

Spinoza on negation, mind-dependence and the reality of the finite

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[forthcoming in the *The Young Spinoza*, ed. Y. Melamed (Oxford)]

1. Introduction¹

From his early *Short Treatise* (KV) onward, Spinoza embraces substance-monism, the thesis that in nature there is only one conceptually and ontologically self-sufficient entity. All other things are no more than modifications or affections of this infinite substance. In this sense for Spinoza all finite things are *both* finite and infinite. For every pebble is not just a pebble but also – and more fundamentally – God.

Not everyone agrees that Spinoza succeeds in this precarious juggling act of holding onto both a thing's finitude and its infinity. His German and British Idealist readers in particular have concluded that Spinoza ought to be viewed as an “acosmist”, i.e. someone who denies the reality of the world – *cosmos* – of finite things.² This is principally because (the claim goes) he fails to *demonstrate* that the existence of finite things must follow from the existence of substance. On this reading of Spinoza's metaphysics, finite particulars simply disappear in the undifferentiated infinity of God; they fail to show up in a metaphysically rigorous account

1 Thanks to Joseph Almog, John Carriero, Michael Della Rocca, Martin Lenz, Yitzhak Melamed, Clinton Tolley, the participants of the Johns Hopkins *Young Spinoza* Conference, the Berlin-Toronto Workshop in Early Modern Philosophy, and the University of Turku *Nature of Judgment* Conference, for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2 Hegel, *Encyclopedia* §151; *Lectures* 3.3.256-8, 281; Maimon, *Autobiography* 113-4; Kojève *Introduction* 109n6; Jacobi, *Concerning* 187-8, 217-8; Joachim, *Study* 78-114; Caird, *Spinoza* 140-6.

Acosmic readings in fact pose two problems which aren't always clearly distinguished: (1) Does substance self-differentiate in *any* way? (2) Does substance produce *finite* particulars specifically? Here I focus solely on (2).

of what is. To put it in the Scholastic terms that Spinoza coopts, on such readings finite things have no “formal” reality (as opposed to the “objective”, or merely ideal, reality they may have qua objects of our representations).

Acosmic interpretations of Spinoza's system raise worries about its internal consistency. Can Spinoza justify the claims he himself makes about the properties of finite things, not least human beings? Is he violating the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), which he professes to accept from the beginning of his career?³ For the PSR requires that there be a reason or cause for every thing; hence, if finite things exist, they must have a cause, and a truly comprehensive metaphysical account should be able to elucidate it. Acosmic readings also raise a worry about the comprehensiveness and plausibility of Spinoza's metaphysics: Can it account for the existence of the finite things to which experience and common sense so amply testify?

Much has been written lately to examine these charges and to defend Spinoza against them.⁴ In this paper I want to look only at one piece of the puzzle: a certain kind of argument for acosmic readings of Spinoza's metaphysics that turn on his association of finitude with *negation*. For the purposes of this paper, I will call this argument the Argument for Acosmism, and the one who holds it the Idealist.⁵ On a first pass, the premises of the Argument can be reconstructed as follows:⁶

3 E.g. DPP1a11 (G/I/158); KV1.2[8] (G/I/21); E1ax2, E1p11atld.

4 Melamed, “Acosmism”, “Determinatio”, “Monist”, *Metaphysics*; Newlands, “Hegel's reading”, “More recent”.

5 Of course there are other arguments in the Idealists' arsenal. Given limitations of space, I cannot address the detail of individual Idealist readings, but see note 4 for other treatments. (It would be worthwhile in particular to address acosmism from the perspective of the ontological status of *relations* in Spinoza's metaphysics.)

6 The argument is not to be found in exactly this form in any particular text, but I take it to be faithful to the general spirit of acosmic readings.

(P1) For Spinoza, finite things are constituted in part by negation (limitation, exclusion, bounding, etc). That is, a rigorous metaphysical account of a finite thing makes irreducible reference to what we would logically represent by means of negation.

Here is how Hegel puts the point: “Spinoza has set up the great proposition, determination implies negation...of everything determined and finite, what is essential in it rests upon negation” (*Lectures* 3.285).⁷

This is premise two:

(P2) For Spinoza, being or reality (*esse, realitas*) as it is in itself is positive. That is, a rigorous metaphysical account of what is makes no irreducible reference to what we would logically represent with the help of negation. What exists is solely “perfections”, or positive qualities; if there is any diversity in this realm of existents, relations of negation (limitation, exclusion, bounding, etc) are not the conditions of this diversity.⁸

The claim here is *not* the trivial one that anything like a limit or a hole is not itself a being. Rather it is that in metaphysical rigour there are no limits, holes, edges, gaps, dents, etc. To think of being as differentiated through negation into finite particulars is an error analogous to thinking that substance has “really distinct” parts.⁹

Here is Hegel's version of the claim:

7 Cf. *Science* 95. Hegel is also critical of Spinoza's impoverished understanding of negation (e.g. *Lectures* 3.286-8), but I cannot pursue this criticism here.

8 Which properties deserve to be seen as positive is a further question; I will not pursue it here, but see e.g. Adams, *Leibniz* 114f; for skepticism about the very notion of a positive property see e.g. Malcolm, “Arguments”.

We can contrast Spinoza's positive view of being with views such as Hegel's (where being is related to non-being), and with Aristotelian views (where negation and privation understood as lacks of a form in a subject are fundamental ontological categories).

