There is a familiar story about Spinoza, on which he borrows the fundamental building blocks for his philosophical edifice directly from Descartes, his greatest influence. Specifically, the story goes, Spinoza’s celebrated substance monism arises straightforwardly from Descartes’ own conception of substance, which Descartes himself combines—not entirely consistently—with substance pluralism.

At the center of the story’s plot is a crucial premise in Spinoza’s argument for monism: namely, the premise that no substance can be produced, or caused, by another substance. This premise allows Spinoza to eliminate a variety of candidates for substance, eventually leaving only one: Deus sive Natura, the one, uncaused substance. According to the familiar story, this premise is already implied by Descartes’ own view of substance as an independent being. If this implication holds, then a momentous step on the road to Spinozism is already taken—however unintentionally—by Descartes.

Familiar and tempting as the story is, however, I think that it is mistaken. I will argue that Descartes disagrees with Spinoza on this crucial premise. In particular, Descartes’ view of substance—characterized in the Second Replies in terms of inherence, and later in the Principles of Philosophy in terms of independence—does not imply, in and of itself, that substance is causally independent, or that substance monism is true. On the contrary, Descartes’ view of substance is fully compatible with his pluralism. The crucial disagreement between Descartes and Spinoza, it will turn out, concerns whether causation is what I will call an ontological dependence relation—the kind of dependence relation, of which inherence is the paradigm, that a substance does not (indeed, cannot) bear to any other entity.

Ultimately my goal is not simply to establish that Descartes and Spinoza are divided by a substantive metaphysical disagreement, but to understand the philosophical content of this disagreement, and to place it in its broader historical and philosophical contexts. Thus I will examine the familiar story with an eye to uncovering, by making explicit, the particular claims and commitments that underwrite each of Descartes’ and Spinoza’s treatments of causation, dependence, and substance. Eventually I will argue that just as the familiar story
does not do justice to the coherence of Descartes' metaphysical system, wrongly
faulting it with inconsistency or compromise, so too it fails to
appreciate the innovation of Spinoza's. If I am correct, the familiar
story must be replaced by a more nuanced narrative that acknowledges
the substantive metaphysical disputes that divide the two figures. In
the conclusion, I briefly examine a few forms that this alternative
narrative might take.

1. The Familiar Story

Early on in the Ethics, Spinoza rejects the possibility of a substance that
is produced or caused to exist by another substance:

(Ep6) One substance cannot be produced by another
substance.¹

This proposition is what I referred to above as the crucial premise in
Spinoza's argument for the anti-Cartesian thesis of substance monism
(which concludes at Ep14). If no substance can be produced by anoth-
er substance, as Ep6 states, then minds and bodies, which are created
substances for Descartes, cannot be substances; the only candidates
for substance are self-caused (or, per impossible, uncaused) entities — of
which, it turns out, there can be only one.²

1. Translations of Spinoza's Ethics and the Short Treatise are from Spinoza (1985),
and translations of Spinoza's letters are from Spinoza (2002). I follow
the standard method of citing passages from the Ethics by part, type, and num-
ber (for example, 'E1a4' is axiom 4, part 1 of the Ethics; other abbreviations
for type are 'p' for proposition, 'c' for corollary, and 'd' either for definition
(when following a part number) or demonstration (when following a propo-
sition or corollary)). I use 'TIE' when referencing Spinoza's Treatise on the
Emendation of the Intellect, and 'Ep' when referencing one of Spinoza's letters.
Translations of Descartes' works are from Descartes (1985–1992). References
to Descartes' works cite the volume and page number in Descartes (1996)
(abbreviated 'AT'), followed by the volume and page number in Descartes
3 (abbreviated 'CSMK'). I use the following abbreviations for specific works
by Descartes: 'Comments' for Comments on a Certain Broadsheet, 'Discourse'
for Discourse on Method, 'Meditations' for Meditations on First Philosophy, and 'Prin-
ciples' for Principles of Philosophy.

2. See Garrett (1979) for an analysis of the argument culminating in Epi4.

According to the familiar story about this part of the Ethics, whose
contours I sketched in the introduction, in adopting this view Spinoza
is not so much departing from Descartes as much as he is spelling out
an implication that is already latent in Descartes' position.³ This implica-
tion allegedly arises given Descartes' characterization of substance,
in the Principles of Philosophy, as a being that depends on no other
being for its existence:

By substance we can understand nothing other than
a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no
other thing for its existence. And there is only one sub-
stance which can be understood to depend on no other
thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other
substances, we perceive that they can exist only with
the help of God's concurrence. (Principles 1.51, AT 8A.24/
CSM 1.210)⁴

The story holds that Spinoza agrees with Descartes' characterization of
substance as an independent being — a being that "exists in such a way
as to depend on no other thing for its existence". And yet Spinoza goes
on to employ this characterization in a more consistent and uncom-
promising fashion than Descartes does. For Spinoza rejects the excep-
tion Descartes is seemingly willing to make in the case of minds and
bodies, which are not fully independent, since — as Descartes himself
insists — they require God's continuing concurrence in order to exist.

This familiar story is evoked in what Steven Nadler (2006, 56)
would have Spinoza object to Descartes:

My discussion will focus on the alleged influence of Cartesianism on Spino-
za in this part of the Ethics. For discussions of other possible connections
between Spinoza and Cartesianism, see, e.g., Nadler (1999, 112ff) and Douglas

See also Principles 1.48 and 1.53 (AT 8A.22–5/CSM 1.208–10). I will discuss
the remainder of this famous passage, in which Descartes denies the univoc-
ality of the term 'substance', in section 6.
I agree that a substance is essentially what exists in such a way that it depends on nothing else for its existence; but then, as you yourself admit, strictly speaking only God is a substance; and I, in order to be fully consistent, refuse to concede to finite things even a secondary or deficient kind of substantiality.

In the same vein, Michael Della Rocca (2008a, 42) writes:

Spinoza would agree with Descartes that only God meets the requirements for being a substance, but, unlike Descartes, he does not look for a way to have finite things count as substances as well.

And interestingly, a version of the familiar story is offered by Spinoza himself, in an early unpublished work, Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being, in a dialogue between “Reason”, Spinoza’s mouthpiece, and “Lust”, a representative of Cartesianism, in which Reason declares:

O Lust! I tell you that what you say you see — that there are distinct substances — is false. For I see clearly that there is only one, which exists through itself, and is a support of all the other attributes. And if you want to call the corporeal and the intellectual substances in respect to the modes which depend on them, you must equally call them modes too, in relation to the substance on which they depend. For you do not conceive them as existing through themselves. (1985, 75)

Spinoza here suggests that just as the dependence of modes on would-be material and mental substances disqualifies these modes from being substances, so does the dependence of these would-be substances on God disqualify them from being substances. The dependence in each case, it is suggested, is on a par with the other, and hence the ontological statuses of the dependent entities in each case should be taken to be on a par with one another; in neither case are the entities substances.6

It is important to understand the familiar story’s claim (voiced explicitly by Nadler’s Spinoza, and hinted in what Della Rocca and Spinoza say) that Descartes is not being “fully consistent” in Principles 1.51.7 Where is the inconsistency? Getting clear about this is essential to a proper understanding, and assessment, of the familiar story.

As I understand it, the charge of inconsistency begins with the correct observation that Descartes is committed to all of the following:

(1) A substance is independent of all other entities.

(2) Minds and bodies are substances.

(3) Minds and bodies causally depend on God.8

Importantly, (1) – (3) are not, in and of themselves, inconsistent. To secure inconsistency what is needed is that the causal dependence of minds and bodies in (3) entails the absence of the type of independence

6 Below we will see that in the Ethics, Spinoza does not present his argument in quite the same way, but invokes a crucial claim that connects the two types of dependence (what I will formulate later as (ODR–3)).

7 Later, in section 6, I will consider the related charge that Descartes’ position is not strictly inconsistent but trades on an equivocation that leaves him committed to just one substance in the strict sense. Versions of the familiar story are also suggested in Curley (1969, 37), Donagan (1980, 91–2), Bennett (1984, 815–2), Curley (1988, 19–23), Garrett (2003, 170), and Moore (2013, 45–6) who writes: “Spinoza acknowledges only one substance. (Descartes acknowledged only one substance ‘in the strictest sense’. But in Spinoza there are no concessions.” It may also lie behind Bayle’s (1991, 295) suggestive comment in his Dictionary: “It is not wrong to think that the ill use he [Spinoza] made of some of this philosopher’s [Descartes’] maxims led him to the precipice” — which, for Bayle, looms over the abyss of substance monism and heresy. Carriero (2002, 43) considers this type of story about Spinoza’s relationship to Descartes, but rejects it as “uninteresting”. For my part, I do not challenge the interest of the familiar story, though I will deny its veracity.

