Spinoza and Crescas on Modality (03.02.23)

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Introduction

Spinoza’s determinism and necessitarianism[[1]](#footnote-1) earned him few sympathetic readers.[[2]](#footnote-2) For most of his contemporaries, necessitarianism was one of the major monstrosities of Spinoza’s system, and even among recent readers, many still tend to agree with Jonathan Bennett’s verdict that it is hard to do good philosophy if one assumes necessitarianism.[[3]](#footnote-3) Spinoza’s assertion that he “places freedom not in free decree, but in a *free necessity*” [[4]](#footnote-4) did not help relieve worried readers. Indeed, what could “free necessity” mean at all? Isn’t it a plain oxymoron?

That Spinoza was a strict necessitarian was pretty much taken for granted by almost all of his readers during the first three centuries since his death and the publication of his *Opera Posthuma* (1677). But this state of things has changed somewhat over the past half century, and a number of leading scholars have suggested that Spinoza’s commitment to necessitarianism is much less obvious than one would initially think. A significant part of the current chapter will be dedicated to the recent debate about whether Spinoza was a strict necessitarian.

The first section of the chapter will address the philosophy of modality among Spinoza’s medieval Jewish predecessors, and, primarily, in Hasdai Crescas (1340-1410/11), a bold and original, anti-Aristotelian philosopher. This section should both complement the discussion of modality in medieval Christian and Islamic philosophy in the previous chapters of this volume[[5]](#footnote-5) and provide some lesser-known historical background to Spinoza’s own engagement with modal philosophy. Following a section on Spinoza’s *definitions* of his main modal concepts and his understanding of contingency, I will turn, in the third section, to discuss the extent of Spinoza’s commitment to necessitarianism. The recent debate about whether Spinoza was a strict necessitarian has resulted in quite a few insights about Spinoza’s modal philosophy, but it has also detracted attention from some basic questions about Spinoza’s modal philosophy, and in the fourth and last section of the chapter, I will attempt to chart the foundational questions that still have been barely explored.

The primary aim of this chapter it to provide a survey and outline of the chief elements of Spinoza’s modal philosophy. Still, beyond the mere overview of Spinoza’s arguments (and some major scholarly debates), I will also advance two original theses. First, I will show that Spinoza makes a distinction between *two* notions of contingency, and that once this important distinction is observed, Spinoza’s various assertions about contingency turn out to be consistent. Secondly, I will discuss the text (E2a1) which is commonly taken to be the strongest and most stubborn proof against the reading of Spinoza as strict necessitarianism; I will show that the basic meaning of this text has been widely misunderstood, and that E2a1 is perfectly compatible with strict necessitarianism.

§1. Crescas on Modality

The shadow of the “Great Eagle” [הנשר הגדול] – Maimonides’ (1138-1204) Hebrew sobriquet – was cast over almost all aspects and issues in medieval Jewish philosophy, and the subfield of the philosophy of modality is no exception. But figuring out Maimonides’ precise stance on this issue is no trivial task. In several texts, Maimonides brings the conflict between divine foreknowledge and human freedom into sharp relief.[[6]](#footnote-6) In his more popular works, Maimonides seems to support freedom of the will. Yet, in various passages in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, a very different view emerges, where human will and choice are completely determined by previous causes.[[7]](#footnote-7) In a recent study, Zev Harvey argued that even some of the popular works – such as *Eight Chapters* – are consistent with strict determinism and necessitarianism, once read closely.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In his own magisterial work, the *Wars of the Lord* [מלחמות השם], Gersonides (1288-1344) opted to secure a place for human free choice by advancing the radical view according to which God does *not* know the future choices of human beings. Gersonides’ view invites the critical charge of compromising significantly the divine perfection of omniscience. To counter such criticisms, Gersonides argues:

The fact that God does not have the knowledge of which possible outcome will be realized does not imply any defect in God. For perfect knowledge of something is the knowledge of what that thing is in reality [*לפי מה שהוא עליו*]; when the thing is not apprehended as it is, this is error, not knowledge. Hence, God knows all these things in the best manner possible, for He knows them insofar as they are ordered in a determinate and certain way, and He knows in addition that they[[9]](#footnote-9) are contingent [אפשריים] insofar as they fall within the domain of human choice [and as such knows them] truly as contingent.[[10]](#footnote-10)

According to Gersonides, the perfection of divine knowledge requires that God must know all things *as they are*.[[11]](#footnote-11) Since future human choices *are* contingent, God must know them as contingent, i.e., he must *not* know which contingent choice (i.e., action) will be actualized (“which possible outcome will be realized.)”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Discussing Gersonides’ view, and addressing arguments both in favor of and against it, Hasdai Crescas pointed out that if we conjoin Gersonides’ assertion that God knows future human choices only as contingent with the view (which Gersonides also maintains) that God cannot acquire new knowledge,[[13]](#footnote-13) it follows that even *after* one of the future choices has been realized, God must remain ignorant of this choice and of all events resulting from it. Thus, Crescas writes:

Since Jacob’s going down to Egypt belongs to the modality of the possible [חומר האפשר] and depends on his choice, it would follow [according to Gersonides] that once Jacob chose to go down – at which point God became ignorant of the choice and knew nothing of it – God also had no way of knowing all that followed from that choice, and a fortiori, all that followed from the many choices that were made from among the possible alternatives.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Ascribing to God ignorance about most events described in the Hebrew Bible (i.e., events resulting from Jacob’s choice to go down to Egypt) appeared to Crescas as sheer madness, and this consideration, together with other philosophical arguments against Gersonides’ view,[[15]](#footnote-15) led Crescas to reject the latter. Instead, Crescas argued that we can preserve a space for human effort and industriousness (i.e., reject fatalism) even as we embrace necessitarianism, if we observe the crucial distinction between, on the one hand, things which are necessary *per se*, and on the other, things which are *per se* possible, yet necessary by virtue of their causes. He thus provides the following characterization of the possible:

A possible thing that can exist or not exist [הדבר שאפשר שימצא ושלא ימצא] requires a cause to determine [תכריע] its existence over its nonexistence; otherwise, its nonexistence would persist. Therefore, when something possible exists, it is necessarily the case that it was preceded by a cause that necessitated and determined its existence over its nonexistence, so that the existent that was assumed possible turns out to be necessary. And if we investigate the earlier cause, if it, too, was assumed to be possible, and we posit it as existent, then the necessity that turned out to apply in the case of the ﬁrst possible that was posited as existent will apply to it as well. This will continue until the series culminates in the ﬁrst cause and ﬁrst existent, whose existence is necessary by virtue of His essence [מחוייב המציאות], may He be blessed.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Within this broadly Avicennian picture, all things exist necessarily, but only God’s existence is necessary *per se* (״מחוייב המציאות״ i.e., necessary by virtue of its essence). All other existing things – including the human will – are possible *per se* and necessitated by their causes (ultimately, they are necessitated by the first cause, i.e., God).[[17]](#footnote-17) Human endeavor, claims Crescas, is not futile in order to realize possibilities that are necessitated by their cause, since this very endeavor *is* “the essential cause for accumulating [the sought] goods,”[[18]](#footnote-18) i.e., human endeavor is a cause required for the attainment of most goods we seek.