9 Cf. Ep.12; TIE[87]; E1p15s.

God alone is the positive, the affirmative...all other things...are nothing in and for themselves...[N]egation or privation is distinct from substance...the negation is present only as Nothing, for in the absolute there is no mode; the negative is not there, but only its dissolution (*Lectures* 3.281, 289)¹⁰

From the above two premises, the Idealist infers the Acosmic Conclusion:

(AC) For Spinoza, finite particulars *qua finite* have no formal reality. All representations of finite particulars as finite are thus merely misconceptions of the positive infinity of being.

Here is how Hegel puts this conclusion:

Spinozism might...even better have been termed Acosmism, since according to its teaching it is not to the world, finite existence, the universe, that reality and permanency are to be ascribed, but rather to God alone as the substantial...The world has no true reality, and all this that we know as the world has been cast into the abyss of the one identity. There is therefore no such thing as finite reality, it has no truth whatever...what is, is God, and God alone (*Lectures* 3.281)¹¹

In this paper, I want to test the soundness of the Acosmic Argument against various objections. To anticipate, I will suggest that there are two promising lines of defense against the Acosmic Conclusion. The first draws on Spinoza's doctrine of "beings of reason [*entia rationis*]", laid out most explicitly in his early writings. This doctrine suggests that the Acosmic Conclusion rests on a failure to distinguish *illusion* and *ideality*

10 Cf. *Science* 84; Joachim, *Study* 38-9, 104-6.

11 Cf. *Science* 98; Joachim, *Study* 111.

(or mind-dependence). The importance of this distinction is familiar to us from Leibniz's, Berkeley's and Kant's philosophies, but its significance for Spinoza's framework has not been noted. I want to show that we can use the distinction to construct an interpretation of Spinozistic finitude that avoids the Acosmic Conclusion. Secondly, I will suggest that we can also resist this Conclusion insofar as negation is arguably *not* necessary for the metaphysical constitution of Spinozistic finite things, nor for their being known.

But let me start with a preliminary assessment of the two premises. I will begin with the second premise, both because it is the more general of the two (bearing on being as such), and because it will turn out to be the better founded of the two.

2. Being and being finite

The second premise of the Acosmic Argument states that Spinoza holds a purely positive conception of being. Our question now is, is this really Spinoza's view?

2.1. In the first place, recall that starting with the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza holds that what exists is solely God and God's modifications. From this perspective a purely positive view of being may seem theologically mandated insofar as we may wish not to impute any limits or lacks to God.¹² But as is well known, Spinoza forgoes many of the traditional characterizations of God (such as his moral goodness). So we cannot lean on orthodox theological considerations alone to justify a thesis about general ontology of the sort that is contained in Premise 2.

The strongest case for Premise 2 is the textual one: here the evidence is quite clear-cut that Spinoza indeed adopts a purely positive conception of being. For from his earliest works onward he treats limit and negation as that element of our representation of being that is due to the mind rather than to any property of being as it is in itself. Thus he writes for example that negation “cannot be numbered among the affections of being [*affectiones entis*]” (CM1.3; G/I/241); it is we who

¹² Cf. e.g. Descartes, AT7.45-46, 54.

“attribute [*tribuimus*] something to [things] that involves negation, like a limit, an end, lack of power” (E4pref; G/II/207). “[B]lindness, extremity or limit, term, darkness, etc” are “modes which the mind uses [*mens utitur*] for negating” (CM1.1; G/I/234). God “has nothing imperfect or limited” (KV1.2b.2; G/I/20) and indeed “every definition” – that is, every statement of essence – “must be affirmative [*esse affirmativam*]” (TIE[96]; G/II/35).¹³ In the *Ethics*, this purely positive reality of substance is articulated in terms of a conjunction of irreducible and unlimited perfections: God is a “being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence”, and is conceived through itself; “if something is absolutely infinite” in this way “whatever expresses essence and involves no negation [*negationem nullam involvit*] pertains to its essence” (E1d6, E1p10).¹⁴

2..2. On textual grounds then it is clear that we should grant Premise 2. Given this conception of being, if negation or limitation indeed turn out to be necessary for the constitution of finite things (as alleged by Premise 1), then finite things *qua finite* (as opposed to for example insofar as they are *in substance*) will not have a formal reality proper to them. The question we must address now is then, Is negation necessary for the being of finite things in Spinoza's view?

Let's again consider the textual evidence. The *Ethics* offers the following definition:

That thing is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited [*terminari potest*] by another of the same nature. For example, a body is called finite because we always conceive another that is

13 On “affirmation”, see Della Rocca, “Power”.

14 Cf. KV1.2 (G/I/19); E1p11s; E3p4d; CM2.10 (G/I/268).

Cf. Leibniz: “A perfection is...every simple quality that is positive and absolute, or [*seu*] that expresses without any limits whatever it expresses” (*Two Notations for a Discussion with Spinoza*, Loemker 167). Contrast Locke's negative conception of God's infinity: “the Negation of an end in any Quantity” (*Essay*, II.xvii.15).