8 While there is some scholarly disagreement about what God’s concurrence amounts to, it is agreed that, minimally, it is a causal act of conserving finite beings in existence, broadly akin to the initial causal act of creating them. I will return to the debate surrounding concurrence below, in note 46.
in (1). In other words, a conflict arises among (1) – (3) only if the independence of substance includes or entails causal independence. The familiar story is framed by the assumption that Descartes and Spinoza take this to be the case — or, at the very least, that acceptance of this entailment follows rationally from claims to which both philosophers are antecedently committed (for brevity, I will henceforth speak simply of ‘acceptance’ of or ‘commitment’ to this entailment).

The significance of this assumption cannot be overstated. For once, and only once, it is in place, can Descartes’ and Spinoza’s disagreement about whether or not substances can be produced by other substances, as in Spinoza’s Ep6, be legitimately regarded as resulting from Descartes’ inconsistent (or less-than-strict) application of the independence criterion for substances to the case of minds and bodies.

Below I will argue that the assumption I have just identified is mistaken. But first, I would like to introduce terminology that will allow us to clarify the assumption just identified, and state the interpretation of Descartes and Spinoza advanced by the familiar story more precisely. I will continue to say that an entity is causally independent just in case it is not caused or produced by any other entity; otherwise, it is causally dependent. I will call the type of independence that is required of substance ontological independence, and its contrary ontological dependence; ontological independence obeys the following conditional, while ontological dependence obeys its contrapositive:

(OD) If \( x \) is a substance, then \( x \) is ontologically independent of all other entities.

The intention is to introduce a label for whatever independence is required for substancehood, and not yet to make claims about what that requirement is, or to offer an analysis of substancehood itself. Finally, my use of the term ‘ontological independence’ is different from how it is sometimes used in contemporary philosophy — viz., as picking out a special kind of relation that holds when one being does not require another “for its existence or for its identity” (Lowe 2010; cp. Correia 2008, 1013). The related term ‘grounding’ is often used in similar ways (see, e.g., Schaffer (2009), Rosen (2010), Fine (2012), and Koslicki (2015)). By contrast, what anchors the use of ‘ontological independence’ in the present discussion is simply the connection to substancehood expressed in (OD). One can of course pursue a further analysis — a possibility to which we will return in section 5.

I will call all and only relations that preclude the kind of independence required for substancehood ontological dependence relations; these relations obey the following conditional:

(ODR) If \( xRy \), then \( x \) ontologically depends on \( y \).10

Once again, this is not meant as an analysis; nor is it to say which relations, if any, satisfy this conditional, but simply to introduce a label for relations that have a certain property: they preclude their first relatum from being a substance when the relata are distinct.11

Using this terminology, we can now offer a more precise rendering of (1):

(1’) A substance is ontologically independent of other entities.

The assumption framing the familiar story can be formulated as the assumption that both Descartes and Spinoza are committed to the following thesis:

(4) Ontological independence entails causal independence.

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9. My use of the term ‘ontological independence’ is different from how it is sometimes used in contemporary philosophy — viz., as picking out a special kind of relation that holds when one being does not require another “for its existence or for its identity” (Lowe 2010; cp. Correia 2008, 1013). The related term ‘grounding’ is often used in similar ways (see, e.g., Schaffer (2009), Rosen (2010), Fine (2012), and Koslicki (2015)). By contrast, what anchors the use of ‘ontological independence’ in the present discussion is simply the connection to substancehood expressed in (OD). One can of course pursue a further analysis — a possibility to which we will return in section 5.

10. Throughout, “\( xRy \)” should be read as “\( x \) bears relation \( R \) to \( y \).”

11. For brevity, I will often elide the clause “when the relata are distinct”, speaking simply of relations that preclude their first relatum from being a substance. As should be clear, (ODR) does not commit us to any particular view about the unity or plurality of ontological dependence relations. For example, it does not imply that being-in (inherence) is the only ontological dependence relation, or that all other ontological dependence relations entail inherence. In fact, as I will argue below, Spinoza holds that there are at least three ontological dependence relations: inherence, conception, and causation. As indicated below, I also think that Spinoza regards them as distinct. (For a related debate concerning the unity or plurality of metaphysical grounding, see Wilson (2014), Koslicki (2015), and Berker (2018).)
In other words, the familiar story assumes that for both Descartes and Spinoza causation is an ontological dependence relation and, as a result, that for both thinkers substance is causally independent.12

This formulation sharpens the charge of inconsistency. Put simply, the charge is that Descartes maintains that minds and bodies are substances, hence *ontologically independent* of other entities, as (1) and (2) jointly imply, and yet that they are causally dependent (on God), hence *ontologically dependent* on another entities, as (3) and (4) jointly imply. This is clearly an inconsistent position.

As we shall see, a significant virtue of this way of spelling out the familiar story is that it enables us to place the debate between Descartes and Spinoza in its broader historical context, and to better appreciate what is at stake. I will briefly address the historical context in the next section. This will set the stage for engagement with the philosophical issues in subsequent sections.

2. Substance and Independence in the Aristotelian Tradition

Although Descartes and Spinoza both reject Aristotle’s hylomorphism, their metaphysics of substance is firmly grounded in the philosophical tradition stemming from Aristotle. In that tradition, substance is the ultimate subject of properties, or that in which accidents exist or inhere without existing or inhering in anything in turn.13 The *locus classicus* of this Aristotelian position is a well-known passage from the *Categories*:

> A substance — that which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all — is that which is neither said of a subject nor in a subject, e.g. the individual man or the individual horse ... all the other things are either said of the primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects. So if the primary substances did not exist, it would be impossible for anything else to exist. (*Categories* 2a11–b6)

According to this passage, insofar as some things are in substances and insofar as some things are said of substances (and, moreover, insofar as some things are both in substances and said of them), they themselves are not substances. Substances, on the other hand, are neither said of nor in — they do not inhere in — anything else.14 In the terminology of the previous section, *being-in* and *being-said-of* are ontological dependence relations, non-substances (i.e., things that bear those relations to other things) are ontologically dependent, and substances are ontologically independent.15

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle famously invokes the notion of “priority in nature” to characterize substances:

> Some things then are called prior and posterior ... in respect of nature and substance, i.e. those which can be without other things, while the others cannot be without

14. To my knowledge, these comments on the *Categories* passage are unexceptional: they do not offer an analysis of ontological dependence in Aristotle, but only identify a widely-acknowledged connection between such dependence and the relations *being-in* and *being-said-of* in the *Categories*. For further discussion see, e.g., Corkum (2008).

15. This position is endorsed by later Aristotelians. Consider, for example, Eustachius of St. Paul: “To subsist, or to exist by itself [per se], is nothing but not to exist in another thing as in a subject of inherence. Substance differs in this respect from accident, which cannot exist by itself [per se], but only in another thing, in which it inheres.” (*Summa* I: 96; quoted in Broackes (2006, 138)). Further examples are cited in Schechtman (2016, 159–60).
An entity enjoys such priority when it can be without another entity, yet the latter cannot be without the former — the selfsame status that in the Categories is ascribed to substances. In the terminology introduced above, an entity that is prior in nature is ontologically independent, per (OD), and an entity that is posterior in nature is ontologically dependent; being-in and being-said-of, which entail posteriority in nature, are ontological dependence relations, per (ODR). As we will see in a moment, the expression “prior in nature” reappears in Spinoza, when he echoes Aristotle in speaking of the relation between substance and non-substances.

It is generally thought that both Descartes and Spinoza adopt the traditional Aristotelian notion of substance, which they develop in a non-hylomorphic manner. Our terminology preserves and sharpens this point. Indeed, as we return to our main thread, we will see that Descartes and Spinoza agree with Aristotle that substance does not and cannot inhere in anything — that is, that inherence (being-in) is an ontological dependence relation. The question is whether they also agree, as assumed by the familiar story, on what other relations, beyond inherence, are ontological dependence relations — specifically, on whether causation is such a relation. It is to this question that I now turn.

