a momentary reminder that God is a substance.

³⁹To assume otherwise would require that God’s is the only internally consistent substantial essence, yet Spinoza openly explores the real possibility of multiple substances in his first propositions without nary a word about their internal consistency.

argument for God easily generalizes to other substances, so if the subjects of other substantial essences are possible, then by Spinoza's own reasoning they too should necessarily exist. Nor can God prevent their existing since this would violate their causal/conceptual independence. Since their possibility entails the necessity of their subject, the only conclusion we can draw is that God's is the only possible substantial essence.⁴⁰ If this is so, then with *EIP14* in hand we are welcome and possibly even encouraged to look back to *EIP7* and interpret it, now and with *EIP14* principally in mind, as an argument for God's substantial essence.

3. A FIRST PASS FROM GOD'S SUBSTANTIAL ESSENCE TO GOD'S OWN NECESSITY

As noted earlier, if the common reading of *EIP7* were correct, then Spinoza's argument for God's necessary existence would have been exceedingly easy: God is a substance (*EID6*) and since substance necessarily exists (*EIP7*), God necessarily exists.⁴¹ But this is not how Spinoza argues. He instead provides four different arguments, and when he does appeal to *EIP7* he makes no explicit appeal to God being a substance and needs additional premises to make the argument work.⁴² I think we can better understand Spinoza's arguments for God by regarding them as different attempts to explain why God's substantial essence is necessarily instantiated. His first argument relies on a counter-intuitive axiom, *EIA7*, whose only use in the *Ethics* is *EIP11*. Though I will offer little in support of this suggestion, I suspect that Spinoza intends for this argument to connect with the argument discussed by Aquinas and Descartes, in particular. After securing a connection with the history of this way of thinking, Spinoza then moves in his second and third a priori arguments to replace the unsupported inference afforded by *EIA7* with what he thinks are stronger inferences, namely, conceiving of God's essence as an essence infused with reason and with power.⁴³

We can formalize Spinoza's first argument as follows:⁴⁴

⁴⁰There are additional complexities to this argument that I explore elsewhere, but regardless, it is a mistake to think Spinoza can argue for substance monism or, here, substantial-essence monism, by pitting God against the possibility of other substances. Timothy Sprigge, failing to appreciate this point, explains Spinoza's third a priori argument as "a kind of battle between all the [substantial] essences as to which shall exist" (*The God of Metaphysics*, 38).

⁴¹See Jarrett, "Logical Structure," 42, for an example of this.

⁴²I will restrict my analysis to Spinoza's a priori arguments and largely ignore his a posteriori cosmological argument in *EIP11Alt2*.

⁴³Gueroult suggests that Spinoza's second and third arguments are meant to provide positive arguments as supplements to the negative connotation of the first argument—that God's not existing is absurd (*Spinoza*, 179–87). After dismissing the first argument as the "least interesting, least original, and least convincing," Lin suggests that the remaining arguments exhibit different ways to employ the PSR in a defense of God ("Spinoza's Arguments for the Existence of God," 270). I argue that the second argument explains why God must exist and the third explains how; these arguments, in other words, are designed to complement and reinforce one another.

⁴⁴"Conceive, if you can, that God does not exist. Therefore (by A7) his essence does not involve existence. But this (by P7) is absurd. Therefore God necessary exists" (*EIP7Dem*). There are difficult questions about the role of conception, its relation to adequacy, and their relation to ontology in this argument that I will not be addressing here.

- (1) Conceive if you can that God does not exist.
- (2) If a thing can be conceived as not existing, its essence does not involve existence (*EIA7*).
- (3) The essence of God, then, would not involve existence, that is, its existence is not necessary.
- (4) God is a substance (*EID6*).
- (5) Because God is a substance God's essence necessarily exists (*EIP7*).
- (6) God's essence cannot both necessarily exist and possibly not exist.
- (7) Given the contradiction, it is not possible to conceive of God as not existing.
- (8) God necessarily exists.