Hegel cites E1d6 (*Lectures* 3.261); cf. Joachim, *Study* 38-9.

greater (E1d2; G/II/45)¹⁵

To paraphrase, the definition stipulates that finitude requires the existence of relations of limitation or exclusion within an attribute-kind. (This follows from Spinoza's prohibition on inter-attribute relations of causation and explanation [E2p5-6]: to explain the finiteness of a thing under a given attribute, we cannot appeal to what is the case under other attributes.) So to be a finite x that is F (for example, extended), is to exclude and be excluded by other instances of F – i.e. to have properties understandable through the attribute-kind F which other instances of F lack. It is the presence of these kinds of relations of limitation or exclusion that for Spinoza constitute a finite thing qua finite.¹⁶ As Spinoza's own example of a body suggests, conceiving of finitude in this way implies that a finite thing can always be placed in parthood relations to a larger whole of the same kind – the whole composed of the thing in question and of non-identical instances of the same kind that this thing constitutively excludes and is excluded by. At the limit of this process, we can conceive of an infinite entity that comprehends all finite instances of a given kind, i.e. of an infinite mode.¹⁷

The definition mentions “limitation” rather than “negation”, but the equivalence of these two terms in the context of finitude is confirmed

15 Cited in Hegel, *Lectures* 3.259.

16 For a recent attempt to defend causal and constitutive roles for negative facts see e.g. Barker and Jago, “Being”.

E1d2 implies that finite things are only insofar as together they determinately limit the prior positive reality of substance. This is one sense in which finite modes are – like all modes – essentially conceivable through something else (E1d5, E1p28). On the priority of the infinite/perfect cf. Descartes AT7.45, 3.427; Leibniz NE 157; Adams, “Priority”.

17 In contrast, an “infinite” thing would be one that *cannot* be conceived in relation to something greater of the same nature. Cf. Anselm, *Proslogion* 2; see also Ep.12 for a classification of infinities.

by other passages.¹⁸ For example, Spinoza asserts that “being finite is really, in part, a negation [*finitum esse revera sit ex parte negatio*]”, whereas “being infinite is an absolute affirmation of the existence [*affirmatio existentiae*] of some nature” (E1p8s1; G/II/49).¹⁹ We are now in a position to refine our initial formulation of Premise 1 by adding that the “negation” at stake in being finite is the negation of the *existence* of a particular kind of being – of some but not other instances of existing as extended, as thinking, etc.

Another Spinozistic synonym of “limitation” and “negation” in the present context is “determination”.²⁰ For example, in Ep. 50 Spinoza notes that the “determination” of something “finite” “does not pertain to the thing in regard to its being; on the contrary, it is its non-being”, such that “determination is negation”.²¹

2.3. We can conclude tentatively then that for Spinoza being “finite” indeed requires the presence of certain relations of negation (exclusion, limitation) and hence that we should grant the Acosmic Argument’s second premise, just as we granted the first (asserting the positivity of being). The Acosmic Conclusion seems to follow with ironclad necessity:

18 Cf. Descartes AT7.365; Leibniz, 1698 letter to Molanus (Grua 412).

19 Cited in Hegel, *Lectures* 3.262.

Cf. also: “limited substance” “would necessarily have to have something which it had from Nothing” (KV1.2b.2; G/I/20); “if someone says that a stone and a man agree only in this, that each is finite, lacks power...he affirms completely that a stone and a man do not agree in anything. For things that agree only in a negation, or in what they do not have, really agree in nothing” (E4p32d,s).

20 Cf. Ep.36; DPPpref (G/I/132); and Ep.21 for equivalence of “perfection” and “indetermination” (G/I/129).

“Determination” also has a causal sense for Spinoza, as when one thing determines another to an effect. How a finite thing is constituted (what it excludes and what it is excluded by) depends on its causes (cf. E1p28). Thanks to Yitzhak Melamed for pressing me on this.

21 Cited by Hegel (*Lectures* 3.267).

finite particulars have no formal reality qua finite, i.e. qua limiting and limited; every representation of something limited is a misconception of what is in fact an indeterminate and positive reality.

3. Some arguments against Acosmism

On a first pass then, the Acosmic Argument emerges as a sound argument. Let us see now if it can withstand the following objections.

3.1. Perhaps the most obvious objection to be made is that the Acosmic Conclusion is inconsistent with the most natural reading of Spinoza's writings: insofar as Spinoza explicitly asserts many doctrines bearing on the properties of finite things (including the psychological and moral properties of human beings), the formal reality of such things must be regarded as beyond doubt.²² If Spinoza accepts the Acosmic Conclusion, then he either contradicts himself by making claims about finite things, or such claims must be seen as at most useful or therapeutic for the reader, but not as strictly speaking true.

The problem with this first objection is that it does nothing to undermine what I'd call the more formidable version of the acosmic charge. This is that regardless of what propositions about finite things Spinoza asserts, he is simply not *entitled* to them, because he never adequately demonstrates that finite things must exist, by grounding their

²² For this line of defense of Spinoza see Melamed, "Individuals", "Monist", *Metaphysics*. However, it's not clear that the doctrines Melamed appeals to actually require the existence of finite things. Parallelism, E1p36, and substance's "active" nature are satisfied by substance's own self-causation under various attributes. The meaning of Spinoza's claim that knowledge of finite things increases our knowledge of God is too underdetermined to undermine acosmism (the knowledge in question could be just the knowledge that finite things are illusory, and God alone exists). Finally, it's not clear that intuition as described in E5p22 and E5p31 is supposed to be a knowledge of finite things *qua finite* (as opposed to qua indiscernible components of something infinite).

existence in the nature of substance.²³ So although this line of defense may show that Spinoza did not *intend* to put forth an acosmist metaphysics, it does not show that, whatever his intentions, his metaphysics in fact has only the conceptual resources to establish the existence of an entirely indeterminate, infinite being.