3. Independence and Causation: The Case of Spinoza

Let us begin with Spinoza. I will present evidence suggesting that he accepts (4), and hence that causation is an ontological dependence relation. To this extent, I believe, the familiar story is correct. I will proceed in two steps. First, I will show that Spinoza thinks of another relation, conceiving-through (or conception), as an ontological dependence relation (§3.1). Second, I will show that Spinoza holds that causation entails conception (§3.2). Hence, it follows that causation is itself an ontological dependence relation.

3.1. Inherence and Conception as Ontological Dependence Relations

Spinoza’s definitions of substance and mode at the outset of the Ethics invoke two relations, inherence (being-in) and conception:

(E1d3) By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself [id quod in se est et per se concipitur], that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.

(E1d5) By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another and through which it is conceived [id quod in alio est, per quod etiam concipitur].

According to these definitions, what makes something a mode rather than a substance is that it is in another and is conceived through another, whereas a substance is in itself and is conceived through itself.

16. To my knowledge, this comment on the Metaphysics passage is uncontroversial. See Peramatzis (2011) and Malink (2013) for discussion.

17. Regarding Descartes’ place in the tradition, see, e.g., Garber (1992, chapter 3), Carriero (1995), Rozemond (1998, chapter 1), and Pasnau (2011, chapter 8). Regarding Spinoza’s, see, e.g., Bayle (1991, 331), Carriero (1995), Della Rocca (2008a), Melamed (2009), and Melamed (2012). Curley (1969) agrees that Descartes belongs to this tradition, but sees Spinoza as departing from it, writing that “Spinoza’s use of these terms [substance, mode, attribute] is highly idiosyncratic” and that whereas Descartes continues a tradition regarding substance “going back ultimately to Aristotle”, “it is one of Spinoza’s principal novelties that he breaks with this long tradition” (ibid., 18–21). Curley’s position is based on his claim that Spinoza, unlike Aristotle and Descartes, understands the inherence relation as a type of causal relation. However, I am convinced that inherence and causation are two distinct relations for Spinoza, largely for the reasons detailed in Melamed (2012).

18. Here I am in agreement with Jarrett (1978), Bennett (1984), Wilson (1999), Garrett (2002), Della Rocca (2008b), Newlands (2010), and Lin (2017), though I do not agree with the reasons sometimes given for thinking that Spinoza holds this entailment. Nor am I convinced of the further claim, which some of these scholars have promoted, that Spinoza views the relations of causation, conception, and inherence as either identical or co-extensive. I will return to this issue below (see note 26).
In other words, what precludes something from being a substance are the relations of inherence (inhering-in) and conception (being-conceived-through), in which it is the first relatum. It follows that, for Spinoza, inherence and conception qualify as what I am calling ontological dependence relations: they are relations that preclude their first relatum from being a substance.

Moreover, like Aristotle, Spinoza speaks of substance as “prior in nature” to non-substances. This priority is established in the first proposition of the Ethics:

\[(E1p1)\] A substance is prior in nature to its affections.

The demonstration of this proposition is brief: “This is evident from \(E1d3\) and \(E1d5\)” — the definitions of substance and mode, respectively (cited just above). Earlier I argued that for Aristotle an entity that is prior in nature is ontologically independent, and an entity that is posterior in nature is ontologically dependent. Given Spinoza’s relation to the Aristotelian tradition, it stands to reason that he, too, views priority in nature as ontological independence. Moreover, the fact that he argues for \(E1p1\) on the grounds that substances neither inhere in nor are conceived through other entities, whereas modes do and are (as per his definitions of mode and substance), indicates that he views inherence and conception as ontological dependence relations.

The foregoing considerations make it plausible to think that for Spinoza inherence and conception are ontological dependence relations, and in particular that Spinoza endorses the following two theses:

\[(ODR-1)\] If \(x\) inheres in \(y\), then \(x\) ontologically depends on \(y\).

\[(ODR-2)\] If \(x\) is conceived through \(y\), then \(x\) ontologically depends on \(y\).^{19}

19. These two theses do not entail that conception entails inherence (or vice versa). Recall the comment about the unity or plurality of ontological dependence relations in note 11.

We will now consider whether for Spinoza causation is an ontological dependence relation as well.

3.2. Causation entails Conception

Recall \(E1p6\), the proposition that “one substance cannot be produced by another substance”, which Spinoza employs to eliminate created substances. Spinoza offers several demonstrations for this proposition. One is particularly relevant to our discussion, as it features the definition of substance in terms of inherence and conception — both ontological dependence relations. The demonstration reads:

\[(E1p6c)\] This is demonstrated more easily from the absurdity of its contradictory. For if a substance could be produced by something else, the cognition of it would have to depend on the cognition of its cause (by \(E1a4\)). And so (by \(E1d3\)) it would not be a substance.^{20}

The demonstration relies on two premises: the definition of substance (\(E1d3\)) quoted earlier, and the so-called “causal axiom”, which reads:

\[(E1a4)\] The cognition \([cognitio]\) of an effect depends on, and involves, cognition of its cause.^{21}

The causal axiom is the subject of many scholarly debates, and it is beyond the scope of this discussion to offer a comprehensive interpretation of it.^{22} Here I will consider the axiom simply on the basis of how it

20. Strictly speaking, the demonstration is of the corollary to \(E1p6\) (in which it is included), “a substance cannot be produced by anything else”. However, clearly, \(E1p6\) does follow from this demonstration as well, since the corollary is a general claim of which \(E1p6\) is an instance.

21. I have altered Curley’s translation, replacing his ‘knowledge’ with ‘cognition’, as I tend to agree with scholars who think that \(E1a4\) applies to inadequate cognition as well, which arguably falls short of knowledge (see Wilson (1999) for an expression of this position). However, nothing in my discussion turns on this choice, and readers who prefer ‘knowledge’ can replace it throughout without the main points being affected.

22. These debates include whether cognitio is meant to include only adequate or also inadequate cognition (recall the previous note); whether the axiom
is employed in the demonstration just cited. Given Spinoza’s use of the axiom in this demonstration, we can infer that Spinoza is committed to two theses — one linking causation to cognition, and the other linking cognition to conception:

(Link-a) If \( x \) is caused by \( y \), then the cognition of \( x \) depends on, and involves, the cognition of \( y \).

(Link-b) If the cognition of \( x \) depends on, and involves, the cognition of \( y \), then \( x \) is conceived through \( y \).

The first thesis is simply a paraphrase of the causal axiom. The second thesis is required to secure the validity of the demonstration of E1p6c, which can be reconstructed as follows, with (Link-b) added as a premise:

1) If \( x \) is caused by \( y \), then the cognition of \( x \) depends on, and involves, the cognition of \( y \). (Link-a)

2) If the cognition of \( x \) depends on, and involves, the cognition of \( y \), then \( x \) is conceived through \( y \). (Link-b)

3) Therefore, if \( x \) is caused by \( y \), then \( x \) is conceived through \( y \). (from 1 and 2)

expresses only an entailment from causation to conception or an entailment from conception to causation as well (recall note 18); whether the causation at stake is efficient, formal, or a type of logical entailment (see, e.g., Hübner (2015)); and whether the axiom applies to all cases of causation or only to a restricted subclass (as in, e.g., Viljanen (2008) and (2011, chapter 2), Melamed (2012), Morrison (2015), and Hübner (2015)). I will not take a stand on these debates, though I will assume that an adequate interpretation of the causal axiom must pay heed to how Spinoza uses it (viz., its role in the demonstration in E1p6c). Cp. Wilson’s comment (1999, 143) that ‘not only ‘cognitio’, but also ‘causa’ — and perhaps ‘dependet’ and ‘involvit’ as well — take on peculiar technical significance as the axiom becomes entwined with the unfolding of Spinoza’s system’.

