Abstract: I investigate the meaning and significance of Spinoza's elusive concept of "expression". I do so by situating expression among his canonical relations of conception, causation, and inherence. I argue that, for Spinoza, expression necessarily corresponds to what is sufficient for conception, but implies neither causation nor inherence. This correspondence with sufficient conditions on conception and the pulling apart of expression from causation and inherence has important consequences for our grasp of the interconnections among Spinoza's key metaphysical relations. But it also has profound implications for our understanding of the essential structure of Spinoza's ontology itself, and for the proper assessment of his rationalism. I explore these consequences by explicating Spinoza's assertion that substance and each of its attributes are "conceived through themselves", and by demonstrating that, on his view (though contrary to that of most commentators), the relation of conception is not to be accounted for in causal terms. A systematic treatment of the expression relation sheds new light on these issues. The result is a view of the underpinnings of Spinoza's metaphysics that is as surprising as it is compelling.

Ego sum qui sum.
(Exodus 3:14)

1. Introduction

Much recent work on Spinoza's metaphysics seeks to explain the nature of the fundamental relations that structure his ontology.¹ Most

1. All references to the English translations of Spinoza's works and correspondence are to Edwin Curley's edition (abbreviated "C"), cited by volume and page number. References to the Latin text of Spinoza's works are to Gebhardt's edition (abbreviated "G"), cited by volume, page, and line number. In referring to passages from the Ethics I use the following abbreviations: a-( axiom), c-( corollary), e-( explanation), p-( proposition), s-( scholium); 'd' stands for either 'definition' (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book) or 'demonstration' (in all other cases). Thus, '1d6' stands for definition 6 of part 1 of the Ethics, and '1p16d' stands for the demonstration of proposition 16 of part one. I use the following abbreviations for other texts of Spinoza
attention by far has been trained on Spinoza’s three canonical relations of metaphysical dependence: conception, causation, and inherence. Indeed, charting the interconnections among these three relations has been one of the chief goals — and ongoing success stories — of contemporary Spinoza scholarship. But there is another relation whose presence in Spinoza’s system is equally prominent, yet whose status remains conspicuously uncertain: “expression” (exprimere).

Part of the challenge in apprehending the nature of Spinoza’s concept of expression stems from its esoteric appearance: unlike conception, causation, and inherence, “expression” is apparently not included in the standard catalog of metaphysical relations Spinoza would have inherited from his philosophical predecessors. Yet the notion of expression shows up repeatedly in Spinoza’s philosophy. In the most central passages of the Ethics, Spinoza tells us that God’s attributes express his essence and that the ontologically dependent modes which modify God’s attributes express his essence in a certain and determinate way. Anticipating several of Leibniz’s appeals to the notion, Spinoza also claims that the mind expresses the body, the part expresses the whole, and definitions express nothing but the nature of the thing.

The context of the term ‘exprimere’. Aquinas uses the Latin term to denote the act of uttering or representing by means of words (see the entry for ‘exprimere’ in Deferrari 1948). Hobbes and Descartes, two of Spinoza’s most prominent influences, also use the term ‘expression’ in the verbal sense. Given the vagaries and limitations Spinoza assigns to the nature of language (see especially TIE §89), it is doubtful that these previous senses of ‘expression’ contributed the basic thrust of Spinoza’s concept of expression as it is best interpreted in the context of the Ethics. Nevertheless, Spinoza may well have been drawing on the Latin etymology of ‘exprimere’ in shaping his philosophical conception of expression. Here the relevant senses of the term seem to be those of ‘making manifest’ and ‘pressing out’. These senses are evocative of the view that an expression of a thing makes that thing manifest, in such a way that its nature can be ‘extracted’ by a (true) conception of the thing. This would be a basic way of characterizing Spinoza’s understanding of expression on the interpretation 1 advance in what follows. Several other commentators have discussed the connection between Spinozistic expression and the notion of manifestation: see Deleuze 1968, Kaufmann 1940, and Lin 2004.

The range of contexts in which expression is invoked reveals its far-reaching scope. And because it is so closely tied to Spinoza’s characterizations of the essences of God and modes, an adequate understanding of expression could uniquely illuminate his foundational views on essence and being. Is it possible to recover a unified account of expression in Spinoza? A reasonable procedure for answering this question would be to examine the connection between expression and the integral notions of conception, causation, and inherence. In what follows, that is what I propose to do. Taking the latter group of relations as our context will, in fact, enable us to see just how unique and fundamental Spinoza’s notion of expression is, and how crucial to acquiring a cogent grasp of his metaphysics.

I’ll argue that underlying the diversity of Spinoza’s statements about expression is the following fundamental fact:

(1) Necessarily, $x$ expresses $y$ if and only if $x$ is sufficient for conceiving of $y$.

My chief aim is to show that this thesis applies to the complete range of expressions defined. The context of the term “expression” is of the utmost importance in the setting of Leibniz’s metaphysics. Thus Leibniz writes to de Volder in 1703: “I have said nothing that does not follow from my doctrine that every body expresses all other things, that every soul expresses its own body, and that through its body each soul also expresses all other things” (GP II.253/L.531; as quoted in Swoyer 1995, 65). Among the standard claims about expression to be found in Leibniz are that finite substances express God (GP IV.460), every substance expresses its own body (GP II.126), and definitions express the essence of what is defined (GP V.272). Leibniz’s use of the concept of expression is far more intricate, multifaceted, and disorderly than Spinoza’s, but is, I’m convinced, systematically and suggestively related to the latter. An adequate comparison of the two philosophers on this issue would penetrate deep into the connection between their systems of thought. Unfortunately, this fascinating philosophical terrain must be explored on another occasion. For an insightful account of Leibnizian expression that complements the picture of Spinozistic expression offered here, see Swoyer 1995.

3. As is well known, the notion of “expression” is of the utmost importance in the setting of Leibniz’s metaphysics. Thus Leibniz writes to de Volder in 1703: “I have said nothing that does not follow from my doctrine that every body expresses all other things, that every soul expresses its own body, and that through its body each soul also expresses all other things” (GP II.253/L.531; as quoted in Swoyer 1995, 65). Among the standard claims about expression to be found in Leibniz are that finite substances express God (GP IV.460), every substance expresses its own body (GP II.126), and definitions express the essence of what is defined (GP V.272). Leibniz’s use of the concept of expression is far more intricate, multifaceted, and disorderly than Spinoza’s, but is, I’m convinced, systematically and suggestively related to the latter. An adequate comparison of the two philosophers on this issue would penetrate deep into the connection between their systems of thought. Unfortunately, this fascinating philosophical terrain must be explored on another occasion. For an insightful account of Leibnizian expression that complements the picture of Spinozistic expression offered here, see Swoyer 1995.

4. This formulation, sans the modal operator, is due to Della Rocca (2002, 20), who argues for the mere biconditional. I say more about the reasons behind the precise formulation of (1) at the beginning of the next section.
of cases in which Spinoza invokes the concept of expression. On this reading, for example, Spinoza holds that a given attribute expresses God’s essence just in case conceiving of that attribute is sufficient for conceiving of God’s essence; a given mode expresses the attribute under which it falls just in case conceiving of that mode is sufficient for conceiving of the essence of God through that attribute; and the mind and the body express “one and the same” individual just in case conceiving of the mind and of the body is sufficient for conceiving of the essence of that individual.

In addition to unifying such claims, this interpretive scheme unearths two deep-rooted Spinozistic commitments, each pervasively informing the distinctive character of his metaphysics. The first of these commitments lies buried beneath Spinoza’s claims concerning the uniqueness of substance and each of its attributes (i.e. the fact of there being only one such substance or individual attribute and of its being of a single nature). The notion of expression, interpreted along the lines of (1), provides the key to unlocking the meaning of such statements. In the early definitions of part 1 of the Ethics and over the course of the text, Spinoza exhibits the concept of substance in such a way as to reveal that certain properties — e.g. necessity, eternity, infinity — pertain to it. These qualities are paradigmatically tied to claims about what the attributes express of the essence of substance. The attributes therefore appear as self-sufficient conceptions of what Spinoza calls the “reality, or being” of the one and only substance, God. Significantly, that the attributes constitute expressions of substance, rather than distinct substances in their own right, suggests the view that, for Spinoza, “uniqueness” is not analyzable into something like a Leibnizian criterion of qualitative indiscernibility. Substance is identical with an infinity of intrinsically *discernible* attributes. Moreover, a substance’s identity is not accounted for by any independently specifiable feature of its attributes: neither the attributes nor any relations among them bring it about that the substance is what it is. Instead, the identity of substance — the fact of its being conceived through itself — *consists in* the attributes’ being expressions of it. A critical implication of this view is that one cannot explain the “proximate” features of substance (attributes) or its “non-proximate” features (modes) without adverting to the unity of substance: these features are necessarily tied, all the way down, to that being “the knowledge of which does not require the knowledge of any other thing” (G II.50.5–6). If this is right, then Spinoza rejects the impetus to *ground* his monistic ontology of substance. He sees it a mistake to try to rest his monistic principles on features or relations internal to his ontology (such as relations of conception or causation), since those features or relations are already dependent on the conception of a being, the very embodiment of metaphysical necessity, whose nature can be conceived only insofar as it is expressed.

Hence we proceed, via the expression relation, from the seemingly narrow notion of a thing’s being “conceived through itself” to sweeping conclusions regarding the justification of monism, the character of substance, and the proper scope of philosophical explanation. As we shall see, these implications are carried over into Spinoza’s conception of the role of expression in exhibiting how a mode of substance is determinate, a conception which, I’ll argue, does not involve facts of the matter concerning in *virtue of* what such a mode is determinate.