Crescas’ Avicennian distinction between *per se* necessity and *tout court* necessity was shared by many medieval and early modern philosophers, such as, Spinoza (as we shall shortly see) and Leibniz (see Chapter Five below). However, not all of Crescas’ readers were happy with his necessitarian conclusion. Thus, Yitzhak Abarbanel (1437-1508), addressing Crescas’ suggested alternative to Gersonides’ view, writes:

And I was alarmed at seeing the Pious Rabbi [i.e., Crescas] escape being burnt by the fire of the commentator’s [i.e., Gersonides’] heresy only to have him succumb to it in the end. For what possibility remains for the thing that is necessary in respect of its causes when it is after all necessitated and constrained [והלא באמת הוא מוכרח ומחוייב].[[19]](#footnote-19)

Restricting possibility to *per se* possibility – which by virtue of its causes is either necessarily actualized, or necessarily non-actualized – leaves no room for genuine freedom of the will, claimed Abarbanel. Still, we can point out at least one reader of Crescas who was clearly sympathetic to his necessitarianism. In his celebrated Letter on the Infinite, Spinoza discusses and endorses a proof for God’s existence advanced by Crescas which unmistakably embraces a necessitarian position.[[20]](#footnote-20) We will shortly begin our study of Spinoza by scrutinizing his definitions of the core concepts of modality and his understanding of contingency, but before turn to Spinoza, let me note that in his *Light of the Lord*, Crescas provides a series of argument in favor of the possibility of alternative universes, or non-actual, possible worlds.[[21]](#footnote-21) His arguments are terse but precise, and thus require close scrutiny and detailed explication which cannot be carried out here.

§2. Spinoza’s Definitions of Contingency and Other Modal Notions

The *Cogitata Metaphysica* (“Metaphysical Thoughts”) is the appendix to Spinoza’s 1663 book in which he attempted to present Parts I and II (as well as the opening segment of Part III) of Descartes’ book, *Principles of Philosophy*, in a geometrical (i.e., axiomatic) manner. This is an intriguing text, though it is not always clear whether the claims stated in this text represent Spinoza’s own (early) views, the views of Descartes, or perhaps merely the assertions of some late scholastic authors. Still, the *Cogitata Metaphysica* is extremely rich in discussions of modal philosophy, and therefore we simply cannot afford to disregard it. We will discuss this text while keeping in mind the question of whether they represent Spinoza’s views.

The title of the third chapter of part one of the *Cogitata* reads: “Concerning What is Necessary, Impossible, Possible, and Contingent.” Attempting to elucidate the first two notions, Spinoza writes:

A thing is said to be necessary or impossible in two ways: either in respect to its essence or in respect to its cause. We know that God exists necessarily in respect to his essence, for his essence cannot be conceived without existence. And it is impossible that a chimaera exists in respect to its essence, which involves a contradiction. [Other] things—e.g., material ones—are called either impossible or necessary in respect to their cause. For if we consider only their essence, we can conceive it clearly and distinctly without existence.[[22]](#footnote-22) Therefore, they can never exist by the power and necessity of their essence, but only by the power of their cause, God, the creator of all things. And so, if it is in the divine decree that some thing exists, it will necessarily exist; but if not, it will be impossible that it should exist.[[23]](#footnote-23)

God and chimeras occupy the two extreme poles in Spinoza’s modal ontology.[[24]](#footnote-24) God exists necessarily by virtue of its essence, while a chimera necessarily does not exist (i.e., is impossible) just by virtue of its contradictory essence. In between God and the chimera, we have things whose essences neither rule in, nor rule out, their existence. These things in the middle category are still – according to the last sentence in the passage above – all either necessary or impossible, but their necessity or impossibility results from external causes, rather than from their mere essences. It is just with regard to things in this middle category that we apply the notions of *possibility* and *contingency* which Spinoza defines as follows:

A thing is called *possible*, then, *when we understand its efficient cause*, but do not know whether the cause is determined [*attamen an causa determinate sit, ignoramus*]. So we can regard it as possible, but neither as necessary nor as impossible. If, however, *we attend to the essence of the thing alone*, and not to its cause, we shall call it *contingent*. That is, we shall consider it as midway between God and a chimaera, so to speak, because we find in it, on the part of its essence, neither any necessity of existing (as we do in the divine essence) nor any impossibility or inconsistency (as we do in a chimaera). And if anyone wishes to call *contingent* what I call *possible*, or *possible* what I call *contingent*, I shall not contend with him.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Things in the middle category (i.e., everything apart from God and chimeras) are called contingent when we attend *only* to their essence and find nothing in the essence which would either rule in, or rule out, the existence of the thing. The very same things (of the middle category) are also called possible, if we attend not to their essence, but to their external, efficient, causes; due to the limits of our knowledge of the order of the infinitely many external causes of each thing, we do not know whether these external causes obtained. Notice that contingency *in the sense defined in the last excerpt* is perfectly compatible with necessity: a thing whose essence does not involve existence (or contradiction) is contingent, and yet, insofar as that thing is still necessarily caused by an external cause, it is still necessary.

But in the very same discussion in the CM, Spinoza also uses ‘contingent’ in a significantly different sense, i.e., as being neither necessary nor impossible, *all things considered*.[[26]](#footnote-26) Obviously, contingency in this second sense is *incompatible* with necessity. Spinoza points out the term ‘real contingency [*contingens reale*]’[[27]](#footnote-27) as the common expression for this second (and stronger) sense of contingency. It is possible, though I cannot prove it at this stage, that this notion of strong, ‘real contingency,’ is inspired by Gersonides’ understanding of what is “contingent in reality [לפי מה שהוא עליו],” such as human decisions which, for Gersonides, are not necessary even given all previous facts and causes.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Here is it crucial to observe that *it is with regard to real contingency* that Spinoza asserts that “there is nothing contingent in things”[[29]](#footnote-29) and that contingency is “nothing but a defect in our understanding.”[[30]](#footnote-30) To keep clear this important distinction between the two senses of ‘contingent,’ we will henceforth use the term ‘E-Contingent’ for things whose *essence* does not rule in, or rule out, their existence, whereas things – if there are any – which neither exist necessarily nor are impossible, *tout court*,[[31]](#footnote-31) will be called ‘TC-Contingent.’[[32]](#footnote-32)

Having thus documented and briefly clarified the distinction between the two notions of contingency in the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, we are now ready to approach Spinoza’s discussions of contingency in his *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*. Frequently, Spinoza’s claims about contingency in the *Ethics* are viewed as inconsistent.[[33]](#footnote-33) Against, this view, I will argue that in the *Ethics* – just as in the CM – Spinoza employs ‘contingent’ in two distinct senses (i.e., the very same two senses we find in the CM), and that once we observe this crucial distinction, the apparent inconsistencies are dispelled.

After endorsing and proving determinism in E1p28,[[34]](#footnote-34) Spinoza turns to prove the following proposition:

E1p29: *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.* Dem.: Whatever is, is in God (by E1p15); but God cannot be called a contingent thing [*res contingens*]. For (by E1p11) he exists necessarily, not contingently. Next, the modes of the divine nature have also followed from it necessarily and not contingently (by E1p16)… if [the modes] have not been determined by God, then (by E1p26) it is impossible, not contingent, that they should determine themselves. Conversely (by E1p27) if they have been determined by God, it is not contingent, but impossible, that they should render themselves undetermined. So, all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature, not only to exist, but to exist in a certain way, and to produce effects in a certain way. *There is nothing contingent*, q.e.d.