4) A substance is not conceived through anything other than itself (including another substance). (E1d3)

5) Therefore, a substance is not caused by anything other than itself (including another substance). (from 3 and 4)

Without premise 2, which appeals to (Link-b), the conclusion simply does not follow. According to premise 1, which is just (Link-a)’s paraphrase of the causal axiom, if one substance were caused by another substance, the cognition of the former would depend on, and involve, the cognition of the latter. But there is nothing in the definition of substance (E1d3) — here, premise 4 — to preclude the cognition of one substance from depending on, and involving, the cognition of another substance. But that is needed to secure the conclusion (via modus tollens) that one substance is not caused by another substance. This is the role played by (Link-b), which bridges the gap between the definition of substance and the causal axiom. In this way, (Link-b) is critical to the validity of the demonstration in E1p6c.

Note that the foregoing discussion does not make any assumptions about the particular type of causation invoked in the causal axiom. In E1p18, Spinoza distinguishes between immanent and transient causation, where the effect of an immanent cause does, whereas the effect of a transient cause does not, inhere in its cause. While most commentators maintain that the causal axiom covers both immanent and transient causation, this interpretation is not entirely uncontroversial.\(^{23}\) But we need not take a stand on this here. For our purposes, it suffices to observe that the validity of Spinoza’s demonstration in E1p6c requires (Link-b), in addition to (Link-a). This is so regardless of how the notion of causation is otherwise read or restricted. (I will continue to
The upshot of my argument, then, is that Spinoza is committed to this thesis.

It is important to emphasize that by attributing to Spinoza the position that inherence, conception, and causation are all ontological dependence relations (as per (ODR-1), (ODR-2), and (ODR-3)), I am not attributing to him the position that the three relations are identical, or even convergent (i.e., co-extensive). Strictly speaking, the latter attribution is consistent with my claim that Spinoza is committed to the former position. But it is not implied by, and does not receive support from, that claim: as noted above, the characterization of an ontological dependence relation as a relation that precludes its first relatum from being a substance is compatible with both the identity and the divergence of such relations. If Spinoza indeed endorsed the identity or convergence of inherence, conception, and causation, this is not simply because of, but goes beyond, his commitment to the thesis that all three relations are ontological dependence relations.

Turning back to the familiar story with which we started, we can see that (ODR-3) is equivalent to one of that story’s key steps, namely:

(4) Ontological independence entails causal independence.

would be no instance in which two modes are simultaneously the cause and the effect of each other, as in symmetric causation.) While I am inclined to endorse the second response, rather than the first, I will remain neutral between them here.

25. Recall note 11.

26. Scholars disagree about whether Spinoza indeed endorses the identity or convergence of conception, inherence, and causation. Those who think he does do not rest their case on the observation that he views all three as ontological dependence relations, but instead offer independent reasons (e.g., that some of the Ethics’ demonstrations presuppose the convergence of the relations, or that their identity follows from Spinoza’s commitment to the principle of sufficient reason; see Newlands (2010) and Della Rocca (2008b), respectively, for these lines of argument). For my part, I do not think that Spinoza accepts the identity or convergence of these relations, largely for the reasons detailed in Melamed (2012); cp. Morrison (2013). That being said, my argument in this paper is compatible with both sides in this particular debate — which is, in this sense, orthogonal to the question of the veracity of the familiar story.
The assumption framing the familiar story holds that both Descartes and Spinoza are committed to this key claim. We have now seen both that, as well as why, in the case of Spinoza this assumption is correct. (Below I argue that the same is not true for Descartes.)

To summarize, I have argued that Spinoza regards causation as an ontological dependence relation, per (ODR-3) — and, therefore, that he accepts step (4) in the familiar story. (ODR-3) follows in part from (Link-c), which is an implicit premise in the demonstration of Ep6 (the claim that “one substance cannot cause another substance”) — a crucial step on the way to substance monism. That (Link-c) anchors a crucial step in Spinoza’s argument for substance monism underscores its significance. That it anchors the anti-Cartesian position expressed in Ep6 underscores its controversial nature, showing that it is not an assumption Descartes could easily accept. Yet the fact that the familiar story has the traction it does suggests that the latter point has not been fully appreciated. For this reason, I take it to be important to show that Descartes indeed rejects (Link-c), and with it, (ODR-3).

## 4. Substance Under Threat

But first let me make an observation about Spinoza’s argument, which is not wholly anomalous but belongs to a class of arguments, offered by philosophers past and present, designed to undermine a certain type of entity’s claim to being a substance. These arguments accept the broadly Aristotelian premise that a substance is ontologically independent, and then argue that the entity in question stands to another entity in an ontological dependence relation, hence is not a substance. In Spinoza’s case, these entities include created minds and bodies, and the relation is causation, as in (ODR-3). Other philosophers have offered arguments that employ claims connecting various other relations to ontological dependence. Examples include:

- (ODR-4) If $x$ has $y$ as a part, then $x$ ontologically depends on $y$.\textsuperscript{28}
- (ODR-5) If $x$ is a part of $y$, then $x$ ontologically depends on $y$.\textsuperscript{29}
- (ODR-6) If $x$ is an abstraction with respect to $y$, then $x$ ontologically depends on $y$.\textsuperscript{30}
- (ODR-7) If $x$ is constituted by $y$, then $x$ ontologically depends on $y$.\textsuperscript{31}

Other possible conditionals invoke antecedents regarding various other relations that have been linked to dependence, such as being-functionally-realized-by, being-a-determinate-of, or being-a-determinate-of.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{28} See the discussion of Leibniz below. For one appearance of (ODR-4) in contemporary metaphysics, see, e.g., Heil (2012, 167): “[O]ne tradition begins with a notion of independence: a substance is a non-dependent entity, one the existence of which does not require the existence of any other distinct entity. … One result of characterizing substances in this … way is that complex objects … will not be substances.” See also Toner (2011) and Gorman (2012).

\textsuperscript{29} See the discussion of Schaffer below.

\textsuperscript{30} See, e.g., Armstrong (1989, 113–5) for concerns about the substantiability of tropes, understood as “abstract particulars”. Although Armstrong does not there explicitly identify the abstraction relation when voicing these concerns, it seems to be a plausible source for them. Cp. the discussion of abstraction as “grounding by subsumption” in Goff (forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{31} See, e.g., the concerns about hylomorphic compounds, understood as standing in the being-constituted-by relation to both form and matter, discussed by Koslicki (2013).

\textsuperscript{32} See Corriea (2008) and Wilson (2014) for other possible relations.
any of these conditionals is true, then insofar as substance is held to be ontologically independent, an entity for which the antecedent of the relevant conditional is true is not a substance. For it is thereby shown that it stands in what I am calling an ontological dependence relation to another entity. Put differently, would-be substances come under threat whenever they bear a relation to another entity that is alleged to be an ontological dependence relation.

The previous section detailed how Spinoza, a substance monist, employs this strategy to threaten created substances. Others employ the strategy as well. Consider, for example, Leibniz’s position that Cartesians, bodies, which he regards as mere aggregates, are not substances. One argument for this view proceeds from the premises that every corporeal entity has further parts (i.e., there are no corporeal atoms), and that a whole that is an aggregate is posterior to—that is, ontologically depends on—its parts. If so, then no aggregate, and hence no body, is a substance.33 This version of the strategy relies on (ODR-4). But one could invoke (ODR-5) instead (though presumably not also). Consider a contemporary monist view, akin to Jonathan Schaffer’s, according to which the whole physical universe—the cosmos—is the only concrete substance. One argument for this view proceeds from the premise that every concrete entity other than the whole universe is a part of the universe, and that a part ontologically depends on the integrated whole of which it is a part. If so, then no concrete entity smaller than the entire universe is a substance.34

The point is that Spinoza’s argument is an instance of a more general argumentative strategy, one that calls a class of would-be substances into question. The threat to substances, pressed by Spinoza, is not specific to causation but can easily be seen to generalize to a host of other important metaphysical relations. Consequently, many philosophers (past and present) join Descartes in facing threats to their favored substances. Whether and, if so, how Descartes manages to stave off the threat—the topic of the next section—is not merely for insiders, of concern only for those invested in what I am calling the familiar story, but should, therefore, be of broad interest.