These themes are connected with a second Spinozistic commitment I’ll attempt to explicate: the autonomy of conception and expression

5. This assertion might appear flatly contradicted by Spinoza’s use of the notions of causation, conception, and inherence in his opening definitions of *’causa sui’* (1d1) and substance (1d3). Yet it is not clear whether we should count a description of a thing as that which causes itself, is conceived through itself, and inheres in itself as an explanation of that thing in terms of causation, conception, and inherence. The tautological or reflexive application of these notions to the concept of substance seems to me definitively non-explanatory, and instead indicative of the substance’s absolute fundamentality. This need not conflict with the demonstrative use to which these notions are put in validating the exclusivity of the notion of substance to which they themselves must be regarded as posterior.

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from the other key relations that drive explanations within the context of Spinoza's metaphysics. If we take seriously thesis (1) as an analysis of expression, we see unambiguously that the relations of conception, on the one hand, and causation and inherence, on the other, come apart. For Spinoza, that is, all connections of causation and inherence admit of conceptual articulation, because all such connections are conceptual connections. But not all conceptual connections are connections of causation or inherence, and in fact, in many cases, connections of the latter kinds holding between certain relata are strictly orthogonal to the conceptual connections holding between those same relata. Hence it is not the case that

(2) If \( x \) expresses \( y \), then \( x \) is caused by \( y \),

and

(3) If \( x \) expresses \( y \), then \( x \) inheres in \( y \).

My secondary aim will thus be to show that (2) and (3) are false; that the relations of conception, causation, and inherence are not coextensive; and that the link between expression and conception serves to bring out this fact.7 The moral of this part of our story dovetails with that of the proposal just sketched concerning the uniqueness of substance and its attributes. Many — indeed, the most fundamental —

7. One could probably scope out the landscape of recent seminal work on Spinoza’s metaphysics along the lines of whether it views the relations of inherence, causation, and conception as coextensive (or identical) or not. Garrett (2002) appears to treat the three relations as coextensive. Della Rocca (2008a) explicitly identifies them. Newlands (2010) reduces both inherence and causation to conception. By contrast, Melamed (2013, ch. 3) argues that inherence, causation, and conception are not identical (though he does claim that conception and causation are coextensive), while Morrison (2013) contends that conception and causation in particular are not coextensive. I believe that the results concerning the connection between expression and conception presented here place my interpretation most closely in line with Morrison’s, although, for reasons I cannot elaborate here, I also accept Melamed’s argument that conception and causation do not imply inherence.

of Spinoza’s metaphysical claims are ungrounded constitutive claims: categorical claims about what a thing simply must be, to which any causal explanation of related phenomena must advert, but which are not themselves grounded in such explanation. These claims are instead meant to exhibit the character of — brute! — metaphysical necessity, out of which alone, Spinoza thinks, springs the intelligible order of nature. Or so I’ll try, in the end, to show.

The plan is as follows: In section 2, I defend thesis (1) as an interpretation of Spinoza’s notion of expression, focusing on the relation of the term ‘exprimere’ to Spinoza’s broader conceptual terminology; the import of Spinoza’s statements about the expression of attributes and modes; and what such talk reveals about the fundamental natures of, and ontological distinction between, the latter. I unfold this distinction by attending to how the meaning of claims about expression is linked to the degree of determinacy of the entities which those claims are about. This broader analysis confirms what I have represented as the underlying message of Spinoza’s claim that substance and each of its attributes are conceived through themselves: namely that the essential role of the expression relation is to exhibit determinate things — characteristic unities. In section 3, I extend this analysis by exploring the incongruities between expression, causation, and inherence. The results of this section serve to detach the notion of what it is to conceive of a determinate thing as a determinate thing from the requirement that a determinate thing must be conceived as such in virtue of independently specifiable factors involving causation or inherence. In the final section of the paper, I draw on the characterization of Spinoza’s ontology offered in section 2 and the lessons concerning the autonomy of expression derived in section 3 to account for how Spinoza both secures and constrains the role of rationality and explanation within the context of his metaphysical scheme. I end by suggesting how, on this basis, Spinoza’s rationalism, as an independent philosophical commitment, ought to be assessed.
2. Expression and Conception

Let me begin by laying out my exact understanding of the connection between expression and conception as represented in (1). Here is the thesis again:

(1) Necessarily, \( x \) expresses \( y \) if and only if \( x \) is sufficient for conceiving of \( y \).

In some instances, ‘expression’ corresponds to what Spinoza would regard as necessary and sufficient for conception. This is so in the case of attributes and definitions, which express, and are necessary and sufficient for conceiving of, substance and essences, respectively. More generally, however, Spinoza implies that expression picks out precisely what is sufficient for conception. This is true in the case of modes, which express and are sufficient, but not necessary, for conceiving of substance. It is also true in relation to Spinoza’s standard terminology for conceptual claims, which, as we will see below, may themselves be parsed as stating sufficient conditions on conception. Spinoza treats these sorts of claims — e.g. that ‘\( x \) is conceived through \( y' \), or that ‘\( x \) requires the concept of \( y' \)’ — as materially equivalent with the claim that ‘\( x \) expresses \( y' \). These facts provide a clue as to what Spinoza thinks “expression” really is: what his metaphysical analysis of the relation would be.” This analysis, abbreviated in (1), could go as follows: for any object \( x \) and property \( \phi \), \( \phi \) expresses (the essence of) \( x \) just in case: (i) \( x \) is \( \phi \) and (ii) there is a determinate conception, \( \psi \), such that the parameters for individuating \( \psi \) correspond to the parameters for individuating \( \phi \). If this analysis is correct, then \( \phi \)'s being sufficient for conceiving of \( x \) (in virtue of its isomorphic relation to a particular conception of \( x \)) is (partly) constitutive of what it is for it to be an expression of \( x \) (the other constitutive feature being that \( \phi \) is genuinely a property of \( x \)).

8. When Spinoza wants to indicate that something is both necessary and sufficient for conceiving of another thing, he typically introduces a qualifier in addition to saying the latter thing is conceived through the former thing. For example, the assumption that definitions are necessary and sufficient for conceiving of the essence of what they define is signaled by Spinoza’s saying that “nothing but” a thing’s essence is conceived through its definition (sp8s2). Similarly, that attributes are necessary and sufficient for conceiving of the essence of God is suggested by Spinoza’s stating that attributes are conceived “as constituting” God’s essence (1d4). As I suggest below, however, Spinoza’s typical claim that one thing is “conceived through” another thing (and related claims employing analogous terminology for the conception relation) imply strictly that the first thing is sufficient for conceiving of the latter thing.

9. I take the following characterization to offer a “metaphysical analysis” as opposed to a “conceptual analysis” of expression. What this means for present purposes is that the analyses proposed is intended to uncover something genuinely primitive about the analyses (what I am about to propose on Spinoza’s behalf concerning the nature of expression is meant to represent his view that what it really is to be an instance of expression is to be...). The concern with primitives (as opposed to mere clarification of meaning) need not apply to conceptual analyses.

10. In adopting the vocabulary of objects and their properties in this formulation, I am alluding in particular to one paradigm case of expression: viz. that of a mode’s expressing substance (through an attribute, or essence, of substance). As noted below, talk of properties does not apply to the case of an attribute’s expressing the essence of substance, since an attribute constitutes the essence of substance. My present use of object-property terminology notwithstanding, I maintain that we can discern the structure proffered in this analysis in all cases of expression, mutatis mutandis for the various ontological relationships involved.

11. This is not to say, à la Descartes, that \( \psi \) contains as much reality as \( \phi \) in virtue of being caused by the latter (a caveat that will become important in my discussion of expression and causation in section 3 below).

12. I believe that one function of Spinoza’s terminology of expression is to secure the objectivity of statements made about the objects in his ontology. Part of what it is to be an “expression” of \( x \) is for the expressing entity to genuinely belong to \( x \), in addition to being the sort of thing susceptible to being represented as a distinct feature of \( x \). It’s worth noting the disparity between the implications of statements about one thing’s “expressing” another thing within a Spinozistic framework (as I interpret it) and the (merely) subjectivist connotations of expression talk according to (e.g.) the modern “expressivist” program in ethics. Noteworthy divergences of this sort make it clear that, as a general matter, grasping what implications the notion of “expression” harbors in relation to fundamental conceptions of the nature of representation and objectivity is no trivial or straightforward affair.
the properties has a heart and has a kidney: there is never a case when one would predicate one of these relations or properties of something without presupposing the other. Nevertheless, (1) should not be understood as stating that everything that is true of expression is true of conception, and vice versa. There can exist a conception of \(x, \psi\), which does not correspond to an expression of \(x, \phi\); in that case we would not say that the biconditional in (1) holds, since \(\phi\) is not sufficient for \(\psi\).

That’s the basic rationale behind (1), and the outline of the general picture of expression I’ll defend. My next order of business is to lay the groundwork for a discussion of Spinoza’s texts by charting the correspondence among Spinoza’s uses of `exprimere`, the conception-implying term ‘involvere’ (‘involve’), and other standard idioms for the conception relation. This overview will show that such terminology, in picking out sufficient conditions on conception and corresponding with Spinoza’s use of the term `exprimere`, indicates his endorsement of thesis (1). In the remainder of this section I’ll flesh out Spinoza’s commitment to (1) by carefully examining what Spinoza’s talk of expression reveals about the natures of attributes and modes, as well as the general framework of conditions governing how attributes and modes express what they do.

2.1. Expression and Spinoza’s Conceptual Terminology

A survey of Spinoza’s standard terminology for the conception relation reveals the latter’s coextensiveness with the expression relation, as well as the fact that in deploying such terminology Spinoza means specifically to pick out what is sufficient for conception. The most important connection to highlight in this regard is that between the terms ‘express’ and ‘involve’ (involvere). Spinoza typically uses these terms interchangeably, as in 1p19d, and in 2p5d and 2p29d he speaks of their relationship in such a way as to strongly imply their coextensiveness (see also Ep. 35/G IV.182.16–17 and TTP IV.11/G 3.60/C II.128). For Spinoza, for \(x\) to “involve” \(y\) means for \(x\) to be “conceived through” \(y\). Now, Spinoza’s definition of ‘substance’ in 1d3 indicates that he holds that if \(x\) is conceived through \(y\), then the concept of \(x\) requires the concept of \(y\). If the concept of \(x\) requires the concept of \(y\) to be conceived, then it is also the case that, solely in virtue of \(x\)’s being conceived, \(y\) is conceived. And this amounts to saying that \(x\) is sufficient for conceiving of \(y\).