Spinoza begins E1p29d by claiming that God is not contingent. Indeed, in E1p11s, Spinoza proves that God’s essence involves existence. Thus, God is clearly not a contingent thing (on *either* understanding of contingency). But in the rest of E1p29d, Spinoza seems to be using ‘contingent’ as TC-Contingency, i.e., as being neither necessary nor impossible, all things considered. This allows him to argue that *the modes* too do not exist contingently, in spite of the fact that it is precisely the modes which constitute the middle category between God and chimeras, i.e., in spite of the fact the essence of a mode does *not* necessitate either its existence or its non-existence (which will qualify the modes as E-Contingent).[[35]](#footnote-35) Employing this strong sense of ‘contingent,’ Spinoza can conclude: “There is nothing contingent,” but this conclusion is perfectly compatible with the ascription of E-Contingency to all modes.

One reader of the *Ethics* who was critically aware of these two senses of contingency in Spinoza is Leibniz. In his 1678 notes on Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Leibniz objects that E1p29d is “obscure and abrupt,” and then adds:

The matter depends on the definition of ‘contingent’ which he has given nowhere.[[36]](#footnote-36) I use the term ‘contingent,’ as do others, for that whose essence does not involve existence. In this sense, particular things are contingent according to Spinoza himself, by Proposition 24.[[37]](#footnote-37) But if you take ‘contingent’ in the sense of some of the Scholastics, a usage unknown to Aristotle, and to common life, as that which happens in such a way that no reason of any kind can be given why it should have happened thus rather otherwise, and as that whose cause is equally disposed to act and not to act when all the conditions, both internal and external, have been fulfilled, then I think such contingency implies a contradiction.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The assertion ascribed here to “some scholastics,” i.e., that certain things have a cause “equally disposed to act and not to act [even] when all the conditions, both internal and external, have been fulfilled” would just as well fit Gersonides’ view. Leibniz (at least the Leibniz of 1678), just like Spinoza, would utterly reject the notion that contingency, in this strong sense, ever obtains.

The weaker sense of ‘contingent’ (i.e., E-Contingent) resurfaces at the beginning of Part Four of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza provides explicit definitions for both contingency and possibility. It is worth noting that these definitions appear very late in the book and after Spinoza has already employed both notions quite significantly. One way to explain this late introduction of the definitions is that the strong sense of ‘contingent’ (TC-Contingent) reflected what Spinoza considered to be a common use of the term,[[39]](#footnote-39) while in Part Four he introduces his own, more technical, use of the term. Be that as it may, let us scrutinize these definitions:

E4d3: I call singular things contingent insofar as we find nothing, while we attend only to their essence, which necessarily posits their existence or which necessarily excludes it.

E4d4: I call the same singular things possible, insofar as, while we attend to the causes from which they must be produced, we do not know whether those causes are determined to produce them.

The definitions make clear that the terminology of ‘contingent’ and ‘possible’ applies only with regard to modes (“singular things”), or what we take to be a mode.[[40]](#footnote-40) More importantly, E4d3 seems to show that E-Contingency (employed in E4d3) is a real feature of the world, and not just a result of a defect in our understanding.[[41]](#footnote-41) Consider *God’s* idea of mode M1. Insofar as M1 is a mode and not a substance, its essence does not involve existence, and thus – per E4d3 – it is contingent (E-Contingent). Were God to conceive M1 as not being E-Contingent, he would be making an error, by taking a mode for a substance. Thus, even on God’s perfect and adequate understanding of M1, M1 and all other modes are truly E-Contingent.[[42]](#footnote-42)

We will shortly turn to the question of whether Spinoza was a necessitarian or not, but before we do that, let us complete our discussion of Spinoza’s definitions of his basic modal notions. In E1d8, Spinoza presents the following definition of eternity:

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

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

The formulation of E1d8 raises several intriguing questions.[[43]](#footnote-43) In earlier studies, I have shown that in E1d8 Spinoza seems to understand eternity not a as temporal notion (i.e., sempiternity, or existence in all times), but rather as a *modal* concept: as self-necessitated existence, or as existence which is necessitated by virtue of the mere essence (or, what is the same: by virtue of its mere definition) of the thing.[[44]](#footnote-44) In fact, eternity (as defined in E1d8) is just the negation of E-Contingency. Whatever is eternal is not E-Contingent, and whatever is (chimeras excluded) which is not E-Contingent, is eternal.

§3. Spinoza’s Necessitarianism

In the previous section we have studied Spinoza’s understanding of contingency, and his definitions of modal terms. Already the texts we have surveyed so far seem to support the ascription of necessitarianism to Spinoza. Thus, for example, we have seen that when Spinoza addresses things which are E-Contingent, he would frequently add that these things are still necessitated by their causes and, ultimately, God.[[45]](#footnote-45) In this section, we will expand and deepen our study of Spinoza’s discussion of necessitarianism, and then scrutinize E2a1, the text which is widely perceived as the strongest evidence against the ascription of strict necessitarianism to Spinoza.

The general picture we get from Spinoza’s discussions of modality in the *Ethics* is that all things are necessitated into existence (or non-existence) either by their essence or by their efficient causes. Consider, for example, E1p33s:

A thing is called necessary either by reason of its essence or by reason of its cause. *For a thing’s existence follows necessarily either from its essence and definition or from a given efficient cause.* And a thing is also called impossible from these same causes—viz. either because its essence, or definition, involves a contradiction, or because there is no external cause which has been determined to produce such a thing.[[46]](#footnote-46)

We get the very same picture in E1p11d. Here, in the course of proving God’s existence, Spinoza formulates what can be viewed as his own version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR):

For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence. For example, if a triangle exists, there must be a reason or cause why it exists; but if it does not exist, there must also be a reason or cause which prevents it from existing, or which takes its existence away.[[47]](#footnote-47)

According to Spinoza’s variant of the PSR, neither existence nor non-existence can be brute. Once brute existence facts are ruled out of the picture, the path leading to necessitarianism seems unavoidable:

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 (see E1p7*).* 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. *For from this* [*order*] *it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now* [*jam*] *or that it is impossible for it to exist now* [*jam*].[[48]](#footnote-48)

For our purposes, the crucial claims in this passage appear in the discussion of the existence of the “circle or triangle,” i.e., modes, or things whose essence does not involve existence (i.e., E-Contingent things). Addressing the existence of these modes of Extension, Spinoza states unequivocally that *(i)* E-Contingent things *must* have a reason for their existence, *(ii)* the reason for the existence of E-Contingent things lies in the order of corporeal nature, and that *(iii)* given the order of corporeal nature, the existence (or non-existence) of E-Contingent things *follows necessarily* (“must follow”).