5. Independence and Causation: The Case of Descartes

Like Aristotle and Spinoza, Descartes provides a characterization of substance that invokes the inherence relation. He writes in the Second Replies:

Substance. This term applies to everything in which immediately inheres [inest], as in a subject, or by means of which exists [per quam existit], whatever we perceive. By ‘whatever we perceive’ is meant any property, quality or attribute of which we have a real idea. (AT 7.161/CSM 2.114)

This passage seems to manifest a commitment to the idea that substance is ontologically independent, and to inherence being an

33. Leibniz writes in a letter to Arnauld: “[A body] will always be an aggregate made up of many. Or rather, it will never be a real being [i.e., substance], since the parts that make it up face just the same difficulty, and so we never arrive at real being, because beings by aggregation can have only as much reality as there is in their ingredients.” (Leibniz (1875–90, vol. 2, 71–2); cited in Levey (2012)) On a plausible interpretation of this passage, the “difficulty” a body qua aggregate faces is that it ontologically depends on its parts: an aggregate of parts “can have only as much reality as there is in [its] ingredients”, which (Leibniz seems to imply) will always be less reality than what is possessed by a substance; and so a body, understood as an aggregate, is not a substance. Whether at any period of his career Leibniz held a different view of body, not as a mere aggregate but as something that has a “principle of unity” (i.e. a soul, form, or entelechy), and whether he regarded such a principle as securing a body the status of substance, is a matter of much scholarly debate. For a helpful discussion, see Levey (2011).

34. Schaffer’s argument is of course more sophisticated than this, and just as Spinoza offers a defense of (ODR-3), Schaffer offers a defense of (ODR-5). The chief point is simply that Schaffer’s defense of monism is committed to (ODR-5) — as indicated when, for example, in the course of his argument that “among the cosmos and its proper parts, the cosmos is the one and only substance” (2013, 82), he emphasizes that “to speak of the cosmos as a single clockwork is not to deny that it has parts, but rather to characterize the parts as dependent …” (ibid., 80; emphasis added). See also Schaffer (2010).

35. Although ‘or’ is a standard translation for the term *sive* that appears here, this term usually indicates not a disjunction but an equivalence.
ontological dependence relation. Substance is that in which and by which a property or mode (Descartes’ preferred term) exists, whereas a mode exists in and by means of its substance.\(^{36}\) Descartes here explicitly links this point about the ontological dependence of modes to inherence.\(^{37}\) For Descartes, as for Spinoza and others in the Aristotelian tradition, a mode exists by means of a substance insofar as it inheres in a substance. In other words, inherence entails ontological dependence.

Descartes also holds that ontological dependence is connected to a type of intelligibility, a conceptual relation of a piece with what Spinoza labeled ‘conception’ (conceiving-through). For Descartes, modes are intelligible only in terms of their substances (i.e., the things of which they are modes), upon which they depend. Consider, for example, this passage from the *Principles:*

\[
\text{[S]hape is unintelligible } [\text{intelligi}] \text{ except in an extended thing; and motion is unintelligible except as in an extended space; while imagination, sensation and will are intelligible only in a thinking thing. (Principles 1.53, AT 8A.25/CSM 1.210)}
\]

That intelligibility is a conceptual relation is made clear when Descartes remarks in the *Comments:*

\[
\text{[T]he nature of a mode is such that it cannot be understood [intelligi] at all unless the concept of the thing of which it is a mode is involved in its [the mode’s] own concept. (AT 8B.355/CSM 1.301)\(^{38}\)}
\]

Conversely, Descartes seems to think, a substance need not be conceived through another entity, either another substance, as evidenced by his view that “we can clearly and distinctly understand one [substance] apart from another”; or through a mode, as evidenced by his view that “we can clearly and distinctly perceive substance apart from the mode which we say differs from it.” (*Principles* 1.61–2; AT 8A.28–30/CSM 1.213–4)

So far, then, Descartes and Spinoza seem to be in agreement: modes, which ontologically depend on a substance, both inhere in and are conceived through a substance; a substance, which is ontologically independent, neither is in nor is conceived through any other entity. That is, Descartes appears to endorse both of the following claims:

\[
\text{(ODR-1) If } x \text{ inheres in } y, \text{ then } x \text{ ontologically depends on } y.
\]

\[
\text{(ODR-2) If } x \text{ is conceived through } y, \text{ then } x \text{ ontologically depends on } y.
\]

Let us now turn to causation. Here I think that the agreement ends. Descartes does not think, as Spinoza does, that causation implies the kind of conceptual relation (viz., intelligibility or conception) that entails ontological dependence — as we saw in section 3, this is Spinoza’s route, via (ODR-2) and (Link-c), to the conclusion that causation entails ontological dependence, as in (ODR-3). That is to say, from the perspective of intelligibility — with respect to understanding or conceiving what an entity is — causal relations are not always relevant.

Descartes seems to affirm this view in the Second Replies. In the course of discussing the claim that God’s concept or nature includes necessary existence (famously employed as a premise in the so-called ontological argument for God’s existence), Descartes writes:

\[
\text{[I]t may be, with respect to a given thing, that we understand there to be nothing in the thing itself that precludes the possibility of its existence, while at the same time,}
\]
Descartes is here contrasting two ways of considering something, or two points of view, the one causal, the other concerned with “the thing itself”. In some cases, the two points of view coincide. For example, in the case of God, whose concept or nature involves necessary existence, consideration of the thing itself also involves consideration of its cause, since God’s nature entails that he is self-caused. Similarly, in the case of entities whose concept or nature involves a contradiction, such as a round square, consideration of the thing itself also involves consideration of its cause — or rather, lack thereof (since there is nothing that can cause a round square to exist). In the majority of cases, however, of entities whose existence is neither necessary nor impossible, the two points of view come apart. In those cases, the concept of a thing includes the possibility of its existence, but excludes whether it in fact exists — and hence, if it does exist, what brought it into existence; or, if it does not exist, what prevented it from existing. Consideration of the thing itself does not settle what is the case “from the causal point of view”.  

39. See, e.g., the First Replies (AT 7.109/CSM 2.79): “By the same token, although God has always existed, since it is he who in fact preserves himself, it seems not too inappropriate to call him ‘the cause of himself’. It should however be noted that ‘preservation’ here must not be understood to be the kind of preservation that comes about by the positive influence of an efficient cause; all that is implied is that the essence of God is such that he must always exist.”

40. Cp. the Second Replies (AT 7.166/CSM 2.117); and also Principles 2.25 and 37 (AT 8A.53, 62 /CSM 1.233, 240–1), where the same basic point is made regarding the particular case of motion. A similar point is well-documented in the literature on specific types of Cartesian causation (body-body, mind-to-body, and body-to-mind), each of which has been argued to hold without the relation of conception or intelligibility between the cause and the effect. See, e.g., Loeb (1985, chapters 3–4), Wilson (1999), Della Rocca (2008c), and De Rosa (2013). Loeb and Wilson both explicitly compare Descartes and Spinoza on this point, noting in each case that the entailment expressed by Spinoza’s causal axiom (from causation to conception) is not one that Descartes would accept — nor is it something that he is inadvertently committed to, even on the strength of his infamous causal principle that “there must be at least as

It seems, then, that Descartes recognizes a gap between the causal point of view and what we might call the conceptual point of view, or the point of view that conceives things as they are in themselves. Conceiving of something as it is in itself, according to Descartes, need not involve its causal relations, either to its effects or to its causes. If this is right, then Descartes does not accept (Link-c), the thesis that causation entails conception. So he can accept (ODR-2), which links conception with ontological dependence, without thereby accepting the thesis, in (ODR-3), that causation entails ontological dependence.

Of course, it might be objected that Descartes’ acceptance of cases of causation without conception does not manifest Descartes’ rejection of (ODR-3), but is rather a symptom of his less than fully consistent commitment to it. This objection will seem attractive to proponents of the familiar story with which we started. The story, we saw, arose in part from Descartes’ characterization of substance in Principles 1.51 as “a thing whose existence depends on no other thing for its existence” and the accompanying distinction between God, which depends “on no other thing whatsoever”, and created substances, which “can exist only with the help of God’s concurrence”. The latter qualification in particular has led many readers to interpret Descartes’ characterization of substance in this passage to be first and foremost about causal independence.