Hence the notions of “involving”, “being conceived through”, and “requiring the concept of” all share the sense of ‘being sufficient for conceiving of’. These notions are also parallel with the notion of something’s “not being able to be conceived without” another thing. Thus consider 1d5 and 1p15, which respectively state that modes are “conceived through” and “cannot be conceived without” God. The parallel

13. In 2p5d, Spinoza writes: “The formal being of ideas is a mode of thinking (as is known through itself), i.e. (by 1p25c), a mode that expresses, in a certain way, God’s nature insofar as it is a thinking thing. And so [adeoque] (by 1p10) it involves the concept of no other attribute of God …” Spinoza appears here to be inferring the involvere relation from the exprimere relation. But in 2p29d we get the opposite direction of implication: “For the idea of an affection of the human Body (by 1p27) does not involve adequate knowledge of the Body itself, or [sic] does not express its nature adequately ….” It seems we are to infer that if a thing does involve adequate knowledge of another thing, then the former thing expresses the latter thing’s nature adequately. Putting two and two together, then, we arrive at the proposition that \(x\) expresses \(y\) if and only if \(x\) involves \(y\). (Cf. 1p82.)

14. 1p2d: … “For each [substance] must be in itself and conceived through itself, or the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other [Unaquaeque enim in se debet esse et per se debet concipi, sive conceptus unius conceptum alterius non involvit].” On the conceptual nature of the involvere relation, see further Melamed 2012a, 88 and Gabbey 2008, 47–48, n. 10.

15. For a quotation of this passage, see section 2.2 below.

16. For a similar line of reasoning, see Della Rocca 2002, 21. One might wish to point out here that if \(x\) requires the concept of \(y\) to be conceived, then \(y\) is necessary for conceiving of \(x\). However, this of course does not amount to the claim that \(x\) is necessary and sufficient for conceiving of \(y\). In saying that Spinoza’s conceptual terminology reflects sufficient conditions on something’s being conceived, I mean to single out what is implied about the variable ‘\(x\)’ in the claim that \(x\) requires the concept of \(y\) to be conceived (and cognate assertions).

17. 1d5: “By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in
import of these texts implies the equivalence of these two ways of stating the conception relation. This is significant in light of 2p49d, where Spinoza writes that “to say that A must involve the concept of B is the same as to say that A cannot be conceived without B”. Given the equivalence just observed between ‘cannot be conceived without’ and ‘conceived through’, Spinoza must take ‘conceived through’ as equivalent with ‘involves’; and given the interchangeability of ‘conceived through’ with ‘requires the concept of’, he must take the latter notion as also interchangeable with ‘involves’. Thus Spinoza evidently sees ‘is conceived through’, ‘cannot be conceived without’, ‘requires the concept of’, and ‘involves’ as all denoting the same conceptual relation. Moreover, because Spinoza plausibly treats ‘expresses’ as coextensive with ‘involves’, he must regard ‘expresses’ as coextensive with the other formulations for the conception relation as well. Thus the interchangeability of these various formulations for the conception relation, together with the coextensiveness of the verbs involvere and exprimere, indicates that, insofar as Spinoza’s talk of expression strictly covaries with his talk of conceptual relations more generally, the relation of one thing’s expressing another thing may be viewed as coextensive with the relation of one thing’s being sufficient for conceiving of another thing. The scope of these terminological considerations, then, lends strong presumptive support to the view that Spinoza universally endorses thesis (1). But to substantiate this commitment, we must establish the way in which (1) informs the meaning of the fundamental metaphysical doctrines whose articulation or defense involves an appeal to the notions of expression and conception. So let’s now turn to a more direct examination of Spinoza’s texts.

2.2. Expression, Conception, and the Natures of Attributes and Modes

In 1p10, Spinoza elucidates his conception of the nature of the attributes of a substance by claiming that each attribute is unique or “must be conceived through itself”. The scholium to this proposition (i) displays his commitment to thesis (1), specifically in the way in which it (ii) reveals how expression informs his conception of the uniqueness of substance and each of its attributes. Thus I’ll proceed by exploring how this pregnant passage delivers on (ii), drawing on the findings of this inquiry to establish (i).

Spinoza’s argument for the claim that each attribute is self-conceived is grounded in his definitions of ‘substance’ (1d3) and ‘attribute’ (1d4):

1d3: By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.

1d4: By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence.

18. Although in the Ethics Spinoza straightforwardly affirms that God’s essence is “unique” (unicum; see 1p14c1), in Letter 50 he expresses telling reservations about the propriety of using such language to describe substance: “[I]t is evident that nothing is called one or unique unless another thing has been conceived which (as they say) agrees with it. But since the existence of God is his essence, and we can’t form a universal idea concerning his essence, it’s certain that someone who calls God one or unique does not have a true idea of God, or is speaking improperly about him” (G IV.239b.20–25/C II.406). I believe that Spinoza’s remarks here obviate any attempt to understand his argument for substance monism as involving an appeal to attributes as features or ways of conceiving of substance. Such interpretations appear to construe Spinoza’s proposal that there might be two or more substances of the same attribute — a possibility he seeks to exclude — as suggesting that there might be several substances falling under a single genus of sorts. This option is taken to be forestalled in 1p5 (by appeal to the identity of indiscernibles). But this interpretive strategy presupposes that Spinoza thinks it could be entertained, even for the sake of argument, that two substances have the same attribute, where ‘attribute’ is construed in the sense of ‘feature’ or ‘type’. This presupposition is belied by his remarks in Letter 50. I will explain shortly in what sense substance (and modes) can be said to be “conceived through” an attribute.
In 1p10d, Spinoza appeals to 1d4 to reach the conclusion that, given that substance is conceived through itself, each attribute, which is a perception or conception of the essence of substance, is self-conceived. Here is 1p10, its demonstration, and the first part of its scholium:

1p10: Each attribute of a substance must be conceived through itself.

Dem.: For an attribute is what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence (by1d4); so (by 1d3) it must be conceived through itself, q.e.d.

Schol.: From these propositions it is evident that although two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct (i.e., one may be conceived without the other), we still cannot infer from that that they constitute two beings, or two different substances. For it is of the nature of a substance that each of its attributes is conceived through itself, since all the attributes it has have always been in it together, and one could not be produced by another, but each expresses the reality, or being of substance.

It appears at first sight that whatever reasons Spinoza has for saying that substance and each of its attributes are conceived through themselves, they are decidedly opaque. What exactly is he arguing here?

A promising way to approach this question is to attend to what Spinoza says about expression in this context. Spinoza invokes the concept of expression in 1p10s partly in order to forestall the possible objection that, in having nothing in common with each other, the attributes must constitute distinct substances. Spinoza rejects this view, pointing out that while each attribute is conceived through itself, “each expresses the reality, or being of substance” (G II.52.7–8). His point is that while the attributes have nothing in common with each other (which is entailed by the fact that no attribute can “produce” or cause another), they nevertheless are all expressions of one and the same substance. Thus, each attribute is inseparable from the essence of the substance to which it belongs, and so not a distinct substance in its own right; yet the attributes are nevertheless said to be “really distinct” and “conceived through themselves” (G II.52.2, 5–6). What we need to understand is how this can be. How can each attribute be conceived through itself while being identical to substance, which in turn is conceived through itself? What is the connection between the attributes’ being conceived through themselves and their being really distinct?

Notice that, in the scholium, Spinoza reasons that we cannot infer that any two attributes constitute distinct substances — despite our ability to conceive of them as really distinct — because each attribute is conceived through itself. The idea behind this inference might be as follows: Any two attributes, A and B, would have it in common that they belong to one substance. But suppose that A and B were in turn distinct substances, on account of their real distinction. Then there would have to be a relation between them in virtue of which they, as independent substances, both belong to one substance. That relation would have to be such as to explain the unity of the one substance to which A and B belong. However, the relation would be one between A and B, and so also would have to be one that explained their interconnection. But this interconnection is itself dependent on the unity of the original substance, which is what the supposed relation has been invoked to explain. Thus, on pain of circularity, we cannot regard a substance’s attributes as distinct beings or substances in their own right. Once we grasp these implications, the message Spinoza wants to convey about the uniqueness of substance, or its being conceived through itself, becomes apparent. For something to be “conceived through itself”, or to be unique, is for that thing to possess a characteristic unity, to be one thing of the same nature. But I take the lesson of 1p10s to be that this notion also entails that something that is conceived through itself cannot be explained through its relations to other things, including relations between its own attributes. Thus the unity of substance, for Spinoza, is basic and is not further explained by any
relations between its attributes. The nature of each attribute, in turn, is fixed by the nature of the one substance to which it belongs, of which it is a conception. What makes an attribute one attribute, one conception, is the nature of its contribution to (the conception of) the one unified substance. And this contribution is, in fact, just what is embodied in the way that an attribute expresses substance.

This picture has the virtue of illuminating Spinoza’s mysterious-sounding claim that the attributes express the “reality, or being” of substance. What this means, we now see, is that to “attribute” an attribute to a substance is to identify the substance; it is not to classify it, bring it under a description, or attach it to a relation. Moreover, what we’ve uncovered about the meaning of the phrase ‘conceived through itself’ shows that the attributes are, contrary to superficial appearances, wholly determinate individuals: to conceive them is essentially to name them (and substance). That being so, the “absolute essence” of an attribute $A$ may be taken in an “adjectival” manner and then can be construed “predicatively”, as that through which certain other things, namely $A$’s attributes, modifications, are conceived.22

If all this is true, then attributes must be “informative” in some way.