3.2. A second objection one could make to the Acosmic Argument is that this argument proves too much. This is because if correct it undermines not only the existence of finite things, but also the existence of distinct divine attributes. Someone who wished to defend the existence of finite things in Spinoza's metaphysics – call her a “Pluralist” – could claim that negation is in fact essential also to *God's* constitution. As Spinoza writes, “if something is only infinite in its own kind” – as is an attribute – then “we can deny [*negare*] infinite attributes of it” (E1d6e). On this reading, although each attribute predicates of God “whatever expresses essence and involves no negation” in a particular kind, the attributes themselves stand in relations of negation: thought is not extension, extension is not thought, etc. On this reading then negation makes God what God is essentially, namely an “absolutely” infinite substance, rather than a substance infinite in one kind only. But if negation is necessary in this way for God's own constitution, then it seems that we must give up Premise 2 (of the positivity of being), since relations of negation turn out to constitute the joints of Spinozistic nature after all. Moreover, we cannot

23 For this formulation of the charge cf. Hegel, *Lectures* 3.288; Joachim, *Study* 103, 115-6; Caird, *Spinoza* 142-4.

Melamed suggests that this more formidable version of the acosmic charge is answered by E1p16d, where “Spinoza derives modes from the essence of substance as substance's *propria*” (*Metaphysics* 72, cf. “Individuals”). However, it's not enough to say that modes must follow from substance as *propria* unless we can first explain why substance must have *propria* (and not, for example, only essential properties). Likewise, it's not clear how “God's absolutely infinity” would “requir[e] the instantiation of modes” (*Metaphysics* 72n54, cf. “Monist” 214), unless we assume, in question-begging way, that modes are somehow already *intrinsically possible* – a modality Spinoza rejects.

any longer deny reality to finite things qua finite on the basis of *their* constitutive reference to negation. If relations of negation are excluded from being, we lose not only the formal reality of finite things, but equally God's own absolute infinity, i.e. the distinctness and multiplicity of attributes.²⁴

Unfortunately for the Pluralist, this second objection also proves defeasible, for at least three reasons. First, a reader not already inclined to acosmism might indeed balk at giving up on both finite things and distinct divine attributes. For this leaves little of Spinoza's ostensible metaphysical edifice intact. But the Idealist can simply bite the bullet: she can grant that *if* there were multiple attributes, they would stand in relations of negation, but then she can simply deny the antecedent, either by glossing God's "absolute infinity" as infinity in a single attribute, or by denying that there are any attributes as distinct from substance (with Spinoza's suggestions to the contrary going the way of other claims he is not entitled to).²⁵

The second problem for the objection is that the relation of negation necessary to constitute something as finite is arguably quite different from any "negation" that would relate attributes. For unlike in the finite case, inter-attribute relations of "negation" are not equivalent to relations of exclusion or limitation: substance qua thinking does not exclude or limit substance qua extended: it is infinite in both ways.²⁶ Nor does thought require extension or any other attribute in order to be constituted (cf. E1p10). These fundamental dissimilarities in what is meant by "negation" in each case arguably render attributes irrelevant to the problem of the

24 Cf. Joachim, *Study* 104-6.

25 Cf. e.g. Hegel, *Lectures* 3.269.

26 Cf. Deleuze, *Expressionism* 60.

One could object that there is a disanalogy here insofar as finite things standing in a relation of negation fall under a common concept representing the relevant attribute-kind (e.g., 'extension'); but such a common concept seems lacking in the case of attributes. However, although different attributes indeed do not fall under a shared *attribute*-concept, nonetheless, they do fall under other shared concepts (e.g., "a way of conceiving of divine essence").

ontological status of finite things, even if Spinoza uses cognate terminology in both contexts.

Finally, the second objection is weakened by the fact that for Spinoza the inter-attribute negation seems not to be a matter of God's intrinsic constitution, but merely of how *we* may apprehend God. The reference to negation appears not in the official definition, which describes divine essence in terms of a coexistence of unlimited perfections, but rather in the supplementary *Explicatio*, as a description of a possible judgement ("we may deny infinite attributes"). The young Spinoza warns us that "infinity" is a "difficult, indeed insoluble" concept (Ep.12; G/IV/53). Is the negative way of conceiving of God's "absolute infinity", given in the *Explicatio*, as adequate as the purely affirmative conception contained in the definition proper? For the Pluralist's objection to go through, she must first demonstrate that this is the case. As Leibniz will later insist, we cannot simply assume that if an essence consists in a conjunction of different perfections, these perfections necessarily negate one another.²⁷

3.3. The third objection to the Acosmic Argument also views its conclusion as inconsistent with Spinoza's conception of God, this time however with God insofar as he is *res cogitans*. The key premise of the objection is that according to Spinoza for there to be "thinking", or production of ideas, there must minimally be acts of affirmation *or negation*, and that either affirmation or denial can constitute a judgement of truth. The premise is textually grounded. Spinoza writes, for example, that "since [a mind] is a thinking thing, [it] has no greater power of affirming than of denying" (CM1.1; G/I/234). He also defines truth as an "affirmation (or denial)...which agrees with the thing" (KV2.15[1]; G/I/78]), offering as an example of an eternal truth "*That there is no Chimera*" (TIE[54]u).²⁸ Now, if for Spinoza thinking as such involves acts of

²⁷ Cf. Adams, *Leibniz* 113.