In light of this textual situation,[[49]](#footnote-49) it is no surprise that, until a half century ago, it was virtually taken for granted that Spinoza is a strict necessitarian. Then, in his important 1969 book, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, and later in an article co-authored with Gregory Walski, Edwin Curley argued that while Spinoza is a determinist,[[50]](#footnote-50) his version of necessitarianism is moderate rather than strict. On Curley and Walski’s interpretation of Spinoza’s “moderate necessitarianism,” Spinoza’s God exists necessarily, yet the complete system of all finite modes is *not* necessitated by God’s nature, and there are alternative possible worlds that are compatible with God’s necessary nature.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Addressing Curley and Walski’s arguments, Don Garrett showed convincingly that it is hard to reconcile Spinoza’s texts, as well as his commitment to a strong version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, with the ascription of mere “moderate necessitarianism” to Spinoza.[[52]](#footnote-52) Still, there is *one* text in Spinoza’s works which, at least at first sight, does not sit well with the ascription of strict necessitarianism to Spinoza, and this text appears in quite a central place in the *Ethics*: the first axiom of part two.

E2a1: The essence of man does not involve necessary existence, i.e., from the order of nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist, or that he does not exist [*Hominis essentia non involvit necessariam existentiam, hoc est, ex naturae ordine, tam fieri potest, ut hic, et ille homo existat, quam ut non existat*].[[53]](#footnote-53)

E2a1 is divided into two parts by “i.e., [*hoc est*].” The first half seems clear: it states that the essence of man does not involve existence (i.e., human beings are E-Contingent), and from this we can infer that a human being is not a substance, but a mode (see E2p10&c).[[54]](#footnote-54) The second part of E2a1 is much more enigmatic, for at least three reasons. First, it appears to be in conflict with Spinoza’s unequivocal statement (in E1p11d) about the reason for the existence of modes – such as a triangle or a circle – according to which from the order of nature “it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now or that it is impossible for it to exist now.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Second, assuming that Spinoza is using “the order of nature” in his customary way as referring to the system of existing things (which includes finite modes), the second part of E2a1 seems to deny not only necessitarianism but also determinism, whereas Spinoza’s endorsement of determinism is both well-documented and undisputed. Third, the two parts of E2a1 seem to make *very different claims*: the first part asserts that human beings are E-Contingent, while the second that human beings are both TC-Contingent and are not subject to causal determinism. But then: how could Spinoza connect the two parts of the axiom by a “*hoc est*”? The use of “*hoc est*” indicates either that the two parts of the axiom are equivalent or that that the second part elaborates and restricts the meaning of the first part. But neither of these can be the case if the second part indeed endorses human TC-Contingency and indeterminism.

As one would expect, Curley and Walski present the second half of E2a1 as textual evidence against the ascription of strict necessitarianism to Spinoza. Yet, since this second half seems to reject not only necessitarianism, but also determinism (the latter of which they do ascribe to Spinoza), they suggest that the phrase ‘order of nature [*ordo naturare*]’ is used in E2a1 not in its regular sense as referring to the system of all things in nature, but rather as denoting the laws of nature alone. Under this reading, the second part of E2a1 merely claims that the laws of nature do not suffice to necessitate the existence of finite things.[[56]](#footnote-56) Regrettably, Curley and Walski provide hardly any evidence for the claim that ‘*ordo naturae*’ in E2a1 is used in this special sense: they do not point out any element in the formulation of E2a1, or in the applications of this axiom later in the *Ethics* (which we will shortly discuss) that supports their surprising reading, and as far as I can see, there is no such element either in E2a1 or in its applications. They point to one other text in which, they argue, Spinoza “clearly” uses ‘*ordo naturae*’ as referring to the laws of nature, but, as Garrett has pointed out, this text is better read according to Spinoza’s regular use of ‘*ordo naturae*.’[[57]](#footnote-57) Moreover, under Curley and Walski’s reading, the two parts of E2a1 make significantly different claims, and it is hard to understand why Spinoza should connect the two parts with ‘*hoc est*.’

Addressing the formulation of E2a1, Garrett reads the axiom as stating that man’s essence leaves open whether this or that man exists, and that it is only the order of nature (which includes the prior order of finite modes) that determines the existence or non-existence of a human being. However, Garrett continues, we have only a very limited knowledge of the order of nature, and thus, from *what we know of the order of nature*, the existence of this or that man does not follow. Thus, on Garrett’s reading, the second part of E2a1 should have this crucial *epistemic* sense (which is not stated explicitly in the text). In support of his reading, Garrett points to E1p33s1, where Spinoza stresses that “the order of causes is hidden from us.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Indeed, when we look systematically at Spinoza’s use of the term ‘the order of nature’ throughout his writing, our ignorance about this order seems to be its most salient feature.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Another important observation that could lead us toward reconciling E2a1 with Spinoza’s standard backing of necessitarianism is suggested by Olli Koistinen. Comparing the second half of E2a1 with Spinoza’s claim in E1p11d that “from [the order of nature] it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now [*iam*] or that it is impossible for it to exist now [*iam*],” Koistinen stresses the presence of time specification (“now”) in the necessitarian text of E1p11d, and the absence of this time specification in E2a1. According to Koistinen, what the second half of E2a1 is trying to secure is that “it is possible that finite things do not exist and in fact for every finite thing such a possibility is actualized.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

E2a1 is a non-trivial and interesting text, and one of the measures the *Ethics* provides us in dealing with problematic texts is the examination of the application of a textual unit in subsequent geometrical derivations. Frequently, the meaning of an axiom, definition, or proposition becomes much clearer once we observe the use and application of that definition or axiom. The case of E2a1 is no exception.

E2a1 is used three times in later derivations in the *Ethics*: E2p10d, E2p11d, and E2p30d.[[61]](#footnote-61) In E2p10d and E2p30s, Spinoza employs E2a1 to prove that the human mind and body are not substances. But something else transpires in E2p11d. In E2p11d, Spinoza investigates the ontological status of the human mind and its object. E2p11 and its demonstration are complex, long, and address non-trivial issues in Spinoza’s metaphysics and philosophy of mind. Still, since this text is the climax of my entire chapter, it would be best to have it before our eyes. For our purposes, the crucial argument which employs E2a1 appears in the italicized text, toward the end of the demonstration.

E2p11: *The first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human Mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists.*

Dem.: The essence of man (by E2p10C) is constituted by certain modes of God’s attributes, viz. (by E2a2) by modes of thinking, of all of which (by E2a3) the idea is prior in nature…But not the idea of a thing which does not exist. For then (by E2p8c) the idea itself could not be said to exist. Therefore, it will be the idea of a thing which actually exists. *But not of an infinite thing. For an infinite thing (by E1p21 and E1p22) must always* [*semper*] *exist necessarily. But (by E2a1) it is absurd*. Therefore, the first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human Mind is the idea of a singular thing which actually exists, q.e.d.

Spinoza begins E2p11d by showing that the human mind and its object are modes, and not substances. He then shows that both the mind and its object are modes having duration (and not mere formal essences as per E2p8c). Finally, he argues that the human mind and its object *are finite modes, and not infinite modes*.[[62]](#footnote-62) For our purposes, the last step is the crucial one. Were the object of the human mind an infinite mode, claims Spinoza, then by E1p21, it would have to “*always exist necessarily* [*debet semper necessario existere*]. But (by E2a1) it is absurd” (E2p11. emphases added). Thus, we have here a clear and unequivocal evidence that Spinoza understands E2a1 as asserting that human beings do not exist *always* (and are thus not infinite modes). Now, where does Spinoza state that in E2a1? The first half of E2a1 – stating that the essence of human being does not involve existence – would not commit Spinoza to the claim that human beings do not exist “always,” since the infinite modes (qua modes) do not involve existence (E1p24), yet they *do* exist always. Thus, it must be the second part of E2a1 which states that human beings do not exist always. But how, precisely?