41. This is not to imply that causal relations are never relevant to the explanation of a given thing. As the passage from the Second Replies suggests, causal relations are highly relevant when explaining why something exists, or why it does not exist (why it is prevented from existing). My suggestion is simply that this is not what Descartes has in mind in the context of the above passage, when drawing a contrast with “the causal point of view”. Rather, what he has in mind is a conception of “the thing itself”. As I will say shortly, this is a conception of a thing’s essence, rather than its existence. And in this context, I am suggesting, causal relations are not always relevant.
However, although this causal interpretation (as we may call it) of *Principles* 1.51 is popular, it is not obligatory.\(^{42}\) At least three other interpretations have been offered, partly due to dissatisfaction with inconsistencies, such as the one just mentioned, that the causal interpretation must ascribe to Descartes. Elsewhere I have discussed the relative merits and demerits of these interpretations of Descartes’ characterization of substance, in the *Principles* and other passages.\(^ {43}\) Without rehearsing the suite of considerations in its favor, let me just state the interpretation I propose, and then indicate how it renders Descartes’ characterization of substance consistent with his endorsement of cases of causation without conception, and with his rejection of (ODR-3).

The interpretation consists of two theses, the first concerning ontological dependence—the type of dependence that precludes substancehood—and the second concerning substance:

\begin{align}
\text{(NI-Dep)} \ x & \text{ ontologically depends on } y \text{ if and only if (1) there is some relation } R \text{ such that } xRy, \text{ and (2) } xRy \text{ by } x’s \text{ nature but not by } y’s \text{ nature.} \\
\text{(NI-Sub)} \ x & \text{ is a substance if and only if there is no entity } y \text{ such that for some } R, xRy \text{ by } x’s \text{ nature but not by } y’s \text{ nature.} ^ {44}
\end{align}

The first thesis indicates Descartes’ view that whether an entity is ontologically dependent hinges on its *nature*. The second applies this view to Descartes’ characterization of substance as an entity that is ontologically independent of other entities. According to this nature-based interpretation, as I call it, a substance is an entity that does not stand in any relation by its nature to any other specific entity.

\(^ {42}\) The causal interpretation is endorsed by, e.g. Loeb (1981, 328), Markie (1994), Stuart (1999), and Secada (2000, 200). Further support for the causal interpretation is sometimes gleaned from the Synopsis to the *Meditations*.

\(^ {43}\) See Schechtman (2016), where I also discuss the Synopsis passage mentioned in the previous note.

\(^ {44}\) This approach is influenced by Lowe (2010).

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This interpretation implies that an entity is a substance only if it does not stand in a causal relation to any other specific entity by its *nature*. A substance may (and generally does) stand in a causal relation to, and hence may be causally dependent on, other entities; it just cannot do so by its *nature*—a point that is corroborated by Descartes’ discussion of “the causal point of view” in the Second Replies passage cited earlier, with its distinction between an entity’s causes and what, by contrast, is “in the thing itself”. Insofar as causal relations do not hold by an entity’s nature, its causal dependence does not threaten its status as ontologically independent, hence as a substance.\(^ {45}\)

If this is correct, then Descartes does not view causation as an ontological dependence relation in general. But this leaves open the possibility that he views it as such in particular cases. One candidate is divine causation, whereby minds and bodies—which, Descartes tells us, “can exist only with the help of God’s concurrence”—are causally dependent on God. Does Descartes view divine causation as an ontological dependence relation?\(^ {46}\)

\(^ {45}\) At this point it can naturally be asked whether Spinoza thinks that causal relations do hold by the nature of their relata, and if so, whether this difference from Descartes is at the root of their disagreement over (ODR-3). I briefly touch on this possibility, and other proposals as to what explains Descartes’ and Spinoza’s disagreement over (ODR-3), in the conclusion.

\(^ {46}\) The relevant causal dependence is described by Descartes in the *Principles* as ‘concurrence’. Scholars differ as to what kind of divine causal contribution Descartes designates by ‘concurrence’: some limit it to the continuous conservation of entities in existence, along the lines of the position known as conservationism (identified most prominently with Durandus of Saint Forçain); others endorse a broader interpretation, on which it includes also God’s collaboration with created beings in bringing about natural effects in the world (along the lines of the position known as concurrentism, held by, among others, Aquinas and Suárez); yet others hold that Descartes’ position amounts to occasionalism, so that God is the only cause that brings about natural effects. In what follows I limit my discussion to concurrence understood as God’s conservation of created beings, though I believe that my comments apply mutatis mutandis for the other interpretations of concurrence. The main point I wish to make is that concurrence, however it is interpreted, does not belong to the natures of created substances, according to Descartes, but follows in part from other metaphysical factors external to their natures. For an overview of conservationism and concurrentism in the scholastic context, see Freddo (1991); for a discussion of them as interpretive options with respect to

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References


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There are good reasons to think that the answer is negative. Descartes’ discussions of the causal dependence of minds and bodies on God do not include the claim that such dependence belongs to the natures of minds and bodies. Nor do those discussions treat such dependence as following from, or as a necessary consequence of, their natures (or what is known in the Aristotelian tradition as propria). On the contrary, Descartes makes it clear that he views the causal dependence of minds and bodies on God as a necessary consequence of their natures together with other factors, concerning causation and time, that clearly do not belong to (or follow from) the natures of minds and bodies. We are told, first, that given that successive moments in time are distinct, a cause is required not only to bring something into existence but to conserve it in existence as well; second, that one and the same cause must play both causal roles; third, and finally, that minds and bodies lack the power to play this dual role with respect to themselves. Of these contentions, it is only the third, if any, that can reasonably be viewed as invoking what belongs to (or follows from) the natures of minds and bodies. Yet the thesis that God must be the cause of minds and bodies follows only when all three of these contentions are conjoined. Given that Descartes nowhere asserts, or even considers, that the causal dependence of minds and bodies on God belongs to the nature of minds and bodies, and moreover, given that his argument for such dependence explicitly invokes factors wholly external to the natures of minds and bodies, it seems reasonable to view Descartes as holding that the causal relation between God and minds and bodies belongs to the natures of the relata no more than other causal relations do—which is to say, not at all. In all of these cases, the “causal point of view” remains external to the natures of the relata.

I conclude that there is no reason to view Descartes as committed to thinking of causation in general, or of divine causation in particular.

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47. Descartes argues for this causal dependence in several places, most prominently in the second (part of) the causal argument for God’s existence in the Third Meditation, where he claims that “the mere fact that I exist and have within me the idea of a more perfect being” can only be accounted for by the existence of God as my creator. See AT 7.48–51/CSM 2.33–5; cp. the First Replies (AT 7.107–9/CSM 2.77–9), Second Replies (AT 7.168–9/CSM 2.118–9), Fifth Replies (AT 7.369–70/CSM 2.254–5), and Principles 1.21 (AT 8A.13/CSM 1.200).

48. For a related contemporary notion, see Fine (1995) on “consequential essence”.

49. See, e.g., the Second Replies: “There is no relation of dependence between the present time and the immediately preceding time; and hence no less a cause is required to preserve something than is required to create it in the first place” (AT 7.165/CSM 2.116). Cp. the Third Meditation (AT 7.49/CSM 2.33) and First Replies (AT 7.109/CSM 2.78).

50. See, e.g., the Third Meditation: “[I]t is quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time that the same power and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as would be required to create that thing anew if it were not yet in existence” (AT 7.49/CSM 2.33); cp. Discourse 5 (AT 6.45/CSM 1.133) and Principles 2.42 (AT 8A.66/CSM 1.243). Scholars disagree about what is at issue time that leads Descartes to this conclusion, as well as about whether conservation is the same action-token or merely the same action-type as creation. For helpful discussions, see Gorham (1994) and Schmaltz (2008, §§2.2.2–3).

51. See, e.g., the Second Replies: “I do not have the power of preserving myself” (AT 7.168/CSM 2.118); the contrast is with God, who “possesses such great and inexhaustible power that it never required the assistance of anything else in order to exist in the first place, and does not now require any assistance for its preservation” (First Replies, AT 7.109/CSM 2.78).