²⁸ Cf. E2p49s[II] (G/II/130); Spinoza's definition of "will" ("power...of affirming and of denying" [CM1.12; G/I/280]); and his characterization of modes of knowledge as "modes...for affirming or denying something" (TIE[18]).

affirming or negating, and if knowledge of truth can be a knowledge of a negative fact, then Spinoza's God as an omniscient thinking thing will engage in veridical acts of negation. Moreover, since Spinoza allows for no genuine possibles to be left unactualized (KV1.4[3-5] (G/I/37-8); E1p17s[I]), God will necessarily negate the being that is the object of his thought and knowledge in all possible ways. But this is tantamount to say that God will necessarily think all possible finite things. For to represent something finite as finite all we need is to affirm certain instances of a certain kind of being while denying others. Finally, since all divine ideas are true (CM2.7 [G/I/261]; KV1.2[13] [G/I/22]),²⁹ the finite things thought by God must necessarily actually exist in nature (i.e. have formal and not merely objective reality).³⁰

The third objection in short recasts the controversy over acosmism as a controversy over what an infallible intellect would represent within Spinoza's framework: if the Acosmic Conclusion is correct, such an intellect will not represent anything finite; if the third objection is correct, the Acosmic Conclusion must be false because it is inconsistent with Spinoza's conception of the divine *res cogitans*. Moreover, if the objection works, the Pluralist succeeds in proving not just the reality of *some* finite things in Spinoza's metaphysics, but the necessity of *all* possible finite things. In offering this counterargument the Pluralist manages to supply the demonstration that the Idealist alleges to be missing from Spinoza's system, showing why, given substance, there must also be finite things. On the proposed argument, this follows from God's essence under the attribute of thought, assuming a robust necessitarianism.

29 Cf. CM1.2 (G/I/237-8); E2p7c.

30 The objection assumes, plausibly, that Spinoza's God cannot think merely imaginary things, or have empty thoughts.

Since for Spinoza what is the case must be explicable equally adequately from the perspective of any attribute, we also cannot dismiss this objection on the grounds that there may be factors external to or inaccessible from the point of view of thought that could prevent God from producing finite things. We could however object to the claim that Spinoza's necessitarianism extends to finite modes (see e.g. Curley and Walski, "Necessitarianism").

Unfortunately for the Pluralist, this third objection is also defeasible, for at least two reasons.

(i) First, textually it is simply not clear whether Spinoza's God can think negation. First, the context of the passages to which the Pluralist appeals suggests that they are intended to characterize human, or finite, thought alone, not thought as such. (Consider the titles under which the cited passages appear: "By what modes of thinking we imagine things" [CM1.1; G/I/234]; "On man and what pertains to him" [KV2; G/I/51].) Secondly, Spinoza's references to "negation" in his writings are typically reserved for discussions of thinking done by a "mind [*mens*]"³¹ But Spinoza never attributes a "mind" (as opposed to an "intellect") to God, and many of his claims about minds – for example, his descriptions of them as confused, or as united with "bodies" (which are finite by definition [E2d1]) – clearly cannot apply to God.³² In fact, Spinoza explicitly berates "those who feign a God, like man, consisting of a body and a mind" (E1p15s[1]). Consider likewise his claim that "what is common to all ideas" is "affirmation" alone (E2p49s[III.B(iii)]; G/II/135),³³ and that negation happens in a "wholly passive" "soul" (KV2.16[5] [G/I/84]). The divine intellect certainly is not a "soul" of this sort.³⁴ In short, on textual grounds we cannot rule out the possibility that for Spinoza relations of negations are, like error, the exclusive preserve of finite thinking things. That is, it is possible that Spinozistic substance

31 E.g. E2p48s-p49s; E3p3s; E3p25; E4pref (G/II/207). Though see TIE[108].

32 Cf. TTP1.25, CM2.6 and Renz, "Definition" 114-5.

33 Cf. the intellect "forms positive ideas before negative ones" (TIE[108]; G/I/39). Cf. also Hobbes, *Elements* 1.2.7; Aristotle, *De int* 5 17a8; Geulincx (1891-3, v.1, 175) in Nuchelmans, "Proposition" 125, 130.

34 Although Spinoza asserts that the infinite intellect knows modes (e.g. E2p4d), nowhere to my knowledge does he specify that it is a matter of *finite* affections. To assume this would be to beg the question against the Idealist. Likewise, although in E5p36c Spinoza writes that God "loves" (and hence knows [E2a3]) "men", the context clarifies that this is a matter of God "not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explained by the human Mind's essence" (E5p36).

merely eternally affirms what is, and cannot represent anything finite qua finite (i.e. qua limiting and limited).