19. I’ve been helped in some of my formulations of these ideas (here and in the introduction) by a superb discussion of similar themes with respect to Aristotle’s theory of substance in Charles 1994.

20. It should be clear that this conclusion vitiates a broad conception of the attributes as “characterizations” or “qualities” of substance. Deleuze (1968, 37) appears to capture the latter, popular construal when he writes that attributes “exprime une essence infinie, c’est-a-dire une qualité illimitée”.

21. In calling the attributes “individuals” here, I do not mean to invoke Spinoza’s technical definition of ‘individual’ given in the “Physical Digression” following 2P13. My purpose is rather to evoke the idea of a thing that is so determinate that it cannot be characterized by means of any independent description: hence it can only be named. On the attributes as ‘names’ of substance, see Ep. 9/G IV.46.20–30/C I.195–196. Cf. also Della Rocca 2002, 19, and Deleuze 1968, ch. 3. Melamed (2012b) adduces an assortment of texts and considerations, passed over here, that support the interpretation of Spinoza’s attributes (and thus God’s essence) as maximally determinate.

22. Here I’m adapting some fruitful ideas from Owen’s (1965) discussion of the nature of “inherence”.

23. I derive this suggestion from A.N. Whitehead’s proposal that material objects might be viewed as adjectives of the events in which they are situated (discussed in Ramsey 1990). On the model I’m proposing, an attribute’s being a wholly determinate individual is compatible with its being construed “contextually”. I do not take the latter construal to suggest that attribute contexts are antecedently individuated and then “paired” with modes that are situated in them. Rather, the instantiation of an attribute consists in the actual “situation” of a mode of a given type. A mode is a less-than-wholly determinate, characterizeable way (modus) of situating the wholly determinate, ineliminable character of its attribute, the attribute’s being such that it can
must be represented under some attribute in the following way: Let $e$ be a mode of Extension and $E$ represent the attribute of Extension: more precisely, an “Extension-context”. We are now to conceive that $e$ is (physically) red. Thus we might say: for all $E$, ‘$e$ is situated in $E$’ implies redness is situated in $E$. In this statement, ‘$E$’, the term designating the attribute, has what F.P. Ramsey calls “primary occurrence”, and ‘$e$’ “secondary occurrence”. An attribute, in Spinoza’s ontology, might be regarded as an entity which will always have “primary occurrence” in our representations of existing objects, once the structure of those representations is made explicit. There is something fundamentally be only identified and not characterized independently of the way in which modes situate (modify) it. (One can also think of an attribute as being like a wholly determinate shade of color — an analogy to which I’ll return.) On this model, moreover, each attribute, as a determinate individual, is associated with situations of a certain ‘kind’, such as ‘situations in extension’ or ‘situations in thought’, which define the parameters on what it is for a mode to be a particular instantiation of an attribute — or, as I’m putting it here, a property of a given (event-like) attribute context. (I am not the first to give a characterization of Spinoza’s ontology along such lines: di Poppa [2010] offers an interesting account of Spinoza’s “process ontology” in the spirit of Whitehead, and Morrison [ms-b] sees attributes as analogous to times.)

Thus we are not considering “redness” as a phenomenal property, i.e. as a mode of Thought.

24. Ramsey (1990, 24) argues that the fundamental distinction undergirding the (proper) division of incomplete logical symbols is that between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary occurrence’, not that between substantive and adjective. Ramsey’s insight is embodied in Spinoza’s criticism of those (i.e. most human beings) who conceive of substance in the same manner in which they conceive of individual created things (cf. Ramsey’s spurious substantives), and characterize substance with ordinary predicates (cf. his spurious adjectives). In the Cogitata Metaphysica, Spinoza diagnoses this error in a fashion that confirms the appropriateness of the model proposed above for representing how something that is less fundamental (with secondary occurrence) is “situated” in something that is more fundamental (with primary occurrence). Spinoza writes: “[W]e say expressly that being is divided into Substance and Mode, and not into Substance and Accident. For an Accident is nothing but a mode of thinking, inasmuch as it denotes what is only a respect. E.g., when I say that the triangle is moved, the motion is not a mode of the triangle, but of the body which is moved. Hence the motion is called an accident with respect to the triangle. But with respect to the body, it is called a real being, or mode. For the motion cannot be conceived without the body, though it can without the triangle” (G I.236.32–I.237.5/C I.303). We could represent Spinoza’s point

real about those elements of our conceptions which occupy this primary role. In fact, the underlying “context” that plays this part is, in any representation of an object, ineliminable: it is a necessary component of any instance of conception. This underlying component exhibits, through its ineliminable presence, its very necessity. Indeed, it exhibits necessity itself.

Spinoza also holds that it exhibits eternity and infinity, and for plausible reasons. A primary, or fundamentally real, element of reality — one in which all non-fundamental existing objects must be “situated” — must apply to existing objects without conceivable limit (be infinite), and the statement ‘There exists a mode $m$ situated in $A$’ must be true, regardless of the time to which this statement is indexed. So each attribute, on this construal, essentially demonstrates its own necessity, eternity, and infinity. This, to me, is a plausible way of making sense of the claim that each attribute “expresses a certain eternal and infinite essence”. It is its own essence that an attribute expresses, but ipso facto the essence of substance, since the attribute is identical with the substance. Yet the story is not over until we’ve grasped the necessity of there being an infinity of attributes, an infinity of expressions, of a substance. What is behind this ground-floor assumption? I suspect that, for Spinoza, to suppose an expressionless world is simply to posit a world without necessity. The very possibility of a necessary truth,
for him, rests on the connection between the concepts of a “nature” and of “existence”: a necessary being is one whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing (1d1). But to have a nature is to have attributes, and for those attributes to exist is for them to be expressed. But if a being is necessary, as the substance that is God is, then it cannot possess just one attribute, since to be just one attribute is, by definition, to be singled out from among all remaining possible attributes (1d6e). For the remaining possible attributes not to be realized would make it contingent that God possesses the one attribute that he does, and hence would make his nature — which is identical to his existence — contingent. But this contradicts the truth that it’s essential to God that God exists necessarily (1p7, 1p11). Thus, if God is a necessary being, he must be absolutely infinite; and this absolute infinity must consist in the absolute infinity of expressions, on the part of each of the substance’s attributes, of their own infinity.

We’ve seen that an attribute is sufficient to identify (as opposed to characterize) substance, and that Spinoza indicates this fact by stating that the attributes “express” substance, particularly by exhibiting or expressing its “necessity”, “eternity”, “infinity”, “being”, and “reality” — all synonyms conveying the basic idea of absolute fundamentality. To identify substance is to conceive of substance, and so an attribute’s expressing substance is sufficient for conceiving substance, for conceiving what is fundamental in some way. Thus it would appear that our thesis (1) provides an apt characterization of what Spinoza means when he says that attributes express (the necessity, eternity, infinity, etc. of) substance. On the scheme we’ve been gradually developing, each attribute, as an expression of substance, (i) belongs to the essence of substance, and (ii) embodies certain “parametric constraints”, the constraints that govern the infinity of ways modes can be “situated” as properties of the attribute and that thus make the attribute “infinite in its own kind” (see 1d6e, 1p16d). Such constraints correspond to the kinds of conceptions of substance that are possible, relative to the attribute — the expression — in question.

This result raises an important point about the dichotomy between attributes and modes. Contrary to the shape of the “metaphysical analysis” of expression I earlier proposed on Spinoza’s behalf, attributes are not properties of substance (nor are they objects, for that matter). That analysis properly applies to things which, as Spinoza puts it, exist “outside the intellect”, and the attributes, though not entirely subjective, do not “reside” independently in the world either: they are irreducibly perspectival entities. Modes, by contrast, are characterized by Spinoza as “properties” (propria, proprietates) of substance, the character of mode expression thus being more straightforwardly in line with my earlier analysis of the expression relation. Yet we’ve seen that thesis (1) perspicuously represents the thrust of Spinoza’s statements concerning the expression of attributes, in a way that fits within the general framework of the former analysis. It remains to be determined how this framework can be exploited to elucidate Spinoza’s view of what it is that modes express, and what it means for modes to express the sorts of things they do. We’ll see that there are systematic differences in the way in which attributes express substance, on the one hand, and modes express their attributes and other modes, on another except substances, or what is the same (by 1d4), their attributes, and their affections” (my emphasis). Garrett’s reading is perhaps symptomatic of a widely held view of the attributes as ways of conceiving of substance, a conception I seek to call into question here.

27. Garrett (forthcoming) claims that the attributes are what “structure” Spinoza’s ontology rather than, like substance and its modes, being things “within” that ontology. I find this to be partly true, but also fundamentally incorrect. For while attributes may be seen as “structuring” Spinoza’s ontology insofar as everything in that ontology must be conceived through them, Spinoza also states that the attributes ultimately exist “outside the intellect” along with substance and its modes. Thus, in 1p4d he writes: “[T]here is nothing outside the intellect through which a number of things can be distinguished from one another except substances, or what is the same (by 1d4), their attributes, and their affections” (my emphasis). Garrett’s reading is perhaps symptomatic of a widely held view of the attributes as ways of conceiving of substance, a conception I seek to call into question here.

28. Spinoza often links several of these “fundamental” characteristics that attributes express together with the Latin ‘size’, the ‘or’ of equivalence (indicated in Curley’s translation with an italicized ‘or’).
the other — differences which trace the very foundations of the ontological divide between attributes and modes, and which enrich the concept of “expression” itself.