52. It might be objected that even if Descartes does not think that it belongs to the natures of minds and bodies to causally depend on God, he nevertheless thinks that it belongs to their natures to causally depend on something, and hence to be ontologically dependent. However, two considerations suggest that this is not the case. First, when Descartes argues that “the causal point of view” is external to the natures of the relata, he is not only speaking of this or that cause, but of the causal requirement itself, as being external. That is, Descartes’ view seems to be that when an entity is conceived in itself, or according to its nature, any consideration about causation—including the fact that the entity must have a cause—is left out. Second, and perhaps more importantly, as I’ve argued elsewhere, Descartes’ notion of ontological dependence involves strict rather than generic dependence, where the former is dependence on a specific entity, and the latter is dependence on some entity of a specific type or genus (see Schechtman (2016, 183ff)). So even if Descartes did hold that it belongs to the natures of minds and bodies to have some cause, this would be an instance of generic rather than strict dependence, and hence, for Descartes, not an instance of ontological dependence.
as an ontological dependence relation, or of substance as causally independent. Accordingly, there is no reason to view Descartes as committed to an inconsistent position regarding minds and bodies, as per the familiar story, holding that they are both ontologically independent and ontologically (because causally) dependent. Spinoza and Descartes disagree about whether or not minds and bodies are substances, not because Descartes is committed to an inconsistent position and Spinoza does away with the inconsistency, but because Spinoza, not Descartes, views causation as an ontological dependence relation.3

53. It might be objected that there is an independent route to the inconsistency, stemming from Descartes’ view that minds and bodies are finite beings, hence ontologically dependent on God, an infinite being. According to the Cartesian approach to ontological dependence described above, this would be the case if, for Descartes, being finite involved (i) a relation to an infinite being that (ii) held by the natures of minds and bodies. My own view is that whereas (i) is perhaps true (consider Descartes’ 23 April 1649 letter to Clerelser, AT 5.336/CSMK 377), (ii) is false. Three considerations suggest this. First, Descartes treats finitude as a privation or defect, and as such, an accident, rather than an essence or nature; he writes: “defects, in respect of substance, are accidents; but infinity or infinitude is not” (ibid.). Second, Descartes suggests that minds and bodies, while finite, are not necessarily finite, and hence not finite by their nature. To be sure, they are not infinite, since Descartes’ considered position is that God alone is infinite (see Principles 1.27, AT 8A.15/CSM 1.201). But Descartes accepts another type of non-finitude, which he dubs ‘the indefinite’, and that he suggests can apply to minds (e.g., with respect to their knowledge; see Third Meditation, AT 7.51/CSM 2.33) and to bodies (with respect to extension; see Principles 1.26, AT 8A.15/CSM 1.201). Third, even if minds and bodies were necessarily finite, it would not follow that they are essentially finite, or finite by their nature, for finitude could arguably be viewed as one of their propria (i.e., a necessary consequence of their natures, or the conjunction of their natures and something else; recall the discussion above). In the case of body, for example, Descartes holds that its nature consists in being extended, flexible, and changeable (Second Meditation; AT 7.31/CSM 2.20). While some of these properties perhaps entail limitations (e.g., being extended entails being divisible, and hence imperfect; see Principles 1.23; AT 8A.13/CSM 1.200), it does not follow that those limitations are themselves part of body’s nature. Similarly, the nature of minds consists in thought (see Principles 1.53; AT 8A.25/CSM 1.210); even if being finite, imperfect, and limited were non-contingent features of minds such as ours (as is perhaps suggested in the Third Meditation; see AT 7.45–6/CSM 2.52–3), this falls short of the position that these features are part of mind’s nature.

6. Substance Equivocal?

Even if everything I have said thus far is granted, the familiar story might appear to gain independent support from a comment that Descartes makes in Principles 1.51, immediately following his observation that “there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God”:

Hence the term ‘substance’ does not apply univocally, as they say in the schools, to God and to other things; that is, there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures. (Principles 1.51, AT 8A.24/CSM 1.210)

This comment may seem to imply that by Descartes’ own admission, his position escapes inconsistency only by equivocating on the notion of substance: in the strict sense, there is only one substance; it is only in a second, more lenient sense that there is a plurality of substances. If so, then the spirit (if not the letter) of the familiar story remains intact: Spinoza is more Cartesian than Descartes, because even if Descartes’ pluralism can be made consistent with the fundamental tenets of Cartesianism, Spinoza adheres to these tenets more faithfully than Descartes does by adopting only the strict — hence, univocal — notion of substance, which does not admit a plurality. For Spinoza, “there are no concessions”.

The appearance that Descartes’ comment provides independent support for the familiar story rests on two interpretative claims: first, that if the term ‘substance’ is not univocal, but rather has two senses, then it must be equivocal; and, second, that of those two senses, one is strict and the other is more lenient, in the sense that the second relaxes the criterion for substancehood associated with the first. I will

54. The quotation is from Moore (2013, 45–6), also cited in note 7 above. The charge is popular; see, e.g., Woolhouse (1993, 23): ‘God is strictly the only substance for Descartes — it is by equivocation that we talk of ‘created substances’.’ Some of the endorsements of the familiar story cited in section 1 can be read as charging Descartes with concessive equivocation rather than plain inconsistency.
now argue that the appearance of support is illusory, for the first claim is not compulsory, and the second is mistaken.

Regarding the first claim, for the scholastics (“in the Schools”), univocity and equivocity were not viewed as exhaustive: a third option, that of analogy, was commonly acknowledged. In both cases, there is no “distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common” to all of its applications. In the case of equivocation, this is because the term applies in two or more different and unrelated (e.g., non-overlapping) senses, whereas in the case of analogy, this is because the term applies in two or more different yet related (e.g., partly but not wholly overlapping) senses. Following Aquinas, key metaphysical terms such as ‘being,’ ‘perfection,’ and ‘substance’ were widely held — for example, by Thomas Sutton, Cardinal Cajetan, and Francisco Suárez — to apply to God and his creatures analogically rather than equivocally. It is not implausible that Descartes also viewed ‘substance’ as analogical rather than equivocal, and that it is to this traditional view that he is referring when he rejects the univocity of ‘substance.’ So the interpretative claim that it is equivocality that Descartes has in mind in Principles 1.51 is not compulsory.

55. See Ashworth (2013) on the history of the threefold distinction between univocity, equivocality, and analogy.

56. Cp. Schmaltz (2000, 90): “From the perspective of those in ‘the Schools,’ however, Descartes’ denial that names for God apply univocally to creatures leaves open the question of whether such names apply ‘equivocally’ or rather ‘analogically.’” Schmaltz goes on to argue that Descartes holds that the term applies analogically. Secada, on the other hand, claims that Descartes endorses equivocation, though his argument for this interpretation is unconvincing. He writes (2006, 77): “[Descartes] does not, here or anywhere else, indicate that the term is applied analogically. He must, then, be read as stating that it is applied equivocally to God and creatures.” But Descartes also does not indicate that the term is applied equivocally, so the same reasoning could be used to argue that the term applies analogically instead. Marion (1991, 116) also endorses an equivocal reading, based on a more complicated line of reasoning that ascribes to Descartes a particular interpretation, and subsequent rejection, of Suárez’s position on analogy, as underwritten by a Scotist assimilation of analogy to univocity. However, to my mind Schmaltz makes a compelling point when he writes, in reply to Marion’s proposal, “there is little reason to think that Descartes had the sort of scholastic sensibility that would have been required to recognize [the Scotist position] there [in Suárez]” (2000, 93). Cp. Beysseade (1996), who also prefers analogy.

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However, from the perspective of the familiar story, what is crucial is arguably the second claim, according to which ‘substance’ applies to God in a strict sense and to minds and bodies in a more lenient sense. For it may be said that, whether the strict and lenient senses are related by equivocation or analogy, they remain two distinct senses, only one of which applies to whatever is genuinely a substance. The two senses can presumably be stated as follows:

Substance\textsuperscript{Strict}: A being that is ontologically independent of everything.

Substance\textsuperscript{Lenient}: A being that is ontologically independent of everything other than God.

Whereas on this proposal God is a substance in the first sense, minds and bodies are substances only in the second sense: the former is ontologically independent of everything, without any exception (or concession), the latter are ontologically independent of almost everything, the one exception being God.

This second interpretative claim invites us to consider why we should construe Descartes’ comment in Principles 1.51 as expressing the view that minds and bodies are substances in the second but not in the first sense. In other words, why read him as holding that minds and bodies are ontologically dependent on God? The only reason, it seems, is that Descartes explains that they are not substances in the same “distinctly intelligible” sense as God because they are causally dependent on God (or, more precisely, on God’s concurrence, which is his act of conserving them in existence\textsuperscript{57}). Of course, to move from the causal dependence of minds and bodies on God to their ontological dependence on God assumes that Descartes holds that causal dependence entails ontological dependence — either in general, or at least in the specific case of divine causation. However, the discussion in the preceding section argued that this assumption is mistaken. If that

57. Recall note 46.
argument is correct, it follows that the second interpretative claim, which posits the strict and lenient senses of ‘substance’ stated above, is mistaken as well.