The Pluralist may try to resist this thesis of a bifurcation in kinds of conception on several grounds. First, she can point out that according to Spinoza minds are “parts [latin xx]” of the infinite intellect (E2p11c, cf. E5p40s), within an overall naturalistic framework where all things are subject to the same laws (E3pref; G/II/138). But Spinoza does not elaborate what it means to be a “part” in this context, and since in his view parts don't necessarily retain the nature of the relevant whole (cf. E1p12d-13d), minds presumably could differ from the infinite intellect in their ability to negate.³⁵

Secondly, the Pluralist could object on purely conceptual grounds to the idea of a thought that never engages in acts of negation. In support, she could point to the fundamentality of the Principle of Contradiction for many philosophers. Yet it's been argued that for Spinoza this principle is in fact derivable from other, more fundamental ones.³⁶ Moreover, some of Spinoza's most important metaphysical doctrines can be seen as attempts precisely at a purely affirmative thought. Consider for example the *Ethics*' definition of God. That definition implies that to represent divine essence we must affirm a conjunction of all possible kinds of being, without taking the corresponding concepts to negate one another.³⁷ Or consider Spinoza's conatus doctrine, the fundamental law governing what “each thing [*unaquaeque res*]” can do (E3p6; cf. CM1.6 [G/I/248]).³⁸ This doctrine asserts, inter alia, that “no thing, through its own nature, could strive for its own destruction” (KV1.5[1] [G/I/40]; cf. E3p4-6). In the *Ethics* Spinoza derives

³⁵ See also 4.3.

Given Spinoza's commitment to the PSR, we will want to know the reason for this difference between finite and infinite thinking things. The Idealist however can simply reject this question, insofar as from her perspective there is nothing to explain: in metaphysical rigour, the finite minds that represent through negation do not exist.

³⁶ Melamed, “Determinatio”.

³⁷ The Pluralist will instead stress the reference to “negation” in the *Explicatio*.

³⁸ Thanks to a *Young Spinoza* conference audience member for discussion.

this rule from the claim that “the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny [*negat*], the thing's essence, or it posits the thing's essence, and does not take it away [*tollat checkxx*]” (E3p4d). The basic idea is that whatever a thing does because of its essential nature – i.e., in whatever manner it “strives” – it continues to be what it essentially is. In other words, any effects produced by a thing's essence (and constituting its striving) can all be represented as different ways of affirming that essence. In this sense to think of a thing insofar as it strives is to represent it purely affirmatively. As one last example, consider intuitive knowledge: in intuition we grasp how the essences of things follow from divine attributes (E2p40s2; TIEXX??). That is we grasp a relation of ontological dependence between essences that does not involve any limitation or negation.

(ii) Doubts about the appropriateness of attributing a power to negate to divine thought are not the only reason why the Pluralist's third objection is defeasible. There is also the fact that Spinoza endorses the classical theological doctrine of the *simplicity* of the divine idea (CM2.7 [G/I/263]; KV2.20.[3]c [G/I/xx]; E2p8c). Presumably Spinoza understands this doctrine as the claim that God's representation of what is is not composite either in its formal reality or its objective reality. If that's correct, then even if substance does produce a multiplicity of things, it will not represent them as distinct. A fortiori it will not represent them as limiting one another.³⁹ Instead, the simplicity of the divine idea suggests that substance simply affirms what is in a completely indeterminate manner. This means we cannot undermine the Acosmic Conclusion by recasting it in terms of what God represents, as the third objection attempts to do.

4. Ideality vs illusion

None of the objections to acosmism proposed thus far have succeeded. In the next two sections I want to suggest two more promising lines of attack.

³⁹ Cf. CM2.7 (G/I/263).

4.1. The counterargument I want to begin with takes as its cue the fact that in his discussions of finitude Spinoza systematically resorts to a *non-realist* idiom. For example, strictly speaking E1d2 is not a definition of finitude per se but instead of what it means to “call [*dicere*]” something a “finite thing”. Likewise, the definition does not assert that a finite thing “is” part of some greater entity, but rather that we “conceive [*concipimus*]” it so. In similar vein, Ep.36 states that being “‘determinate’ denotes...only the privation of existence of that same nature which is *conceived* as determinate” (my emphasis), and E3p3s equates a mind's “ha[ving] something which involves a negation” with its being “considered [*consideratur*] as a part of nature which cannot be perceived clearly and distinctly through itself” (G/II/145). Similarly, being finite and being infinite involve “negating” and “affirming” of existence respectively (E1p8s1), i.e. they require the “action” of a thinking thing (E2p49, E2d3).⁴⁰

Passages such as these suggest that for Spinoza being finite – and indeed the entire distinction “finite/infinite” – involves being conceived or represented in a certain way, i.e. an act of a *res cogitans*. Call this the ideality of finitude. To stress this aspect of Spinoza's thinking about finitude is a needed correction to the dominant treatment of this topic from the perspective of extension alone.⁴¹

40 Cf. CM3.3 (G/I/253).

41 See e.g. Bennett: Spinoza “cannot find a plausible mental analogue for [his] geometrical interpretation of ‘limited’” (*Study* §21.4).

One may worry that mind-dependence makes all finite things depend on the attribute of thought, violating the inter-attribute explanatory barrier. But every attribute is already a way of *conceiving* of being (E1d4). In this sense, *all* things, not merely finite ones, are thought-dependent (cf. Pollock, *Spinoza* 184-7; Martineau, *Study* 188; Newlands “More recent”). The ideality of finitude thus fits well with Spinoza's conception of attribute, and, like the latter, is apt to generate a tension with Spinoza's simultaneous commitment to the explanatory independence of attributes. How to solve this larger problem about the status of thought in Spinoza's metaphysics is beyond the scope of the paper, but my reading does not introduce a new difficulty. (Thanks to Yitzhak Melamed for pressing me on this point.)