Perhaps Spinoza’s most explicit characterization of the nature of modes, outside of the definition of ‘mode’ (1d5) itself, is given in terms of expression:

1p25c: Particular things are nothing but affections of God’s attributes, or modes by which God’s attributes are expressed [exprimuntur] in a certain and determinate way [certo, & determinate modo].

The meaning of this passage is best brought out if we first elaborate the basic conditions on attribute expression, as derived from our previous discussion. These are readily cashed out in terms of (1):

(A) An attribute cannot express, and is not sufficient for conceiving of, any more determinate entity; it is not a universal, but a wholly determinate individual (being identical to substance). (Compare the notion of a fully determinate shade of color.31)

(B) An attribute cannot express, and be sufficient for conceiving of, another attribute. (Compare: a fully determinate shade of color cannot be sufficient for conceiving any color but itself.)

(C) An attribute can express, and be sufficient for conceiving of, things which by nature modify it — i.e. modes — only insofar as those things in a primary sense express, and are sufficient for conceiving of, that attribute. In that case, the attribute is taken in an ‘adjectival’ manner and construed predicatively (as when we form a conception like ‘Mode m is extended’), being regarded as that through which the things that modify it are conceived. (Compare: a fully determinate shade of color is sufficient for conceiving of a colored thing only insofar as that thing constitutes a way of being that color.)

This last point suggests a reading of 1p25c according to which Spinoza is not there claiming: “Modes are affections of God’s attributes, and they express those attributes.” Rather, his claim would be that modes express God’s attributes insofar as they are modifications of those attributes. Thus the precise point he seems to be making in 1p25c with respect to modes — and uniquely modes — is that the notion of a thing’s constituting a certain way (modus) of being x cannot intelligibly be separated from the notion of that thing’s being an expression, φ, of x. (Compare again: for a colored thing to constitute a certain way of being colored just is, supposedly, for that thing to express its color.) Modes, considered in the technical, ontological sense, are, I’m now proposing, just what the purportedly non-technical meaning of ‘modus’ suggests they are: certain and determinate “ways” in which attributes are expressed.32 I insist on a rigorous construal of modes as “ways” as

31. I appropriate the example of the color from Owen (1965, 98). Owen concocts the color ‘vink’ as an example of an individual within a category (quality) that is wholly determinate and hence cannot be predicated of any other member of that category; it can only be named. The only circumstance in which a thing like ‘vink’ could be predicated of something else is if it were taken adjectivally, and predicated of ‘vink-colored’ things (but never of any other color). I must forewarn against taking my use of this example in the present context too literally, however, since a color would be something (for Spinoza as much as any traditional metaphysician) that inheres in something else, while Spinoza’s attributes inhere in themselves. Leaving this unfortunate detail aside, however, the utility of the example lies in its vividness and near-pervasive applicability to the present case.

32. In his glossary entry on ‘modus’ (C 1.645–646), Curley registers the commonplace view that Spinoza uses this term disjunctively in reference either to particular things (his ‘technical usage’) or to ‘ways’ or ‘manners’ in a general sense (his ‘non-technical’ use). Kline (1977) thoroughly catalogues Spinoza’s various uses of ‘modus’ and its derivatives as a means of separating out the contexts in which it is used in a technical versus nontechnical sense.
a means of elucidating what Spinoza means by calling modes “certain and determinate”. Spinoza’s in 1p25c is not, on my view, that modes are certain and determinate, full stop. Rather, I suggest, in this representative passage ‘certain and determinate’ is being predicated of modes as ways. And if my interpretation of the nature of attributes is correct, then modes, as such, are in fact less determinate entities than the attributes they express.33

But there are serious problems with this pervasive tendency to base conclusions about the nature of modes on the linguistic observation that ‘modus’ is used in a systematic and nonsystematic way. To cite just one example where taking the linguistic difference to track a philosophical difference generates a noteworthy interpretive obstacle, compare the use of ‘modus’ in 1p16 and in a subsequent reference to 1p16 found in 2p35. Curley translates 1p26 as follows: “From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes [infinita infinitis modis].” And here is the corresponding reference from 2p35: “[…]God does infinitely many things in infinitely many modes [Deus infinita infinitis modis agat].” If we suppose a distinction in Spinoza’s usage of the term ‘modus’, then the syntax of Spinoza’s claims in these passages pressures us to apply the two separate meanings of ‘modus’ to them respectively. But the passages nevertheless assert the same proposition. So if we keep to the distinction, we must charge Spinoza with equivocating. Aside from this infelicity of the standard view of the significance of ‘modus’, it should also be pointed out that there is no inconsistency between taking Spinoza to hold that modes are “ways” in a philosophically significant sense and his use of the word ‘way’ in both philosophically significant and philosophically neutral senses. To discount the former option on the basis of the latter observation is to question-beggingly preclude important interpretive and philosophical possibilities.

33. In Letter 36 Spinoza writes that an attribute is something which “expresses being perfectly” (G IV.185.31/C II.30). He equates “perfection” with being ‘unlimited’ and ‘imperfection’ with ‘limitation’. On the basis of these distinctions he claims that an attribute is “something which expresses God’s nature in some way [aliquid ... quod aliquot modo Dei naturam exprimit]” (G IV.186.3–4/C II.30). In what sense is Spinoza using ‘modo’ here, and does it conflict with my reading that only modes, properly speaking, are “ways”? Spinoza explains the latter remark by saying that God is not a being ‘in a certain respect, but absolutely’ (ibid.), and then goes on to assert the same thing of each of God’s attributes (using Extension as an example). I take Spinoza’s point to be that because God’s nature consists in an infinity of attributes, and because he cannot be said properly to exist in any ‘respect’, the attributes are themselves not properly regarded as ‘respects’, insofar as the latter implies negation or limitation. The description of an attribute as ‘unlimited in its own kind [in suo genere solummodo indeterminatum]’ (G IV.185.12; cf. Ix63, 1p16d) refers to its status as something through which other things are conceived (but which is

How can this be? 1p25c is the ur-statement of the claim that modes are “expressions”, and it says that modes express God’s attributes. But Spinoza also holds that modes express other modes. For instance, the mind expresses the body (G II.204.10; 5p22), and the part expresses the whole (Ep. 36). The claim that a mode may express another mode acquires signal importance in the context of one of the most momentous claims in the Ethics: that a mode of Extension and the idea of that mode express, and indeed are, ‘one and the same thing’ (2p75). Any account of Spinozistic expression must explain this and the previous propositions. In fact there is a single principle underlying all these cases of mode expression. It is that the expression of modes tracks the degrees of determinacy of that which they express. The essential idea is that what is more determinate is not sufficient for conceiving what is less determinate: what it takes to conceive of the latter must outstrip what it takes to conceive of the former. Now, a way of being x must be something over and above simply being x. Conceiving of what it simply is to be x is not sufficient for conceiving of what it is to be a way of being x, but conceiving of a way of being x is sufficient for conceiving of what it is to be x. Hence a mode, as a way of being (modifying) the
thing it expresses, must be less determinate than that thing itself.\textsuperscript{34} A 
fundamental tenet of Spinoza's ontology is that the existence of one 
thing that is less determinate than another thing suffices to make the 
former thing capable of existing as a way of being the latter thing.

This abstract proposal can be made more accessible through a com-
parison with Leibniz's view of what distinguishes individual substanc-
es from their accidents. In Discourse on Metaphysics, Leibniz writes: 
“[T]aken in abstraction from the subject, the quality of being a king 
which belongs to Alexander the Great is not determinate enough to 
constitute an individual and does not include the other qualities of the 
same subject, nor does it include everything the notion of this prince 
includes” (AG 41). For Leibniz, each individual substance corresponds 
to a “complete concept” from which can be deduced all and only those 

\textsuperscript{34} The asymmetry invoked here between being a thing and being a way of being 
a thing reflects Spinoza's asymmetric distinction between a thing's essence 
and its \textit{propria}, i.e. what necessarily follows from that essence. The nature 
of the asymmetry has been aptly characterized by Fine (1994, 5), who points 
out the difference between its lying in the nature of the singleton \{Socrates\} 
to have Socrates as its member and its not lying in the nature of Socrates to 
be a member of the singleton. A similar sort of contrast obtains between the 
essence of a thing and its \textit{propria}: it lies in the nature of a \textit{proprium} to follow 
necessarily from the essence of a thing, but the \textit{proprium} is not part of the 
essence itself. Similarly, in terms of the distinction made above, it lies in 
the nature of being a way of being \(x\) that that way be sufficient for conceiving of \(x\), 
but, on my interpretation, it does not lie in the nature of simply being \(x\) to 
be sufficient for conceiving a way of being \(x\). If, as I'm suggesting, \textit{propria} should 
be construed as ways of being that thing to which they belong, it might seem 
that I've mischaracterized the relationship Spinoza posits between a thing's 
essence and its \textit{propria}. For he seems to say that knowing \(x\)'s \textit{propria} (as a cause 
in expressing the second mode, this first mode is less determinate still 

predicates that are attributable to the substance. By contrast, it is theo-
retically impossible to unfold all the predicates specifying the ways in 
which the concept \textit{being a king} could be realized (which are strictly infinite). Thus, Leibniz would say that the concept \textit{being a king} is sufficient 
for conceiving of Alexander the Great, but the concept of Alexander 
the Great could not be sufficient for conceiving of (what follows from 
the concept of) \textit{being a king}. Leibniz's criterion for what distinguishes 
an individual substance from an accident thus provides a rather ex-
treme illustration of what I take to be Spinoza's graded criterion for 
determining in virtue of what one thing is more determinate than an-
other thing.