Premise (4), which Spinoza needs in order to have recourse to *EIP7* in (5), beckons to contemporary ears Kant's famous objection that "the absolute necessity of the judgment is only a conditioned necessity of the thing. . . . [The] proposition does not declare that three angles are absolutely necessary, but that, under the condition that there is a triangle . . . three angles will necessarily be found in it."⁴⁵ Because God being a substance is the condition under which God's necessity is derived, Spinoza's argument succeeds only by postulating God as a substance and using this to infer that God is necessary. This is near to Mersenne's critique of Descartes, and since Spinoza was intimately familiar with the second replies there is reason to suggest that Spinoza was not wholly unaware of this general line of concern.⁴⁶ Lin, who includes that God is a substance in his own deft reconstruction, characterizes the problem by noting that premise (4) may be read semantically or as a logical quantifier.⁴⁷ Read semantically, the argument begs the question of God's actual existence and can therefore conclude only that if God is actual then God is necessary. If we instead endorse the quantifier reading of premise (4) as, loosely, "anything that is God is a substance," we can infer only that if anything were God then it would exist necessarily.

While I do not find Spinoza's first argument successful either, I think its problem lies elsewhere. Step back and consider the argument with the interpretation of *EIP7* defended in the previous section in mind. On this reading, premise (4) does not smuggle God's actuality in under the blanket of God's definition or concept;

⁴⁵Kant, shortly thereafter, explains that "The deluding influence exercised by this logical necessity that, by the simple device of forming an *a priori* concept of a thing in such a manner as to include existence within the scope of its meaning, we have supposed ourselves to have justified the conclusion that because existence necessarily belongs to the object of this concept . . . we are also of necessity . . . required to posit the existence of its object" (*CPR A 594/B 622*).

⁴⁶Specifically, Mersenne worries that Descartes can conclude only that "existence belongs to [God's] nature . . . it does not follow from this that God in fact exists." (*AT VII.127/CSM II.91*). Gasendi similarly complains in the Fifth Set of Objections that just because existence cannot be separated from God's essence does not yet mean that existence cannot be separated from God (*AT VII.323/CSM II.224*). Spinoza refers to the Fifth Meditation and Descartes's Replies to the First Objections in his *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* (*DPP IP5*). He also includes in this work a set of definitions that are near verbatim repetitions from Descartes's geometric presentation at the close of his Second Replies (*DPP ID1-10*), as is Spinoza's presentation of Descartes's argument for a real distinction between mind and body, which he explicitly acknowledges (*DPP IP8*). Meyer notes that Spinoza drew on the *Meditations* in constructing his *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* (*DPP Pref*).

⁴⁷Lin acknowledges a debt to Charles Huenemann for the point reiterated here ("Spinoza's Arguments for the Existence of God," 274-75). Jarrett recognizes but escapes the difficulty by relying on *EIP7* to secure God's actuality and using *EIP11* only to establish God's necessity ("Logical Structure," 42-43).

it merely reminds the reader that God is a possible substance that, by *EIP7* in premise (5), entails the existence of God's essence.⁴⁸ Spinoza, on this reading, does not commit Mersenne's or Kant's error; he instead earns the ontological commitment of premise (5) by restricting it to God's essence and relying on his conception of truth and its employment in *EIP7* to substantiate it. We might dispute this truth-doctrine, or we might dispute the excessive independence criterion Spinoza holds for substances, but if we appreciate the intermediate reading of *EIP7* and its palliative implications for Spinoza's first argument for God, we should see that it avoids the error Kant and Lin ascribe to it.

The real trouble with this argument is *EIA7*, the claim that "if a thing can be conceived as not existing, its essence does not involve existence." Consider, for the sake of illustration, its contrapositive: If an essence involves existence, then its subject or instantiation cannot be conceived as not existing.⁴⁹ In *EIP11*, the axiom's only employment in the *Ethics*, because God's essence involves existence, by *EIA7*, God cannot be conceived as not existing, that is, God necessarily exists. The axiom, however, is counter intuitive. Spinoza readily concedes that the essence of a triangle expresses nothing other than the kind of thing a triangle is and, specifically, that it neither contains nor affects how many triangles there may be (*EIP82*). The essence of a triangle, then, has no bearing on the existence of its instances. But with *EIA7*, in a claim that is neither further explained nor defended, if the thing in question has an essence that involves existence, that is, an essence that is necessary as opposed to contingent, then the subject itself also necessarily exists.⁵⁰ Without an argument supporting this unique relation between a necessary essence and its instantiation, Spinoza's first argument carries little persuasive force.⁵¹

Enter Spinoza's second and third a priori arguments. Each of these serves as a replacement of the unsupported claim of *EIA7*, and in doing so provide two distinct explanations, one appealing to reason and the other to power as features within God's essence, for why God's essence is necessarily instantiated. Whatever

⁴⁸This is a reflection of Lin's quantifier argument except that he, on my reading, confuses the ontological intent of *EIP7* ("Spinoza's Arguments for the Existence of God," 274–75).