4.2. How does the ideality of finitude fit in with our inquiry?

In the first place, it dovetails with Spinoza's commitment to the positivity of being (Premise 2). For if being as it is in itself admits no negation, relations of limitation and exclusion must depend on how we represent being.

Secondly, to the Idealist, Spinoza's non-realist idiom will certainly appear as a concession that finite things are indeed merely figments of our imagination. But this conclusion is too quick, since it fails to distinguish between error or illusion and ideality (mind-dependence). We have no reason yet to conclude that for Spinoza the ideality of finite things entails that they are mere chimeras, i.e. that all representations of being as finite are necessarily inadequate. Moreover, there are at least three positive reasons to resist this conflation of ideality and illusion. The first is the parity of the infinite and the finite in the present context: as we saw, being "infinite" also requires a mental act, the "affirmation" of a certain kind of existence. Presumably the Idealist does not wish to consign all infinite beings, including substance, to the realm of illusion together with finite things. So mind-dependence must be distinguished from illusion.

A second reason to resist conflating ideality and illusion emerges from Spinoza's treatment of the Aristotelian distinction between "negation" and "privation", which fittingly is overlooked by some Idealist commentators.⁴² As is well known, a "privation" is any property that a thing of a certain kind normally should, but fails to, have. For Spinoza the normative idea of a "privation" misrepresents what in metaphysical rigour are mere "negations". As he explains, privation "in itself" is really "nothing"; to attribute a "privation" to a thing involves "denying something of [it] which *we judge* to pertain to its nature"; in contrast, to attribute "negation" involves "denying something of a thing *because it does not pertain to its nature*" "when we consider God's decree" (Ep. 21; G/I/128-9; my ital.).⁴³ In short, both privative and negative claims require an act of

42 E.g. Hegel, *Lectures* 3.278.

43 Cf. DPP 1p16s (G/I/176).

judgement that something is not true of a thing. But the two kinds of claims differ insofar as only judgements involving negation are grounded in a thing's true nature. They represent, we could say, well-founded phenomena.

A third reason to balk at conflating ideality and illusion within Spinoza's framework has to do with his doctrine of beings of reason. A couple quick words of background first:⁴⁴ One of the issues that Spinoza's early writings illuminate especially well is his quasi-nominalist position on universals. Spinoza distinguishes "ideas of things" – ideas representing what is formally real – from ideas representing *entia rationis*, such as universals and relations.⁴⁵ The latter are products of mental acts of abstraction and comparison – as Spinoza puts it, "[f]rom the fact that we compare things with one another certain notions arise which nevertheless are nothing outside the things themselves but modes of thinking" (CM1.5; G/I/245). In the early writings, Spinoza seems to be on the fence about the epistemic value of such abstractions: are beings of reason merely mnemonic devices, or do they genuinely let us understand being?⁴⁶ The *Ethics* resolves this tension by allowing that *some* beings of reason can contribute to an adequate account of being. On this mature account, merely *empirical* generalizations will represent distinctly only the relative properties of arbitrary subsets of things ("only what [particulars] all agree in, insofar as they affect the body" [E2p40s1; G/II/121]). But Spinoza also allows that our "universal notions" can be adequate, if we form them on the basis of (necessarily adequate) "common notions" and "adequate" ideas of "properties" of things (E2p40s2 [G/II/122]). Such universal notions are then part of "reason" (*ibid.*). Despite the fact that what they represent is merely ideal – species and relations – they possess a foundation in what is formally real. In this way we can have "true knowledge" that "is only abstract, or universal" (E4p62s), and dependent on the active contribution of our minds. This is one way that finite knowers like ourselves can

44 See Hübner, "Essences" for a fuller account.

45 CM1.1 (G/I/234); CM2.7 (G/I/262-3).

46 CM1.1 (G/I/233-4); Ep.12 (G/I/56); KV1.10[1], 1.6[7], 2.16[4] (G/I/49, 42, 82).

improve their epistemic lot: we can compare our ideas of particulars, on that basis construct well-founded universals, and use them to determine being in thought (judging for example, that some instances of extension are “limited” by or “greater” than others.)⁴⁷

In short, we have here another case where Spinoza distinguishes mind-dependence and illusion. The Idealist who leans on the non-realist idiom of Spinoza's discussions of finitude to support her claim that in Spinoza's framework representations of finite things are illusory – this is just the second half of the Acosmic Conclusion – fails to recognize that ideas representing entities not found in nature are not necessarily inadequate in Spinoza's view. For Spinoza the realm of truth, reason and adequate knowledge includes claims about what is mind-dependent. So for him to say that “negation” is not an “affection of being”, but something we “attribute” to things, or to imply that being “finite” depends on how we “conceive” of being does not imply that our representations of finite things – or of being qua finite – are necessarily illusory or false. Whether or not this or that particular idea representing a finite thing is adequate or not – i.e. whether or not it is well-grounded and hence genuinely rational, or due merely to accidental empirical generalizations – can be determined on a case by case basis, by tracing the idea in question back to its causes in the mind (as Spinoza does with the idea of a human being as essentially a “featherless biped” [E2p40s1; G/II/121]).