Let’s have a second look at the Latin of this clause: “*ex naturae ordine, tam fieri potest, ut hic, et ille homo existat, quam ut non existat*.” Arguably, Spinoza is using here ‘*potest* [can]’ in a sense that was very common in Spinoza’s time, but one which we normally tend to disregard or neglect. Let me explain. For many ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophers, the basic modal notions of necessity, possibility, and actuality were defined in *temporal* terms (and not, as we would define them, in terms of possible worlds). Under this so-called “Statistic” understanding of modality,[[63]](#footnote-63) a thing or a property is possible just in case it is instantiated in at least *some* time; necessary just in case it is instantiated in *all* times; impossible just in case it is *not* instantiated *in any* time; and actual just in case it is instantiated *now* (compare this with our understanding of possibility as instantiation in at least *some* possible world, necessity as instantiation in *all* possible worlds, and actuality as instantiation in the *current* possible world). At least prima facie, Statistic modalities and Possible-Worlds modalities are orthogonal (e.g., a property can be possible in terms of Statistic modality and necessary in terms of Possible-Worlds modality, and the other way around).

In the next section, we will encounter other passages in the *Ethics* employing Statistic modality. Here, let us consider what does the second half of E2a1 say, if the modal verb ‘*potest*’ is used there in the Statistic sense? Under the Statistic reading, the claim that from the order of nature it *can* happen (or become) that this man exists, and it *can* happen that this man does not exist, is just to say that *sometimes* from the order of nature it happens/becomes that this man exists, and *sometimes* that this man does not exist.[[64]](#footnote-64)

What Spinoza is saying in the second clause of E2a1 is that the order of nature *does not always brings about the existence* of a specific human being: sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn’t, and this is precisely why in E2p11d Spinoza employs this axiom in order to show that a human being is not an infinite mode. Infinite modes exist *always*, and insofar as they are part of the order of nature, it is incompatible with the order of nature that an infinite mode will not exist at any moment. Human beings – not being infinite modes – are such that sometimes the order of nature necessitates their existence, and sometimes, unfortunately, the order of nature necessitates the end of their existence.

Notice that there is *a* sense in which E2a1 (and consequently, E2p10d) assert that human beings ‘do not exist necessarily,’ but this is not the sense employed by Curley and Walski. If by ‘exists necessarily’ one means ‘exists in all times’ (i.e., if one interprets ‘necessarily’ according to its Statistic sense) then E2a1 – *as interpreted by Spinoza in E2p11d* – clearly states that we do not exist necessarily; but the denial of man’s necessary existence in the Statistic sense is perfectly compatible with the strictest necessitarianism, since we formulated necessitarianism in terms of possible worlds modality, rather than frequency of existence in times.[[65]](#footnote-65) Being non-necessary in the Statistic sense, and being non-necessary in the Possible World sense are completely different qualities, and having features of reality that are Statistically non-necessity is perfectly compatible with strict necessitarianism.

Under the reading of E2a1 suggested here, ‘order of nature’ is used in its standard sense in Spinoza’s writings, and the meaning of E2a1 is dictated by Spinoza’s own interpretation of the axiom in E2p11d. Under this reading, the ‘*hoc est*’ is used to specify the meaning of the first half of the axiom. If the first half asserts that human beings are modes, the second half spells out that human beings are *finite* modes.[[66]](#footnote-66) The reading also fits neatly Spinoza’s claim in E1p11d that from the order of nature “it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now or that it is impossible for it to exist now” as well as the numerous other passages endorsing necessitarianism. Finally, let me note that one cannot disregard the employment of E2a1 in E2p11d as some sort of typo or simple error: the argument employed at the end of E2p11d seems to be quite clear, and it is incumbent upon those who reject the interpretation of E2a1 offered here, to provide an alternative explanation for the employment of E2a1 in E2p11d.

Before we conclude our discussion of Spinoza’s necessitarianism, let me address a fascinating and important suggestion made recently by Samuel Newlands. According to Newlands’ argument, the modal status of things is sensitive to how they are conceived: when we conceive finite modes only through their essence (what Newlands calls the “narrow conception” of a thing), finite modes are (genuinely!) contingent, whereas when conceived in the broader context of the entire order of nature (Newlands’ “broad conception”), finite modes are necessary.[[67]](#footnote-67) I am perfectly happy to endorse this last claim, so long as we make clear that the (indeed genuine!) contingency of finite modes is only E-Contingency (and not TC-Contingency). But Newlands also argues that “both necessitarianism and its denial are consistently true for Spinoza, relative to different ways of conceiving objects in the world,”[[68]](#footnote-68) and here I beg to differ. Newlands is right to my mind in claiming that (i) in E4d3 Spinoza recognizes E-Contingency as a genuine feature of modes, and that (ii) we frequently conceive of finite things as detached from the order of causes, and as such regard them as TC-Contingent. However, unlike Newlands, I would argue that when we conceive finite things as detached from the order of nature, and thus consider them not only as E-Contingent, but also TC-Contingent, our conception is inadequate, erroneous, and non-rational. The place where Spinoza makes this point most clearly is in E2p44 and its corollary:

E2p44: It is of the nature of Reason to regard things as necessary, not as contingent.

Dem.: It is of the nature of reason to perceive things *truly* (by E2p41), viz. (by E1a6) as they are in themselves, i.e. (by E1p29), *not as contingent but as necessary*, q.e.d.

Cor. 1: From this it follows *that it depends only on the imagination that we regard things as contingent,* both in respect to the past and in respect to the future. (Italics added).

The notion of contingency Spinoza employs here is clearly TC-Contingency, not E-Contingency.[[69]](#footnote-69) The first corollary to E2p44 makes clear that when we regard finite things as TC-Contingent, we are conceiving things through the imagination, which Spinoza considered the lowest kind of cognition, and the only cause of falsity and inadequacy (E2p41).[[70]](#footnote-70) Newlands openly acknowledges E2p44 as “the strongest textual threat” to his interpretation, but suggests that perhaps some ideas of the imagination are true.[[71]](#footnote-71) Still, the demonstration of E2p44 makes clear that conceiving finite modes as TC-Contingent is to conceive of them “not truly.” All this being said, I think Newlands is right to point out that in Spinoza’s (and Leibniz’s) treatment of modality there is more structure than what it is usually expressed in our possible worlds theories,[[72]](#footnote-72) and his clear explication of the genuine sense of the E-Contingency of modes is an important contribution to the charting of this underexplored terrain.

§4. Open Foundational Questions

The recent debate about Spinoza’s commitment to necessitarianism has helped elucidate many features of Spinoza’s modal philosophy, but it has also drawn attention away from some rather basic questions about Spinoza’s understanding of modality. In this section, I would like to briefly present some of these still mostly neglected foundational questions.