⁴⁹This axiom affords another argument for the narrower reading of *EIP7*. That Spinoza relies on *EIA7* to move from the necessity of God's essence to God's own necessity shows that *EIP7* does not secure this inference on its own. If the common interpretation were correct, then *EIA7* would be pointless.

⁵⁰Spinoza cannot simply be assuming that God and God's essence are identical, for more on which, see n. 28.

⁵¹We might be tempted to read *EIA7* as an axiomatic assertion of the aggressive reading of *EIP7*: something whose nature involves existence necessarily exists. Its redundancy might explain why Gueroult, *Spinoza*, 179–81, and Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Substance Monism," 13, ignore the axiom in their reconstructions of *EIP11*Dem. But we should then wonder why Spinoza did not employ (or merely refer back to) the axiom in his defense of *EIP7*. Also, if they are redundant why does he appeal to both separately in his first argument for God, and why, if they should both be read aggressively, does he need a *reductio* in this argument at all when the conclusion follows directly from a single employment of the axiom? This reading also betrays Spinoza's otherwise economic use of definitions and axioms; he likely would not have included this aggressive axiom, argued for it under a different name in *EIP7*, and then used the axiom and its *doppelgänger* redundantly in the first demonstration for *EIP11* (see Lærke, "Spinoza's Cosmological Argument," 454). Garrett, "Spinoza's 'Ontological' Argument," 204, and Lin, "Spinoza's Arguments for the Existence of God," 274, who are concerned principally with capturing Spinoza's reasoning, include *EIA7* in their reconstructions.

Spinoza may have meant by *EIA7*, I believe that these two arguments better explain why he thinks such an essence must of necessity instantiate itself.

4. REASON AND POWER IN GOD'S SUBSTANTIAL ESSENCE

Spinoza's second argument for God's necessary existence relies on a robust principle of sufficient reason (hereafter, PSR). As he writes in opening the argument, "For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence" (*EIP11Alt*). With a little finesse, we can find a precursor to this in *EIA3*: "From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow." As Garrett and Lin both argue—persuasively, in my opinion—if we read "effect" as analogous to an event, then the axiom amounts to the claim that a cause necessitates whatever follows from it and that no event can occur if it was not made to do so by a cause.⁵² If we additionally understand an event to include the absence of some occurrence, then every non-occurrent event will have a reason or cause as well, which is the central claim grounding Spinoza's robust principle of sufficient reason.

One preliminary note: Spinoza pairs "reason" and "cause" ("causa seu ratio") repeatedly in *EIP11Alt* because he conceives of rational (i.e. conceptual) and causal dependence relations as being inseparable.⁵³ He first stipulates that the conceptual relation between the idea of a cause and the idea of its effect mirrors the causal relation between a cause and its effect in *EIA4*.⁵⁴ He later introduces and defends his parallelism doctrine (that the order and connection of ideas is the same as [*idem est*] the order and connection of things) by referring back only to *EIA4* (*EIP7Dem*). The axiom can support this claim only if the pairing of conceptual and causal relations in the axiom amount to a kind of sameness or unity. What Spinoza means by this unity or sameness is a matter of considerable dispute, and though I will later argue that the reason for God's necessary existence is incomplete without an accompanying cause (and so, indirectly, that causation does not reduce to conception), it will suffice for our purposes here to note only that Spinoza treats the two relations inseparably in *EIP11Alt*.⁵⁵

With this in mind, we can now consider the argument for *EIP11Alt*. After committing himself to a principle of sufficient reason that applies to both the

⁵²Garrett, "Spinoza's 'Ontological' Argument," 208. Lin notes that if we confine ourselves to a narrower reading of strict cause and effect relations then the axiom would be vacuous ("Spinoza's Arguments for the Existence of God," 276).