On this criterion, then, insofar as a mode expresses the attribute 
under which it falls, it expresses, and is sufficient for conceiving, 
something wholly determinate, while the mode's nature is less-than-
wholly determinate itself, being a way in which its attribute is modi-
\textsuperscript{35} The mode, in contrast to the attribute it expresses, is a way in which 
the nature of substance may be characterized or brought under 
a description of a given sort. Next, insofar as a mode expresses the 
essence of another mode, the first mode expresses something that is 
less determinate than the attribute under which both modes fall, but 
in expressing the second mode, this first mode is less determinate still
then the second mode that it expresses, being a way in which the second mode may be characterized. And so the pattern unfolds, along a dimension of lessening degrees of determinacy, with each mode being a less determinate modification of the mode it expresses.36

This principle helps to sort out Spinoza’s perplexing claim, at 2p7s, that a mode of Extension and the idea of that mode “are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways [una, eademque est res, sed duobus modis expressa]” (G II.90.8–9). Partly at stake here is the ontological makeup of the complex mode that is a human being, which is constituted by the relation between a determinate mind and a determinate body (2p13). Notice that, in light of the preceding discussion, 2p7s seemingly presents an unwieldy picture. For any two attributes, though identical, do not express, and are not sufficient for conceiving of, each other, because each attribute is a wholly determinate expression of substance, and what is wholly determinate cannot express or be sufficient for conceiving of another wholly determinate thing. This should imply that parallel modes — such as a mode of Extension and its idea in Thought — cannot express, or be sufficient for conceiving of, “one and the same thing”, precisely insofar as each is an expression of a different attribute. Yet that they do so is just what 2p7s asserts. What, then, could be the nature of this “one and the same thing” that it is legitimate, on Spinoza’s picture, for parallel modes of different attributes to correspondingly express?

The key factor required to resolve this difficulty, and to display how the claim of 2p7s conforms to the principle of mode expression just elaborated, is, I suggest, Spinoza’s notion of a finite thing’s “actual essence” (essentia actualis). In 3p7&d, Spinoza links this notion to the pivotal concepts of a mode’s “power” (potentia) or “striving” (conatus), and equates all three notions with a mode’s determinate and proprietary pattern of causal activity (cf. 1p36d). Crucially, the notion of an actual essence is characterized in attribute-neutral terms. So, one theory on which the puzzle of 2p7s is resolved would be that the mind and the body express an attribute-neutral entity: the actual essence of a human being. A “conflation” of wholly distinct, wholly determinate attributes would hence be avoided. What explains Spinoza’s talk of the mind’s and the body’s being “one and the same thing”, on this theory, would be that the actual essence of a human being owes its manner of determinacy precisely to the relationship that exists between a certain mind and a certain body, which themselves constitute separate ways in which such determinacy is situated, and expressed, in different attributes. Thus the actual essence of the human being would consist of that pattern of causal activity existing uniquely in virtue of the relation constituted by its mind’s being the idea of its body (2p13). Though the mind and the body are embedded in separate attribute contexts, the relationship between them is definitive of the characteristic pattern of causal activity that constitutes a human being’s (attribute-neutral) essence: outside of that precise relationship, such activity would conform to no identity.37 Hence, a mode of Extension and the idea of that

36. The hypothesis here laid out concerning the relation between expression and degrees of determinacy receives support from (among other sources) Spinoza’s remark that “[w]hat is common to all things … and is equally in the part and in the whole, does not constitute the essence of any singular thing” (2p37). Spinoza demonstrates this proposition by arguing that if what is common to all things constituted the essence of a singular thing, then what is common to all things could neither be nor be conceived without the thing, which is contradictory. The argument shows clearly that a singular thing could not be sufficient for conceiving of “what is common to all things”, whereas what is common to all things would be sufficient for conceiving of any singular thing. By this reasoning, as well as intuitively, what is common to all things is less determinate than the essence of any singular thing. Our principle of mode expression thus appears genuinely to reflect Spinoza’s view.

37. Note that Spinoza would prescribe any characterization of the nature of the interconnection between mind and body such that it must constitute a human being. This restriction follows from the conceptual and causal separation of the attributes, which entails the inconceivability of inter-attribute explanatory connections. This is of a piece, however, with my view that Spinoza thinks the things in his ontology are basic unities. The human being is basic. A human mind is what together with a human body makes a human being, and conversely. What individuates a mind as a human mind is the role it plays in composing a unified human being, and similarly for a human body. To take another apt cue from Charles (1994, 78), the roles of the components that make up basic unities like a human being in Spinoza’s ontology might be understood in the same terms as those in which Frege understood the roles of subject and predicate in making up a sentence, the basic unit of semantic

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mode are “one and the same thing” just because, absent the characteristic relationship between the former, parallel modes, there would be no “one and the same thing” to speak of.38

We’re supposing, then, that the mind and the body are sufficient for conceiving of this attribute-neutral essence, this characteristic pattern of causal activity, of a human being. And we can now represent what this means in terms of the general principle governing mode expression as well as the analysis of the expression relation advanced at the start of this section. Let $m$ denote a mode of Thought (the mind) and $n$ a mode of Extension (the body). These two modes constitute two expressions, $\phi$ and $\phi'$, of an attribute-neutral essence, $x$, just in case: (i) $x$ is constituted by $m$ and $n$, and (ii) there are two corresponding conceptions, $\psi$ and $\psi'$, such that the parameters for individuating $\psi$ and $\psi'$ correspond to the parameters for individuating $\phi$ and $\phi'$, respectively. $\psi$ and $\psi'$ would be conceptions of the mind and the body as expressions of the actual essence of a human being. That is what it means to say that, in expressing $x$, $\phi$ and $\phi'$ are “sufficient for conceiving of” $x$. Furthermore, modes $m$ and $n$, as independent expressions of $x$, would each be less determinate than $x$, because the latter is jointly, and hence more precisely, determined by the two ways in which it is modified by $m$ and $n$. Nevertheless, $x$ itself would in turn be less determinate than the attributes of Thought and Extension in which mode $m$ (the mind) and $n$ (the body) are situated, since Thought and Extension are the wholly determinate, ineliminable “contexts” in which those modes are situated.39 This analysis faithfully reflects Spinoza’s assertion, parallel

38. For alternative readings of Spinoza’s “one and the same” claim of 2p7s, see Della Rocca 1996, ch. 7, and Marshall 2009. Garrett (forthcoming) critically assesses both interpretations.

39. To be clear: I do not construe $x$ as being itself a kind of “attribute-neutral

with his claim of 2p7s, that “the Mind and the Body are one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of Thought, now under the attribute of Extension” (3p2s/G II.141.23–25). Moreover, that the “one and the same thing” that mind and body express, and are sufficient for conceiving, is the ‘actual essence’, or determinate pattern of causal activity, of the human being accords with Spinoza’s statement in the very same context that “the order of actions and passions of our Body is, by nature, at one with [simul sit natura cum] the order of actions and passions of the Mind” (G II.141.28–29).40

What, now, of Spinoza’s related but distinct claim, that the mind is an expression of the body? Does this proposition answer to the same principle earlier put forward, that a mode that expresses another mode is always less determinate than the mode that’s expressed? It would be conceptions of the mind and the body as expressions of the actual essence of a human being. That is what it means to say that, in expressing $x$, $\phi$ and $\phi'$ are “sufficient for conceiving of” $x$. Furthermore, modes $m$ and $n$, as independent expressions of $x$, would each be less determinate than $x$, because the latter is jointly, and hence more precisely, determined by the two ways in which it is modified by $m$ and $n$. Nevertheless, $x$ itself would in turn be less determinate than the attributes of Thought and Extension in which mode $m$ (the mind) and $n$ (the body) are situated, since Thought and Extension are the wholly determinate, ineliminable “contexts” in which those modes are situated.39 This analysis faithfully reflects Spinoza’s assertion, parallel

theory. Each semantic component, for Frege, played a determinate role, but that role was not characterizable outside the context of the formation of a sentence, and no independent characterization of the relationship between subject and predicate could be relevant, because that interconnection was itself dependent on the unity of the sentence. Thus here, with Spinoza’s account of the human being, we meet with the same account of basic unity as characterized above with respect to substance and its attributes.

40. Cf. also 2p21s and G II.144.2–8. In 3p9s, Spinoza can be seen applying a new label to this attribute-neutral essence (or “power” or “striving”) of a human being, viz. appetite. “When this striving is related only to the Mind, it is called Will; but when it is related to the Mind and Body together, it is called Appetite. This Appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation. And so man is determined to do those things.” (Notice here the echo of Spinoza’s general claim of 1p36&d, on which he bases his definition of a finite thing’s actual essence in 3p7&d, that from each thing in nature certain effects must follow.) A final passage that harmonizes with the interpretation I’ve offered can be found in the explication to the first of Spinoza’s Definitions of the Affects in Ethics part 3: “[By an affection of the human essence we understand any constitution of that essence, whether it is innate [NS: or has come from outside], whether it is conceived through the attribute of Thought alone, or through the attribute of Extension alone, or is referred to both at once” (G II.190.23–27).
is plausible that it does. Spinoza writes specifically that the mind, or an idea of the mind, “indicates or expresses [indicare vel exprimere]” a “constitution” or determination of the *essence* of the body (Ethics part 3, General Definition of the Affects, G II.204.9–10), or simply that it expresses the essence of the body itself (5p22). What is the essence of the body? Spinoza spells this out in a textual interlude on corporeal individuation known as the “Physical Digression” following 2p13. In lemma 5 of this discussion, Spinoza states that the essence of an individual body is constituted by a precise “ratio” (*ratio*) of motion and rest which is sufficient to determine a body as the individual thing that it is as long as the ratio is preserved, regardless of whatever other physical changes (such as loss or acquisition of parts) affect the body in question. This, then, will be the principle that determines the essence of a certain human *body*, an essence that, as we’ve said, will, in addition to the essence of a human’s mind, express a human’s *actual* essence, the pattern of causal activity determined by the relation *between* the respective essences of the human’s body and mind. But the *mind* of the human being, Spinoza goes on to state in the propositions that follow the Physical Digression, represents the essence of the human body in such a way that it perceives the affections which follow from the latter essence in addition to the affections of other bodies which affect its body (see 2pp15–19). Spinoza therefore characterizes the mind as a highly complex, confused, and diffuse representation of that which is in fact decidedly more determinate: a *precise* ratio of motion and rest that underlies the pattern of changes that accrue to the human being’s body in its interaction with other bodies. The human mind, as a complex and perpetually reconfigured idea, expresses, and is sufficient for conceiving of, something that is intrinsically more determinate and precisely delineated. The mind is sufficient for conceiving of this more determinate thing because the parameters for individuating the mind’s content, though comparatively indeterminate, nevertheless correspond to the parameters for individuating the nature of the body it represents: indeed such correspondence is, by hypothesis, what is required for the mind properly to be regarded as an idea of the body.