*(i) What is Necessity*? – Augustine’s famous dictum regarding time – “If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not” [[73]](#footnote-73) – applies just as well to the notion of possibility and necessity. We use the terminology of modality constantly and abundantly in all forms of discourse. Still, providing a non-circular account of the notions of possibility and necessity proves to be quite difficult. Spinoza seems to think of possibility and necessity as mutually interdefinable. Still, one may and should wonder whether we can rescue from Spinoza an account explaining modality in terms of more basic notions.[[74]](#footnote-74)

*(ii) Bearers of Modality*. – Recent scholarly literature frequently ascribes to Spinoza definite views about the modal status of *propositions*. Spinoza himself usually applies modal determinations to things, properties, and relations (e.g., “*x* necessarily follows from *y*”), and much less so to propositions.[[75]](#footnote-75) In this sense, we can say that for the most part, Spinoza employs *de re*, rather than *de dicto,* modality.[[76]](#footnote-76) How important is the *de re* /*de dicto* distinction for Spinoza, and to what extent would he allow for the seamless translation from *de re* to *de dicto* modality (and vice versa) are questions which remain open.

*(iii) Modality and Essence.* – Like many of his contemporaries and predecessors, Spinoza considers modality as closely tied to essences: the modal status of modes is partly determined by their essences, and fully determined by God’s essence. Yet, unlike his predecessors and contemporaries, Spinoza seems to understand the essence of a thing to be both necessary *and sufficient* for thing’s existence.[[77]](#footnote-77) This apparently introduces a significant change in the concept of essence, and Spinoza seems to be fully aware of it.[[78]](#footnote-78) We do not currently have a comprehensive account of the significance of this shift in the concept of essence, and specifically, it is not clear what is the impact of this shift on the relation between essence and modality.

*(iv) Statistic Modality.* – It is quite common in current scholarly literature to spell out Spinoza’s modal philosophy employing the conceptual machinery of possible worlds in spite of the fact that Spinoza died shortly before Leibniz developed his theory of possible worlds,[[79]](#footnote-79) and three centuries before Kripke developed his semantics of possible worlds. Still, this anachronism is not necessarily problematic, since even before Leibniz we have quite a rich philosophical literature addressing *synchronic* alternatives (which are hardly theorizable in terms of Statistic modalities),[[80]](#footnote-80) and one can see Leibniz as simply providing a more systematic and elegant frame for discussions of unrealized possibilities and counterfactuals that predated him.

This being said, we should note that there is good textual evidence that on some occasions Spinoza employed modal terms in their Statistic sense. Thus, for example, when Spinoza writes: “all things, have *necessarily* flowed, or *always* follow [*omnia necessario effluxisse, vel semper…sequi*]” (E1p17s| II/62/17. Italics added), he seems to take ‘necessarily’ and ‘always’ as equivalent. Similarly, in E1p21d, Spinoza seems to move seamlessly from the claim that “Thought exists necessarily” (II/66/6) to the claim that Thought exists in all times (II/66/8).[[81]](#footnote-81) We have also seen that in E2p11d Spinoza construes (the second half of) E2a1 in terms of Statistic modality.[[82]](#footnote-82) On the other hand, there are passages where Spinoza is using modal terms in a non-temporalized manner (see, for example, E1d8 and E1p11d|II/53/8-10). This raises at least two non-trivial questions. First, we may wonder to what extent Spinoza was aware of the distinction between the Statistic and non-Statistic understandings of modality. Second, we may ask: how would Spinoza consider the relation, if there is any, between Statistic and non-Statistic modalities?

§5. Conclusion

In this chapter we have studied Spinoza’s and Crescas’ modal philosophy. Arguably, both maintained strict necessitarians, yet both allowed for a sense of contingency in finite things, if by contingency we mean nothing over and above the fact that the essence of (non-chimeric) finite things does not necessitate either their existence or their non-existence.

Apart from providing a survey of the main elements of Spinoza’s modal philosophy, I have argued for two substantial and innovative theses. First, I have argued that there are two distinct notions of contingency at work in Spinoza, and that once we observe the distinction between these two notions, Spinoza’s various pronouncements about contingency, frequently taken to be confused and inconsistent, turn out to be consistent and mostly clear. It should, however, be noted that Spinoza himself is partly responsible for their confusion, for he himself uses the two senses of the term without always explicitly distinguishing between them. Second, I have argued that in E2a1, widely seen as the strongest textual evidence against the ascription of necessitarianism to Spinoza, Spinoza employs Statistic modality, and that once this axiom is read in this sense, it completely coheres with Spinoza’s numerous necessitarian statements. Notably, my interpretation of E2a1, unlike earlier ones, is dictated by Spinoza’s own use of this axiom in E2p11d. Thus, I believe, we have finally found a solution to one, stubborn and significant, Spinozistic riddle (i.e., the meaning of E2a1), but, as it commonly happens, the solution of one problem also exposes the terrain of a new uncharted land: how should we reconstruct Spinoza’s modal philosophy in light of the realization that he also employed Statistic modalities?