⁵³Scholars widely agree that reason (or "concept") and cause are inseparable in Spinoza. See Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 45 and 74; Carraud, *Causa sive ratio*, 315–18; Garrett, "Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument," 136; Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 43–44; Newlands, "Another Kind of Spinozistic Monism," 469; Lærke, "Spinoza's Cosmological Argument," 446; and Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 89–90. John Morrison challenges the claim that all conceptual relations are causal relations ("Conception and Causation").

⁵⁴The idea of an effect depends on the idea of its cause, and involves it." I part with Curley's translation of *cognitio* since Spinoza uses *cognitio* and *idea* in different iterations of *EIA4*. For more on this aspect of *EIA4*, see Wilson, "Spinoza's Causal Axiom."

⁵⁵For references to this excellent discussion, see n. 51. For an instructive overview of some different ways Spinoza may have conceived the relation between conception and causation see Lærke, "Spinoza's Cosmological Argument," 448–50.

existence and nonexistence of things, Spinoza notes that this reason or cause is contained in the thing's nature or it exists outside its nature (*E IP11Alt*).⁵⁶ He offers as one example the famed square-circle, whose nature alone explains why there are no such things. Alternatively, a square or a circle exist or fail to exist not because of their natures but, rather, the common order of nature that does or does not produce them. Substance is like the square-circle and unlike individual squares or circles in that its nature alone can determine its existence or non-existence. More specifically, the conceptual independence of substance requires that only the substance itself, that is, its nature, can produce or explain its existence or nonexistence.⁵⁷ The central move in his argument is as follows: given a robust PSR and the deep conceptual independence of substance, "it follows that a thing necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents it from existing. Therefore, if there is no reason or cause that prevents God from existing, or which takes his existence away, it must certainly be inferred that he necessarily exists" (*E IP11Alt*). Since God's essence is the essence of a substance and is consistent, God's essence is perfectly capable of instantiating itself. Given the conceptual independence of substance there is furthermore nothing that could prevent its doing so. Were God's essence under these conditions to not instantiate itself, we would have an event—God's essence not being instantiated—that could not be explained. Since every existent and non-existent event has a reason or cause, the inexplicability of God's essence not being instantiated is impossible: God must exist.

Suppose we grant Spinoza's contentious pairing of conceptual and causal relations. We should still wonder, I think, how the lack of a reason for not doing something can function as a prompt for action. As Matheron puts it, "But, exactly how can it be that the absence of a reason for not existing is *ipso facto* a reason for existing?"⁵⁸ How is it that the *lack* of a reason for God's essence not instantiating itself is the determinate cause of its doing so? Recalling the second clause of *EIA*₃, which states that "if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow," we need, it seems, to identify this lack of a reason to not instantiate itself as the event that prompts God's essence to necessitate God. This is how Della Rocca and Lin, two of the strongest proponents of the conceptualist (PSR-driven) interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics, interpret the argument.⁵⁹ But we might foretell Kant's grumbling that this lack can be rendered as a prompt for action only when compared to an actual or existent alternative. This conception of the lack of a reason to not instantiate itself seems a shaky hook on which to hang the necessary compulsion driving God's nature to instantiate God.

⁵⁶Though Spinoza continues to use "nature" and "essence" interchangeably in his proofs of *EIP11*, he seems to reserve "essence" for the thing of God's essence and "nature" for its features and activity. I will mostly follow his lead in this respect.

⁵⁷God's nature, unlike the square-circle, is perfectly consistent, by which Spinoza means that its instantiation would not involve a contradiction; "it is absurd to affirm [that its nature involves a contradiction] of a Being absolutely infinite and supremely perfect" (*EIP11Alt*). Lin has a nice discussion of this ("Spinoza's Arguments for the Existence of God," 277–79).

⁵⁸"Essence, Existence and Power," 29.

⁵⁹"Spinoza, in effect, says in *EIP11* that God must exist by his very nature for if he did not then there would be no explanation for his non-existence" (Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 52); see also "Rationalism run amok," 35–37. Lin too notes that the lack of a reason for God's essence to not instantiate itself renders his nonexistence impossible and his existence therefore necessary ("Spinoza's Arguments for the Existence of God," 278).