So we see that implicit in Spinoza’s statements about one mode’s expressing another mode is the principle that the expressing mode must be less determinate than the mode (or attribute) expressed. Herein lies the basis for a set of conditions on mode expression that contrast systematically with the conditions (A)–(C) on attribute expression enumerated above:

(A’) A mode always expresses, and is sufficient for conceiving of, a more determinate entity.

(B’) A mode can express, and be sufficient for conceiving of, another mode.

41. On this picture, the body’s nature itself does not express, and is not sufficient for conceiving of, the way it is affected by other bodies (although Spinoza holds that the essence of the human body does express the absolute essence of the attribute of Extension and, as a consequence, expresses the natures of all modes of Extension qua modes of Extension). Rather, a human body simply is affected by other bodies. By contrast, the mind is precisely the representation of the way other bodies affect its body, which *ipso facto* involves representing the nature of its body (this body, with this nature, being the one that is affected in this way). On this basis we can see that (the nature of) the body is more determinate than (the nature of) the mind, precisely because conceiving of the body cannot be *sufficient* for conceiving of the mind. For the parameters individuating the conception of the mind include the way in which the body is affected by other bodies, which the conception of the body (taken independently of how the body is in fact conceived by the mind) does not itself include.

42. One might not think that the principle applies to the case of a part’s expressing the nature of its whole. Isn’t a part, after all, more determinate than the whole it expresses? Yet the principle applies here too. The parts of a whole themselves are not identical to the organization (the ratio of motion and rest) that makes them the parts of a whole, but they express that organization in the way that they maintain or exhibit it. And now we can apply our test for determining which of these elements is more determinate. It would seem that conceiving of an exact ratio or formula for the configuration of parts cannot be sufficient for conceiving of the way in which the parts actually manifest that configuration. By contrast, if the parts exhibit that configuration, then they *must* be sufficient for conceiving of the latter — that is just what it means for a part to express the nature of its whole. The case of parts’ expressing their wholes thus confirms our general principle that what expresses something else is less determinate than the thing expressed.
(C) A mode expresses, or is sufficient for conceiving of, an attribute or other mode in virtue of its (the first mode’s) status as a modification of something else. A mode cannot express, or be sufficient for conceiving of, another mode which modifies it (the first mode).

All the instances of mode expression explored so far illustrate the first two of these conditions.43 Admittedly, at first glance Spinoza’s claim that the mind expresses the body might appear as a counterexample to (C), since the mind is not a modification of the body. Nevertheless, the fact of the mind’s expressing the body is bound up essentially with the fact that the mind and the body are both modifications of a human being, whose actual essence the mind and the body determine and

43. One caveat worth stating with respect to condition (A) concerns Spinoza’s “infinite modes” (see 1pp21–23). These curiosities play a role in my interpretation in a distinctive way. If a mode is fundamentally a way of being substance, and situated in one of substance’s attributes as a property of the latter, then an infinite mode must be something that is infinitely situated in an attribute, a way of being substance infinitely. An infinite mode is supposed to follow from the absolute nature of an attribute. I’ve said that attributes are wholly determinate entities. Thus, one way to interpret the notion of an infinite mode, i.e. an infinite “way” of being wholly determinate, is to construe it as the completely universal counterpart of something wholly determinate. Something that is completely universal and something that is wholly determinate share the feature that each is sufficient for conceiving of only itself. Neither a wholly determinate attribute nor an utterly universal infinite mode would be sufficient for conceiving any particular less-than-wholly-determinate-but-not-completely-universal finite mode. (As Spinoza states: from a completely universal axiom or principle, “the intellect cannot ascend to singulars, since axioms extend to infinity, and do not determine in the intellect the contemplation of one singular thing rather than another” [TIE §93/G II.34.20–23].) However, an infinite mode will be sufficient for conceiving of the attribute in which it is infinitely situated, precisely because the infinite mode is the universalization of that attribute’s nature. Moreover, because the nature of an infinite mode will be manifested in any finite mode of its attribute, any cognition of a mode of that attribute doesn’t correspond to the particular way that mode is expressed is ipso facto cognition of an infinite mode of the relevant attribute, whose nature is manifested in the particular natures of the finite modes of that attribute. (Garrett [2009] argues that the infinite modes are what Spinoza calls the “formal essences” pervasively determining the particular natures of modes of a given attribute, an interpretation with which I’m inclined to agree.)

**Spinozistic Expression**

express; and they express that actual essence, moreover, in virtue of the connection between them, a connection which, for Spinoza, entails that the nature of the mind is sufficient for conceiving of — expresses — the nature of the body. So it is, after all, due to the mind’s status as a modification of something else — namely, the complex mode that is a human being — that it expresses what it does.

Having delineated the basic conditions on mode expression in this way, we can step back and examine the ground of Spinoza’s ontological distinction between the attributes of substance and its modes. The distinction can be formulated in terms of the relationship we’ve been charting between a thing’s degree of determinacy and the meaning of claims about what such a thing expresses. Viewed along these lines, two general principles appear to underlie the dichotomy Spinoza envisions between attributes and modes:

(I) What is wholly determinate cannot express, or be sufficient for conceiving of, what is less determinate.

(II) What is wholly determinate may only express, and be sufficient for conceiving, itself.

Principle (I) directly explains the character of mode expression — why conditions (A)–(C) obtain. Principle (II), in turn, underwrites the character of attribute expression, and the applicability of conditions (A)–(C). The fundamental distinction between attributes and modes, then, can be characterized as one between the sort of entity that is wholly determinate — that which, in our conceptions of existing objects, expresses, and is sufficient for conceiving, what is ineradicably fundamental in whatever it is we conceive — and what is, in varying degrees, less determinate, the existing objects that express, and are sufficient for conceiving, the ineliminable features of their existence in ways that enable those features to be diversely characterized.44

44. A common trope employed by Spinoza scholars in elucidating the underlying character of his ontology is that of an “aspect”. Pollock (1880) characterizes
Despite this essential difference between attributes and modes brought out by the notion of expression, the expression relation itself, as we can now appreciate, has a perfectly general role to play within Spinoza’s ontology. To express a thing is to exhibit it as a determinate nature, a characteristic unity. This holds true whether that nature is wholly determinate, as in the case of the attributes of substance, or less-than-wholly determinate, as in the case of modes. On the view I’ve presented, what vouches for this relation of expression between one thing and another is not any feature or relation that is specifiable independently of the expression relation itself. Rather, an expression, φ, of x counts as an expression of x simply by virtue of the contribution φ makes to the conception of the unity, or characteristic form of determinacy, of x. This contribution, as I abstractly characterized it above, is established by the “parameters” that individuate φ as an expression of x. As we’ve seen, each attribute expresses substance insofar as it identifies it; an attribute demonstrates the unity of substance. In turn, the expression by a less determinate mode of a more determinate mode (or an attribute) amounts to a distinctive contribution made on the part of the first mode to the conception of the unity of that which it expresses, a contribution which in this case consists in the way in which the first mode expresses, and is sufficient for conceiving of, such unity.

The essential point I wish to underscore is that to say that φ expresses x is to make a constitutive claim about x, to claim that φ is sufficient for conceiving of x. Yet here we reach a critical juncture. For, attributes as aspects or domains, while Melamed (2013) calls the attribute-specific feature of a given mode an aspect. As these examples reveal, the language of “aspects” invites ambiguity. I believe such aspect talk doesn’t distinguish sufficiently clearly between attributes and modes. The most we seem to be able to say about their difference on such interpretations is that modes are “particular aspects” and attributes are “universal aspects”. This (perhaps inadvertently) saddles Spinoza with a naive ontology of particulars “falling under” universals, a type of ontology he demonstrably eschews. By contrast, I take my focus on gradations of determinacy (which are the same as gradations of fundamentality) simultaneously to represent the basis of the distinction between attributes and modes, and to dissolve the familiar host of perplexities stemming from the representation of modes merely as “particular things” that fall under attributes construed as quasi-universals.

at this point, many interpreters of Spinoza would undoubtedly allege that Spinoza himself must balk at my affirmation of the primitiveness of the expression relation, archetypal rationalist that Spinoza is. This Spinoza would surely demand an explanation of what in any circumstance makes it the case that φ is an expression of x. What is it, in other words, that makes an instance of expression an instance of expression, as opposed to an instance of some other type of relation? To say that φ expresses x in virtue of the “contribution” it makes to the conception of the latter’s unity does not appear to differentiate expression from other relations, such as causation and inherence, that serve to individuate their relata in some way. Spinoza, as the emblematic champion of the principle of sufficient reason, would surely disavow the views I’ve ascribed to him on the ground that they would attribute to him a tacit reliance on an illicit quick fix: for it might be hard to see how any conceivable reason for φ’s expressing x on my view doesn’t simply come down to the “correct relata being correctly related”. Such would be the demands and animadversions of a consummate rationalist.

We’re about to see, however, that Spinoza’s concept of expression actually answers to no such demands. This can be appreciated only once the nature of the connection between expression, one the one hand, and causation and inherence, on the other, is properly understood. I fulfill this aim now. Once this task has been accomplished, we’ll be poised to locate the basis of Spinoza’s metaphysics of expression in his distinctive understanding of the nature of metaphysical necessity, and to assess his rationalism from a different angle.