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1. By necessitarianism, I understand the assertion that the actual world is the only possible world. By determinism, I understand the assertion that every event has a cause and is strictly necessitated by its (total) cause. Arguably, these two views do not imply each other. Non-necessitarian determinism asserts that are many possible worlds, though all worlds are deterministically ordered. Non-deterministic necessitarianism might assert that there is just one possible world, but at least one event in this world has no cause. I discuss further the distinction between determinism and necessitarianism in §3 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Two notable exceptions are Nietzsche and Althusser. For Nietzsche’s enthusiastic agreement with Spinoza’s critique of free will, see Yonover, “Nietzsche and Spinoza,” 529-532. For Althusser’s approbation of Spinoza’s uncompromising determinism, see Melamed, “Spinoza, Althusser, and the Question of Humanism,” 171. I am deeply indebted to Justin Bledin, Zach Gartenberg, Zev Harvey and Sam Newlands for their most astute criticisms and comments on earlier versions of this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bennett, *Study*, 114, and Bennett, *Learning*, I 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Spinoza, Ep. 58 (IV/265/30). Italics added. Cf. IV/266/35. Unless otherwise marked, all references to Spinoza’s works and letters are to Curley's translation: *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. I have relied on Gebhardt’s critical edition (*Spinoza Opera*, 4 volumes (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1925)) for the Latin and Dutch text of Spinoza. I use the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza’s works: **TdIE** - *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* [*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*], **DPP** – *Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy* [*Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I & II*], **CM** – *Metaphysical Thoughts* [*Cogitata Metaphysica*], **KV** – *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being* [*Korte Verhandeling van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand*], **TTP** –*Theological-Political* *Treatise* [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*], **Ep.** – *Letters*.Passages in the *Ethics* will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and app(-endix); ‘d’ stands for either ‘definition’ (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or ‘demonstration’ (in all other cases). Hence, E1d3 is the third definition of part 1 and E1p16d is the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Chapter Two above. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, Maimonides, *Eight Chapters*, Ch. VIII, in *A Maimonides Reader*, 379-386. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Pines, “Notes on Maimonides,” 196-8; Altman, “Religion of the Thinkers,” 35-35; Harvey, “Maimonides’ Interpretation,” 16-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Harvey, “Maimonides’ Interpretation,” 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I have slightly amended Feldman’s translation here in order to better fit the original Hebrew. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gersonides, *Milhamot ha-Shem* III, 4, 23d| *Wars of the Lord*, vol. II, 118. Translation slightly altered. For a helpful comparison of these claims of Gersonides, and similar claims in Abraham Ibn Daud’s *Emunah Ramah*, see Touati, *La pensée philosophique*, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Notice that Gersonides allows for contingency in a sense far stronger than the one we find in Avicenna, Ibn Daud and Crescas where a thing is said to be contingent if its essence does not necessitate either its existence or non-existence. For Gersonides, human choices are contingent in the sense that even given all previous causes and all previous facts – and not just the essences at stake – human choices are still not necessary. In §2 below we will see that Spinoza calls this stronger sense of contingency ‘real contingency’ (and I will refer to it as ‘*tout court* contingency,’ or TC-Contingency). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Were God to know now my future choice *c* tomorrow, *c* would have to obtain, and would thus be necessary, rather than contingent (in the stronger sense of contingency addressed in the previous note). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The acquisition of knowledge would require a hylic faculty; both Gersonides and Crescas deny that God has such a faculty. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Crescas, *Or ha-Shem*, II, 1, iii| *Light of the Lord*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Crescas, *Or ha-Shem*, II, 1, iii| *Light of the Lord*, 130-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Crescas, *Or ha-Shem*, II, 5, ii| *Light of the Lord*, 191. I have slightly amended Weiss’ translation here in order to better fit the original Hebrew. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Crescas employs the distinction between *per se* and per another modalities in numerous other places in *Light of the Lord*. See, for example, I, 1, iii where an effect is characterized as possible *per se* [אפשרי המציאות בבחינת עצמו] yet necessary by virtue of its cause. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Crescas, *Or ha-Shem*, II, 5, iii| *Light of the Lord*, 193-4. For a helpful discussion of Crescas’ necessitarianism, see Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, 137-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Abarbanel, *Commentary on Genesis*, 18:20. Translated by Roslyn Weiss in her editorial introduction to Crescas’ *Light of the Lord*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Spinoza, Ep. 12| IV/62/1-10 and Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, 8-13. For a discussion of this proof, see Melamed, “Hasdai Crescas and Spinoza,” 205-211. For a discussion of Crescas’ likely influence on Spinoza’s rejection of free will, see Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, 137-57. In his marginal notes on Spinoza’s Letter of the Infinite, Leibniz observed that Crescas’ argument employed the Principle of Sufficient Reason (Leibniz, *Labyrinth of the Continuum*, 117/|A VI 3, 71). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Crescas, *Or ha-Shem*, IV, 2| *Light of the Lord*, 334-37. It is worth noting that next to his discussion of alternative universes, Crescas still employs “Statistic” modalities, and thus holds that a possibility must be actualized at some time (see, for example, *Or ha-Shem*, IV, 1| *Light of the Lord*, 332). I discuss Statistic modalities in §§3-4 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Regarding things whose essence we can conceive clearly and distinctly without existence, see Spinoza’s claims later in the same chapter: “if we were to conceive the whole order of nature, we should