I suspect Spinoza had a similar thought in mind when he was explaining why square-circles are impossible. He writes that “the very nature of a square-circle indicates the reason why it does not exist” (*EIP11A1*). The contradiction within any instantiation of a square-circle is a feature of its nature, and this feature of the nature explains why it cannot be instantiated. The nature, in other words, contains within itself a feature—here a contradiction—that explains why instances of that nature are impossible. The feature, so construed, is a kind of *positive preventive* on the nature’s being instantiated, by which I mean that this feature of the nature actively prevents its instantiation. Following Spinoza in using this as an instructive analogue for God’s essence, we might say that the reason, meaning conceptual consistency, of God’s essence is likewise a feature of this essence—here a positive *productive*—that explains the necessity of its instantiation. So just as the contradiction of its instantiation is a positive preventative in the nature of a square-circle, so too is the conceptual consistency a positive productive in God’s essence.⁶⁰ I believe this helps us to better secure the hook on which Spinoza hangs God’s necessity, since the lack of a reason to not instantiate itself is, in this instance, a positive feature of God’s essence with which we can link it to God’s own necessity.

There is still a problem, though. The independence and rational consistency of God’s essence may provide a *reason* for its instantiating itself, but they do not on their face furnish the *compulsion* through which God’s essence instantiates God. We are still missing, in other words, a *causa* for God’s necessary existence.⁶¹ I suspect Spinoza was aware of this too, which is why he wrote not that the contradiction inherent in the nature of a square-circle actively prevents its instantiation but, instead, that it *indicates* (*indicare*) the reason why a square-circle cannot be instantiated. Applied to God’s nature, its lacking a reason to not instantiate itself does not so much compel its instantiation as it does *indicate or point toward* what compels its instantiation.⁶² Spinoza uses *indicare* in the appendix to *Ethics* I, for instance, to infer from the many prejudices refuted in book I, their underlying prejudice, which is that all things in nature act as men do, and frequently on

⁶⁰An anonymous reader notes that it would be odd for *ratio* to be both a principal feature of God’s essence and, as we learn in *EIP4oS2*, the second, not even third and presumably best, kind of knowledge. This is not the place for a dedicated exploration of Spinoza’s use and understanding of *ratio*, much less the distinction and difference between the second and third kinds of knowledge, but I would note that Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge is seemingly restricted to particulars (we infer from certain features of God’s attributes specific formal essences) whereas *ratio* is directed instead at common or universal notions. The *ratio* in God’s essence would be extended to essences that follow from God’s, meaning that whatever other essences follow from and further modify God’s essence do so in part by expressing and further modifying the *ratio* within God’s essence. Because *ratio* is a common trait and not unique to any one particular essence, it is appropriately linked with a common rather than particular kind of knowledge. This, as I understand it, does little to denigrate including *ratio* as a feature of God’s essence—on the contrary, I think its role in both instances is consistent and important.

⁶¹Proponents of a conceptualist interpretation that reduces Spinoza’s causal relations to conceptual relations, such as Della Rocca, “Rationalism run amok,” “*Spinoza*,” and Lin, “Spinoza’s Arguments for the Existence of God,” slide past this worry since the compulsion in question is nothing more than a conceptual or logical implication, which they argue God’s nature lacking a reason to not instantiate itself provides. As discussed earlier, however, it is difficult to understand a lack of a reason for something not existing as a cause of its existence. And anyway, Spinoza himself notes that the rationality of God’s necessity indicates—that is, points toward—an efficacy in its cause.

⁶²This is in line with Lærke’s argument for conceptual relations being grounded in and reducible to causal relations (“Spinoza’s Cosmological Argument,” 450–59).

account of some end.⁶³ The many prejudices point toward another prejudice. And in *E III P14 Dem*, he uses *indicare* to note that imaginations in the mind point more toward affections of our own bodies than external bodies. In both instances, Spinoza uses *indicare* to serve as a pointer from one thing to another. Returning to *E IP11 Alt*, the inconsistency within the nature of a square-circle does not constitute so much as point toward the reason for its not being instantiated, which is that the instantiation—which is distinct from its nature—would simultaneously possess four and zero 90° interior angles. Likewise, the rationality of God's nature, specifically as regards His lacking a reason to not instantiate itself, does not constitute so much as *point toward* what compels its necessary instantiation. While Spinoza's second argument explains *why* God necessarily exists—because the PSR and a check on its rational consistency are inborn features of God's nature—in leaving unsaid the referent of *indicare* the argument does not yet explain *how* God necessarily exists. For this, I propose we consider Spinoza's third a priori argument.