To summarize, Descartes’ comment about the non-univocity of the term ‘substance’ in *Principles* 1.51 does not provide independent support for the familiar story. That is, it does not support the familiar story unless the assumption framing the familiar story — viz., that causal dependence entails ontological dependence — is already in place. Given this, the arguments provided in the previous section against that assumption preempt the current effort to defend the familiar story by drawing on Descartes’ comment about non-univocity.

We can go further. I believe Descartes’ comment may reasonably be interpreted in a way that does not merely fail to independently motivate the assumption framing the familiar story, but is in fact incompatible with it. Just above I argued that it is not compulsory to interpret Descartes as holding that ‘substance’ is equivocal. Let me close this section by explaining how the term can be understood instead as analogical, in a way that chimes with the interpretation of Descartes offered in the previous section, and which makes clear the coherence and elegance of the resulting position. I will not attempt to show here that the analogical interpretation is correct; all that is needed for present purposes is that it is plausible.

On this interpretation, the two senses of substance can be stated as follows:

Substance_\text{Uncreated}: A being that is (1) ontologically independent of everything, and (2) causally independent of everything.

Substance_\text{Created}: A being that is (1) ontologically independent of everything, and (2) causally dependent on God.

Recall that a term is analogous when it applies in two different yet related senses, for example, when they partly but not wholly overlap. The two senses of substance just given overlap at a crucial point, namely, (1).\(^{58}\) It is this common component, which both equally share, that makes each notion a notion of substance. At the same time, the two senses are distinct, as each involves a component that the other lacks, namely, (2) or (2’). This entails that, as Descartes says in *Principles* 1.51, there is no “distinctly intelligible” sense of the term ‘substance’ that applies both to God and to created beings.\(^{59}\)

On this construal, it is not the case that one sense of ‘substance’ is “strict”, whereas a second sense of ‘substance’ is “more lenient” — at least not in a way that would vindicate the familiar story. Rather, there is one sense of ‘substance’ that applies to an important species of the genus substance (God), and a second sense of ‘substance’ that applies to another important species of that same genus (minds and bodies). It should be clear that to embrace the metaphysics that this construal describes is not to make any “concessions”, but rather to recognize a significant division among the plurality of substances that exist, according to Descartes.

7. Other Stories

The familiar story about the relation between Descartes’ and Spinoza’s metaphysics begins by observing, correctly, that Descartes and Spinoza agree that substance is ontologically independent, as in the Aristotelian tradition. However, this story fails to recognize that they

\(^{58}\) This rendering of analogy is partly inspired by the discussion in Cross (2012) of analogy in Scotus. It should be noted, though, that many different variations of analogy were accepted by scholastic figures. See Ashworth (2013) for further discussion.

\(^{59}\) It might be objected that this interpretation makes the term ‘substance’ non-univocal after all, having just one “distinctly intelligible” sense, given by (1) — it is just that among the entities that satisfy (1), some but not all happen to be causally independent. However, this does not follow. While the interpretation does provide an intelligible sense of the term ‘substance’ that applies to both God and created beings, that sense is not distinctly intelligible, because it is not intelligible independently of the two analogous senses, Substance_\text{Uncreated} and Substance_\text{Created}. In other words, the multiple distinct senses of the analogous term ‘substance’ must be understood as prior to its analogous, non-univocal sense. For relevant discussion of this type of analogy, see McDaniel (2010) and Brower (2014, §2.4).
disagree about which specific relations are ontological dependence relations, and in particular, whether causation is among them — hence, whether being created, and thereby causally dependent, precludes an entity from being a substance. I have argued that this oversight is rooted in oversight of a further disagreement about one of the premises in Spinoza’s argument for his position: namely, (Link-c), or the entailment from causation to conception, which Descartes does not accept.

In arguing that Spinoza’s path to substance monism in the *Ethics* is not based solely on Cartesian tenets, I have left open the possibility that there are other arguments Spinoza could have given for his rejection of Descartes’ pluralism, and if so, whether the premises of such arguments are, or follow from, principles to which Descartes is committed. It is important to note, however, that this possibility — essentially one of rational reconstruction — arises for us only after the familiar story, which interprets Spinoza as actually reasoning from premises borrowed from Descartes, has been scrutinized and subsequently laid aside.

At the outset, I noted that the familiar story not only fails to do justice to the coherence of Descartes’ position, but that it also misses or obscures the innovation of Spinoza’s. If what I have argued is correct, then now, after rejecting the familiar story, we are in a position to ask questions, more clearly than the familiar story allows, about the philosophical origin or basis of Spinoza’s departure from Descartes, and to evaluate, more perspicuously than we could previously, answers that have been proposed in the literature. I will end with a few brief remarks about two of these proposals, before closing with a third, which highlights a thesis that has not to my knowledge received detailed attention in the relevant literature.

One proposal, inspired by Samuel Newlands’ interpretation of dependence relations in the *Ethics*, is that Spinoza adopts the entailment from causation to conception in (Link-c) because of its “metaphysical serviceability” — because it allows Spinoza to derive other positions (including substance monism) that he endorses. While this proposal is suggestive, it does not in my view offer a fully satisfying perspective on the disagreement between Descartes and Spinoza, to the extent that Descartes’ rejection of (Link-c) also appears to be metaphysically serviceable — because it allows him to maintain other positions (e.g., substance pluralism, as well as the distinction between the causal and conceptual points of view) that he endorses. In effect, appealing to metaphysical serviceability does not answer but merely pushes back the question why Spinoza diverges from Descartes.

A second proposal, inspired by Michael Della Rocca’s recent work on Spinoza and Spinozism, is that Spinoza’s adoption of (Link-c) follows from his metaphysical rationalism, construed in terms of consistent and uncompromising employment of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Since causation and conception are both dependence relations, and since both (according to Della Rocca’s Spinoza) share all their important characteristics, there is reason to — and insufficient reason not to — assimilate them. However, I believe that this diagnosis is belied by what we have seen to be the coherence of Descartes’ position, which obeys the Principle of Sufficient Reason insofar as there is (according to Descartes) a principled reason not to assimilate causation and conception, owing to a significant difference between them: conceptual relations do, whereas causal relations do not, belong to the nature of their relata.

A third proposal focuses on this last claim about causal relations and natures, whose significance is also suggested by the foregoing discussion. Perhaps Spinoza, unlike Descartes, holds that causal relations do belong to the nature of their effects — what we may call a genetic

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60. In note 53 above I consider, and subsequently reject, one such alternative argument.

61. Newlands (2010, 470): “I suggest [Spinoza’s] motivation [for identifying various dependence relations, including causation with conception,] is based on an appeal to metaphysical serviceability: conceptual dependence monism provides Spinoza with a powerful way of consistently satisfying what he takes to be the demands of metaphysical perfection at work in our world.”

62. Della Rocca (2008a, 44): “It’s as if Spinoza is saying to Descartes: you have no good reason to separate these kinds of dependence, and if you do separate them, you are making causal relations unintelligible.”
view of natures. To be sure, whereas I have argued that there is ample reason to interpret Descartes as rejecting this view, in the case of Spinoza, the matter is less clear-cut.63 Let me suggest, then, that what is called for is further investigation into the nuances of Spinoza’s (possibly un-Cartesian) view of the connections between natures, causal relations, and substancehood.64

Bibliography


63. Passages that suggest that this is Spinoza’s view include TIE §95 and Ep6o, in which Spinoza seems to espouse a genetic view of definition (for a helpful discussion of this view see Garrett (2003, chapter 6)); given the close connections between definitions and natures, it is plausible to infer from them a genetic view of natures as well. Passages that appear to suggest otherwise include E1p33s1 and Ep34d. What I am calling a genetic view of natures is importantly distinct from the view that an entity’s nature or essence is itself a causal power, or a “formal cause”—a view which some scholars have recently attributed to Spinoza (recall note 22). For example, the latter view does not entail that an entity’s nature includes causal relations in which this entity is the effect rather than the cause.

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