    discover that *many things whose nature we perceive clearly and distinctly*, that is, whose essence is necessarily such, can not in any way exist. For we should find the existence of such things in nature to be just as impossible as we now know the passage of a large elephant through the eye of a needle to be, although we perceive the nature of each of them clearly” (CM I 3| I/241/30-242/2. Italics added). Using the terminology I will introduce shortly, we may say that things whose essence we conceive clearly and distinctly without existence are *Essence*-Contingent, yet *Tout Court*-Impossible. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. CM I 3| I/240/23-241/3. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The metric Spinoza is using here seems to be related to his understanding of power. See E1p11d: “To be able not to exist is to lack power, and conversely, to be able to exist it to have power (as is known through itself)” (II/53/29-31). Presumably, God has more power than the middle category things, which in their turn have more power than chimeras. I am indebted to Justin Bledin for raising this question which requires further study. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. CM I 3| I/242/11-22. In his discussion of modality in the early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TdIE §53), Spinoza seems not to distinguish between possibility and contingency. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Namely, regardless of the source of the necessity or impossibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. CM I 3| I/242/30. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. I an indebted to Zev Harvey for this suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. CM I 3| I/242/29. Cf. E1p29 and E1p33s1. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. CM I 3| I/242/9 and 26. Cf. E2p31c. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Namely, things which are contingent in the strongest sense that neither their causes nor their essences rule in, or rule out, their existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Martial Gueroult also draws a distinction between “*contingente absolutement*” and “*contingente seulement par rapport à son essence*” (Gueroult, *Spinoza II: L’âme*, 31). We could have just as well call the weaker contingency ‘*per se* Contingency’ rather than ‘E-Contingency.’ After some hesitation, I decided to employ the latter terminology in order to stress the role of essences in this distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See, for example, Bennett, *Study*, 111. Like Bennett, Newlands (*Reconceiving Spinoza*, 94) reads Spinoza as using ‘contingent’ univocally. Newlands adds, however, that the modal status of modes is sensitive to how they are conceived: conceived in one way, modes are contingent, conceived in another, they are not (and both conceptions may be adequate, per Newlands). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. E1p28: “*Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity*.” Cf. E1a3 and E1pp26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See E1p11d | II/53/7-10. Cf. Ep. 12| IV/54/9-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. It seems at this point in time, Leibniz has not studied yet Part Four of the *Ethics*, and specifically, E4d3. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. “E1p24: The essence of things produced by God does not involve existence.” Notice however that Spinoza does not employ the terminology of contingency in E1p24 and its demonstration. Particular things are indeed contingent according to Spinoza’s definition of contingency in E4d3 (to be discussed shortly). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 203-4 (G I, 149). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. This suggestion is supported by the fact that when Spinoza employs the terminology of contingency in contexts that are more general and not dedicated to the philosophy of modality, he employs ‘contingent’ in the strong sense (TC-Contingent). See, for example, TTP Ch. 19 (III/236/24): “A harm and evil to the whole Republic which would have been uncertain and contingent, becomes certain and necessary.” Cf. Ep. 75| IV/312/14. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Namely, were we to attend to the essence of a chimera, but, due to the high complexity of this essence, be ignorant of the contradiction lurking in this essence, we would consider the chimera a mode and call it ‘contingent’ (E-Contingent) “due to a defect of our understanding” (i.e., our failure to diagnose the contradiction). Similarly, were we to attend to the essence of a substance and, due to the high complexity of that essence be unaware of the fact existence belongs to that essence, we would consider that substance an E-Contingent mode. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. In the previous note, we discussed scenarios in which we judge a thing contingent (E-Contingent) due to a defect in our understanding. The crucial point is that in addition to these judgements of E-Contingency resulting from a defect in our knowledge, there are (ample!) cases where our judgment of a thing as E-Contingent is epistemically correct. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Cf. Newlands, *Reconceiving Spinoza*, 93: “Not all [Narrow Conception of Modes] are false or confused.” I am greatly indebted to Newlands’ elucidation of the cases in which (what I call) E-Contingency is *adequately* ascribed to modes. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For detailed discussion, see Melamed, “Eternity in Early Modern Philosophy,” 152-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Melamed, “Spinoza’s Deification of Existence,” 90-96 and Melamed, “Eternity in Early Modern Philosophy,” 149-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See, for example, CM I 3 (I/241/1). Cf. E1p29d. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. E1p33s| II/74/6-12. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. E1p11d| II/52/30-53/2. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. E1p11d| II/53/3-10. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. There are other paths in *Ethics* which seem to lead to necessitarianism though we cannot discuss them in detail here. One such a path begins with Spinoza assertion that God’s nature is necessary (E1p16), and then relying on Spinoza’s demonstrations that all things follow necessarily from God’s nature (E1p16d and E1p29d), infers that all things exist necessarily. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Curley, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 101 and 106, and Curley and Walski, “Spinoza’s Necessitarianism Reconsidered,” 244 and 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Curley, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 104-6, and Curley and Walski, “Spinoza’s Necessitarianism Reconsidered,” 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See Garrett, *Nature and Necessity*, 125-48. Instead of repeating Garrett’s arguments, I invite readers to scrutinize the arguments of Curley and Walski alongside those of Garrett, and then to make their own judgement. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. In the Vatican manuscript of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, E2a1 appears at the beginning of the axiom section of part two but without a number. The significance of this – if there is any – is not clear to me. See Spinoza, *Vatican Manuscript*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. This is contrary to Descartes’ view of the human mind as a genuine substance. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. The claim that the order of nature necessitates the existence of all things appears in numerous other places in Spinoza’s corpus. See, for example, CM II 9| I/266/25-27: “if men understood clearly the whole order of Nature, they would find all things just as necessary as are all those treated in Mathematics.” Cf. Ep. 12| IV/55/13-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Curley and Walski, “Spinoza’s Necessitarianism Reconsidered,” 254-6. For Curley and Walski, the existence of finite things follows only from the *combination* of the laws of nature and the infinite series of past events. Since, on their reading, the infinite series of past events itself does not follow necessarily from God’s nature (and the laws of nature), there are genuinely alternative possible worlds, though each world is ordered in a strict deterministic manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. See Curley and Walski, “Spinoza’s Necessitarianism Reconsidered,” 255-6 and Garrett, *Nature and Necessity*, 144. Here is the text at stake: “Then there is the ordinary power of God, and his extraordinary power. The ordinary is that by which he preserves the world *in a certain order*; the extraordinary is exercised when he does something beyond the order of nature, e.g., all miracles, such as the speaking of an ass, the appearance of angels, and the like” (CM I 9| I/267/21-24. Italics added). Garrett sensibly points out that if ‘*ordo naturae*’ meant only the laws of nature, the proper formulation of the italicized phrase above should have been “with a certain order” rather than “in a certain order.” [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Garrett, *Nature and Necessity*, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. See, for example, TTP Ch. 16 (III/191/6): “For the most part we are ignorant of the order and coherence of the whole of nature, (III/199/15): “but to the order of nature… which is unknown to us,” and TP Ch. 2 (III/283/28): “...to the order of nature, which we do not know.” Cf. E2p30d. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Koistinen, “Spinoza’s Modal Theory,” 229. Notice that Koistinen seems to be using here so-called “Statistic” modality. I will address the role of Statistic modality in Spinoza shortly. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. In E2p30d, Spinoza uses ‘the common order of nature’ as denoting the infinite chain of finite causes of the human body, and not as referring to the laws of nature. If, as Curley and Walski argue, the ‘order of nature’ in E2a1 (upon which E2p30d relies) refers only to the laws of nature, E2p30d would be a trivial fallacy, resulting from an equivocal use of one of the main terms in the argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. For a detailed discussion of Spinoza’s notion of infinite modes, see Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, Chapter Four. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. For a helpful discussion of Statistic (or temporal) modality in Aristotle, Boethius and Scholasticism, see Knuuttila, “Medieval Modal Theories and Modal Logic,” 509-11, and Knuuttila, “Time and Modality in Scholasticism.” For temporal modality in Diodorus Chronus, see Chapter One, §3 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. In fact, the second half of E2a1 is just a statement of the Statistic sense of TC-Contingency: of things/qualities which obtain sometimes, and do not obtain other times, by virtue of their causes. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. In other words, the claim that man does not always exist is perfectly compatible with necessitarianism. All that necessitarianism requires is that whenever a person does not exist, she does not exist in all possible worlds, and whenever a person does exist, she exists in all possible worlds. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Such a use of ‘*hoc est*’ (i.e., when the second clause specifies and spells out the meaning of the first clause) is common both in Spinoza and in our common discourse. Consider, for example, “there’s always one person stuck with cleaning up the mess, *hoc est/namely,* me.” [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Newlands, *Reconceiving Spinoza*, 92-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Newlands, *Reconceiving Spinoza*, 104. For all I can tell, Newlands’ narrow conception of a thing (i.e., a thing conceived only through its essence) is compatible not only with the rejection of necessitarianism, but also with *indeterminism*. In this sense, his view is even more radical than Curley’s (and accordingly, it faces even more textual challenges). On one occasion (*Reconceiving Spinoza*, 91), Newlands claims that the narrow conception commits Spinoza only to determinism and not to necessitarianism, but as far I can see, the narrow conception does not commit Spinoza even to determinism. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. For otherwise, E2p44 would have to be interpreted as arguing that when conceived through reason, finite modes have an essence involving existence, which is clearly absurd. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Cf. TdIE §84, where Spinoza also stresses the randomness and the disconnectedness of imaginary ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Newlands, *Reconceiving Spinoza*, 110 and note 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. See Newlands’ discussion of current “finer-grained [modal] notions” at the end of §2.1 of Chapter Five below. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Augustine, *Confessions* 11.14; Pusey trans., 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Newlands is the recent commentator who pays most attention to this issue. According to Newlands, Spinoza understands modality as a “function of conceptual relations” (*Reconceiving Spinoza*, 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. The one group of propositions which Spinoza does characterize in modal terms are the eternal truths. See his definition of eternal truth in TdIE §54, note u. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. On the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* modality, see Ch. X (§1) above. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. E2d2: “I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessary taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.” [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. See Spinoza’s criticism of his predecessors who maintained that “anything without which a thing can neither be nor be conceived” pertains to the essence of the thing (E2p11s| II/193/25-9 and II/194/5-13). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. On the possible influence of the three-sided discussion among Leibniz, Tschirnhaus, and Spinoza of the plurality of worlds on Leibniz’s development of his theory of possible worlds, see Kulstad, “Leibniz, Spinoza, and Tschirnhaus” and Melamed, “Spinoza, Tschirnhaus et Leibniz.” [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. See, for example, Simo Knuutila’s discussion of Augustine in Chapter Two (§4) above, and Kukkonen’s discussion of Al-Ghazali (Kukkonen, “Possible Worlds”). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Two other texts where Spinoza is switching between claiming that *x* is necessary and that *x* always exists are E4p62d (II/257/9-12) and Ep. 35 (IV/181/21). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Namely, he understands the claim that the order of nature *can* cause both the existence and the non-existence of a specific human being as the assertion that *sometimes* the order of nature causes the existence of the person, while *other times* it causes the non-existence of that person (or, in other words, that the order of nature does not necessitate the existence of that person *in all times*). [↑](#footnote-ref-82)