The central premise of Spinoza's third a priori argument, something he claims to be known through itself, is that power is the measure of a thing's ability to exist (*E IP11 Alt2*).⁶⁴ The argument proceeds accordingly: "since being able to exist is power, it follows that the more reality belongs to the nature of a thing, the more power it has, of itself, to exist. Therefore, an absolutely infinite Being, or God, has, of himself, an absolutely infinite power of existing. For that reason, he exists absolutely" (*E IP11 S*). When we consider a nature with respect to its ability to exist, we are measuring its ability to produce its subject—its ability to instantiate itself. Something that is more powerful has a nature that is more able to instantiate itself, and something that is absolutely or infinitely powerful will accordingly have an absolute or infinite ability to instantiate itself. This means, for Spinoza, that it necessarily instantiates itself—that its subject necessarily exists.⁶⁵ Because God has a most real and therefore powerful nature, God's nature absolutely, which is to say necessarily, instantiates itself.

The central point for our purposes, of course, is that this power, like the PSR and a check on its rational consistency, is an inborn feature of God's essence, meaning that this power is a feature of God's essence before it is a feature of God. Put another way, God is defined as a being with an infinity of attributes (*E ID6*), and the number of attributes in a thing is a measure of its degree of reality.⁶⁶ Because possessing an infinity of attributes is true of God's definition, it holds whether God actually exists or not. It is, accordingly and logically speaking, a feature of God's essence before it is a feature of God. God's essence, then, is an infinitely powerful

⁶³"All the prejudices I here undertake to expose [*indicare*] depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end." For discussions regarding these prejudices see *E IP15 S* or *E IP17 S*.

⁶⁴This is stated in Spinoza's a posteriori argument, which he then presents as an a priori argument in the following scholium. I am focusing only on Spinoza's a priori arguments. For an excellent analysis of Spinoza's a posteriori argument, see Lærke, "Spinoza's Cosmological Argument."

⁶⁵My discussion of the efficacy of substantial essences is in line with Lærke, "Spinoza's Cosmological Argument," who follows Matheron, "Essence, Existence, and Power in emphasizing power as a defining feature of essence. The precise relation between power and reason in an essence is still admittedly unclear.

⁶⁶"The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it" (*E IP9*).

essence. With this, I think we have identified what the *ratio* of God's essence points toward: its power. If so, then God's rationality explains why its essence necessarily instantiates itself, but we do not appreciate the *causa* or compulsion of His doing so until we understand that the referent of this explanation or reason is the absolute power within God's essence.

I will not venture an account of the precise relation between Spinoza's understanding of *ratio* and *causa* in God's essence except to suggest that his account of the *ratio* is not complete until we appreciate that it refers in some sense to a *causa*. So read, we can appreciate the symmetry of Spinoza's second and third arguments: the *causa* in *E IP11S* is the efficacious compulsion explained by the *ratio* of *E IP11Alt*. And if so, then Spinoza's second and third a priori arguments are best read as a complementary and reinforcing pair of arguments identifying two ways in which God's essence necessitates God.

All told, Spinoza's ontological argument includes an explicit argument for a mind-independent substantial essence, what we later learn to be God's essence and, second and as I understand it, highlights *ratio* and *causa* as inborn features of this essence. With these in place I hope to have shed light on the reality and role of God's essence in Spinoza's ontological argument for the existence of God.⁶⁷

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In citing Spinoza's works, I use the following abbreviations:

CM *Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts*
 DPP *Parts I and II of Descartes's Principles of Philosophy [Descartes' Principles of Philosophy]*
 E *Ethics*
 Ep. *Letters*
 KV *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*

In citing the *Ethics* and other works where appropriate, I use the following abbreviations:

A Axiom
 Alt Alternatively
 App Appendix
 C Corollary
 D Definition
 Dem Demonstration
 L Lemma
 P Proposition
 Pref Preface
 S Scholium

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