The distinction between ideality and illusion puts us in the position to say that, despite the prima facie soundness of the Acosmic Argument, its two premises do *not* establish the Acosmic Conclusion *in its entirety*. For even if it follows from the positivity of being (Premise 2) together with the constitutive reference of finite things to negation (Premise 1) that finite things qua finite will lack formal reality (first half of the Conclusion), it does not also thereby follow that our ideas of such things are uniformly illusory. That is, we do not have to conclude as a general principle that

47 Cf. E4pref (G/II/206); E4p5d.

when Spinoza engages in a discussion of finite existents, he is either contradicting himself or giving up on a rigorous pursuit of truth in favour of philosophy as therapy. Instead, we can see Spinozistic finite things *considered qua finite* – that is, *considered insofar as they limit others of the same kind*, and are in turn limited by them – as well-founded *entia rationis*.

4.3. This way of sidestepping the Acosmic Conclusion has, unfortunately, the following two weaknesses:

First, the argument is only a partial victory over the Idealist, insofar as it leaves intact the first half of the Acosmic Conclusion, bearing on the formal reality of finite things.

Secondly, it remains open to the Idealist to simply *reject* Spinoza's doctrine of well-founded *entia rationis*. This is because this doctrine is concerned exclusively with how *finite* beings think. In contrast the divine intellect does not need to entertain representations of merely ideal entities (just as it might not engage in acts of negation). As Spinoza writes, God “does not know things abstractly, and does not make...general definitions” (Ep.19; G/I/90). So if what is at issue is the existence of finite things, to appeal to what is an exclusively finite manner of thinking is to beg the question.

Let me then suggest one final way to plausibly block the Acosmic Conclusion as a whole, by resisting its first Premise.

5. Finitude affirmatively

In the previous section I concluded that given Spinoza's positive conception of being (Premise 2), finite things considered *qua finite* must be relegated to the realm of *entia rationis* if, as Premise 1 asserts, they involve negation constitutively and irreducibly. What I want to suggest now is that we might not have to grant this first premise. For it is plausible that according to Spinoza neither the metaphysical constitution of finite things as finite, nor our knowledge of them as finite, necessarily requires negation.

To see this, recall my earlier suggestion that it is plausible that acts of negation are the province of finite minds alone. Recall also Spinoza's claims that minds are "parts" of the divine intellect, and that falsehood is a matter ultimately of an incompleteness of ideas (E2p32-5). Together these theses suggest that the two different ways of thinking Spinoza allows for on my reading – God's affirmative, indeterminate idea; the finite minds' negative and universal ideas – must in the end intend the very same formally-real things, even if they do so in different ways. The *Ethics'* definition of God serves as an illustration of an analogous kind of referential coincidence of two different ways of representing: the definition proper is formulated in purely affirmative terms; the *Explicatio* then redescribes the definiendum on the basis of relations of negation.⁴⁸ This sort of referential equivalence is also suggested in the TIE, which moreover warns against drawing ontological conclusions on the basis of negative linguistic facts:

every definition must be affirmative. I mean intellectual affirmation [*affirmatione intellectiva*] – it matters little whether a definition is verbally [*verbalem*] affirmative; because of the poverty of language it will sometimes perhaps [only] be able to be expressed negatively, although it is understood affirmatively [*negative exprimi quamvis affirmative intelligatur*]...[Certain] names...express negatively many things that are really affirmative [*quae sunt revera affirmativa, negative exprimunt*]...We affirm and deny many things because the nature of words – not the nature of things – allows us to affirm them. (TIE[96, 89]; G/II/33-5; transl. alt.)

Now, if according to Spinoza one and the same thing can indeed be represented both negatively and affirmatively, then it remains possible that Spinoza allows also for purely affirmative representations of finite things qua finite. On this reading we could regard E1d2, with its

⁴⁸ This is not to suggest that this definition represents God's self-understanding. For one, it is not free of universals, such as "attribute" and "essence".

references to limitation, as analogous to E1d6's *Explicatio*, that is as one but not the only possible way of representing something finite qua finite.⁴⁹ In such a case we no longer have to accept Premise 1 of the Acosmic Argument, and so can also resist its Conclusion. Finite things understood in a purely affirmative way can be accommodated within Spinoza's fully positive account of being.

What would we grasp in representing a finite thing affirmatively?⁵⁰ Such representations would no longer equate being "finite" with "limiting and being limited"; they would allow for distinctions between different regions of being, or different instances of existence, but without explicating those distinctions by means of relations of negation. Arguably it is the conatus doctrine that comes closest to showing us what a purely affirmative representation of a finite thing would be like. For in thinking of a thing insofar as it strives, we think of the degree of reality and power essential to it, and of the effects it must produce, all of which, as we have seen, constitute different ways of affirming that essence. As Spinoza writes, "whatever there is, considered in itself, without relation to any other thing, involves perfection, which always extends, in each thing, as far as the thing's essence does" (Ep.19; G/IV/88-9). Here finally what is essential about a striving thing does not, as Hegel put it, "rest upon negation".

49 Even E1d2 says only that a finite thing "can" be limited, nor that it is intrinsically limited.

Cf. "the best conclusion" is "drawn from some particular affirmative essence" (TIE[93]).

50 Thanks to Martin Lenz for discussion of this paragraph.

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