45. To ask such a question is to invoke the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), of which Spinoza is widely thought to be an exemplary, even quintessential, proponent. For an impressive use of the PSR to address a host of interpretive and philosophical issues in Spinoza, see Della Rocca (2008a). By invoking the PSR on Spinoza’s behalf, Della Rocca attempts to demonstrate why Spinoza would have been committed to identifying the relations of conception, causation, and inherence.

46. To borrow a phrase from Charles (1994, 98).
3. Expression, Causation, and Inherence

It’s important to recognize that in giving an account of expression in terms of sufficient conditions on conception, I have not sought to reduce expression to conception. Indeed, my contention is that where any determinate nature is concerned, that nature can be conceived only insofar as it is expressed. It is first and foremost a nature’s being expressed that guarantees the nature’s being able to be conceived in a way corresponding to its expression. But one might think that this cannot be the whole of the matter, that a reductive account of expression can and should be given. Perhaps, on such an account, expression is properly reduced not to conception but to some other relation. Or perhaps it’s the case that expression, along with certain other relations, is reducible to conception. If my account of Spinoza’s expression relation is to be definitive, I must rule out such proposals.

Aside from being, alongside conception, the two most prevalent relations exploited in the Ethics, causation and inherence are also the two relations besides conception with which we find expression explicitly and regularly juxtaposed. Two obvious candidates for a reductive basis for the expression relation are therefore causation and inherence. Thus we would need to determine whether Spinoza maintains either:

(2) If $x$ expresses $y$, then $x$ is caused by $y$

or

(3) If $x$ expresses $y$, then $x$ inheres in $y$.

(4) and (5) can be refuted straightaway as interpretations of Spinoza’s expression relation. There is no clear textual basis for (4), and it manifestly conflicts (e.g.) with Spinoza’s claim that the part expresses the nature of its whole, since a part is not conceived by its whole. (5) has some apparent textual basis in Spinoza’s claim that the mind expresses the body, but is undermined immediately by the observation that all modes in all attributes, not just modes of Thought, express other modes (and their attributes). Hence it seems obvious that the prospects for a reduction of expression to conception, as opposed to an elucidation of expression in terms of thesis (1), are nil.

It is much less obvious, however, that (2) and (3) are illegitimate as explanations of expression. Several commentators have indeed attributed one or the other thesis to Spinoza. Martin Lin, for example, claims that the central idea behind Spinoza’s concept of expression is that one thing expresses another thing’s $F$-ness just in case both the first and the second thing are $F$ and the second thing has caused the first thing to be $F$.49 Francesca di Poppa has also argued that ‘expression’ picks out a causal relationship.50 In turn, Alex Silverman has argued that expression is distinct from both causation and conception and reduces instead to a form of inherence.51

I believe these commentators are misguided, that (2) and (3) are false. It is not only the case that expression cannot be explained by causation or inherence; it’s also true, crucially, that what gets expressed

47. ip25c, stating that modes express God’s attributes, is a corollary to the proposition that God is the efficient cause of all things, suggesting a close link between expression and causation. Moreover, in ip36d, Spinoza cites ip25c in arguing that from each thing some effect must follow. Equally salient is the fact that Spinoza takes ip25c to be derived from id5 and ip15, which state that modes not only are conceived through but also are ‘in’ God, a point which might be taken to furnish evidence for the view that expression is some form of inherence.

48. There is no plausible textual basis for attributing to Spinoza the claims that if $x$ expresses $y$, then $x$ causes $y$, or that if $x$ expresses $y$, then $y$ inheres in $x$.

49. Lin 2006, 343.
51. Silverman 2014, §2.3
when one thing expresses another thing are not necessarily causal facts about that thing or facts about what inheres in that thing. The expression relation tracks something more basic, namely, the determinate nature of a thing, its characteristic, essential unity.52 If one removes the account of what causes a thing to have the properties that it does, or of what properties inhere in it, one is still left with this essential unity. This does not make causal explanations or the enumeration of a thing’s properties irrelevant to any account of the thing. But it does entail a denial of the assumption that what it is for a thing to be what it is is not distinct from what causes it or what properties it has. I’ll substantiate these claims now by showing that, on Spinoza’s view, one thing’s expressing another thing doesn’t imply that the first thing is caused by or inheres in the second thing. In the following section, I’ll point out how facts about what causes a thing or what inheres in it may be seen as orthogonal to facts about what is sufficient for conceiving of that thing.

There are two strong counterexamples to the view that expression implies causation or inherence. The first involves Spinoza’s strictures on causal explanation in light of the conceptual separation of the attributes, and the second appeals to his understanding of causal and mereological dependence. I begin with the first topic.

We’ve dwelled at length on Spinoza’s claim that each attribute is conceived through itself: one attribute cannot be conceived through another. There is, as Michael Della Rocca puts it, a “conceptual barrier” between them53 (to the extent that it is even proper to invoke the notion of there being a fact — or non-fact — obtaining “between” each attribute). This “barrier” is causal in nature as well: each attribute is sufficient for conceiving of one and the same causal order (2p7s), but, in virtue of the fact that each attribute is conceived through itself, it is impossible that any explanation of causal relations within this causal order should involve (in Spinoza’s technical sense of that term) distinct attributes. Spinoza’s “causal barrier” thus stipulates, essentially, that causal relations across attributes are inconceivable. Thus, causation by God, considered as the thinking substance, of a mode of Extension cannot be conceived, or is inexplicable (see 2p6). Similarly, an idea of the mind’s causing a state of the body, or vice versa, is inexplicable (see 2p7s).

In seeming contravention of such restrictions, Spinoza claims, as we have seen, that the mind expresses the body. The correct conclusion to draw from his espousal of this view seems to be, however, that expression is not a causal relation, since to interpret the claim that an idea of the mind expresses the body as meaning that that idea is caused by the body conflicts with the inconceivability of causal connections between modes of different attributes. Here, then, is a simple reason why it would appear that (2) is false.54 Further reason to doubt that expression implies causation in this context, and rather to affirm that expression bears a connection to sufficient conditions on conception, is that Spinoza does not deny that we can conceive of modes of Extension and modes of Thought in parallel terms (2p7s).

There are similarly transparent reasons for seeing Spinoza’s claims about mind-body expression as incompatible with the claim that expression implies inherence. To begin with, the vocabulary of inherence

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52. It would be a mistake to assert that a thing can never express its causality or what it inheres in. Indeed, I believe that just this happens with propría, which are caused by, inhere in, and express the things from which they follow. What I insist upon, however, is that expression is not itself a causal relation (or relation of inherence), and that causal facts and facts about inherence are not the only things that can be expressed.


54. 3p56d might seem to complicate my argument here. Spinoza writes: “[t]he nature of each passion must necessarily be so explained that the nature of the object by which we are affected is expressed. For example, the Joy arising from A involves the nature of the object A, that arising from object B involves the nature of object B, and so these two affects of Joy are by nature different, because they arise from causes of a different nature” (G II.184.30–II.185.2). It may seem as if Spinoza is precisely endorsing (2) here: a passion expresses the nature of the object that causes it. However, a more careful look at the passage indicates that it is the object causing the passion that expresses its nature, on account of which we can understand one affect to be different from another affect, because we can conceive of the distinct natures of the objects that independently cause these affects. It would not follow, on this reading, that if x expresses y, then x is caused by y.
is simply absent from these claims; Spinoza does not say that the mind is “in” the body, or that the mind and the body are “in” one and the same thing”, whereas he does say that the mind expresses the body and that the mind and the body express one and the same thing. More significantly, however, Spinoza is uncontrovertially committed to a further principle that seems clearly to preclude the possibility that expression implies inherence, namely:

(6) If \( x \) inheres in \( y \), then \( x \) is caused by \( y \).

Given (6), Spinoza can’t hold that ideas inhere in the constitution of the body, since then they would be causally produced by the body. Since we have good reason to deny that expression implies causation, we have good reason to deny that expression implies inherence, since inherence implies causation.

There is a broader, and, it will seem to many, highly controversial conclusion to be drawn from these considerations. If it’s true that expression doesn’t imply causation (or inherence), and that expression implies sufficiency for conception, then we have evidence that Spinoza does not maintain:

(7) If \( x \) is conceived through \( y \), then \( x \) is caused by \( y \).

55. Spinoza derives causation from inherence in, e.g., 1p18d. In this context, Spinoza is distinguishing between two types of cause: immanent and transitive. An immanent cause is an efficient cause whose effect inheres in the cause, whereas a transitive cause is an efficient cause whose effect does not inhere in the cause. It is important to see, then, that given this distinction Spinoza cannot plausibly be taken to derive inherence from causation in this context (since inherence accompanies only one of the two types of causation he distinguishes). See Melamed 2013, 96.

56. (7) is attributed to Spinoza far more frequently and prominently than either (2) or (3) by themselves, and indeed has come to be what John Morrison calls “the orthodox view” concerning the link between conception and causation in Spinoza. Advocates of “the orthodox view” include Bennett 1984, Della Rocca 2008a, Garrett 2008, Jarrett 1978, Lin forthcoming, Melamed 2013, Newlands 2010, and Wilson 1991. For a dissenting opinion, see Morrison 2013.

By contrast, Spinoza is committed to the view that causation implies conception. This is apparent from the fourth axiom of part 1 of the Ethics:

1a4: The knowledge of the effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause.

This axiom states in effect that if \( x \) is caused by \( y \), then \( x \) is conceived through \( y \). Thus, on my interpretation of Spinoza’s view of the relation of expression and conception to causation, while every instance of causation implies a conceptual relation between an effect and its cause — in conformity with a straightforward reading of 1a4 — not every conceptual relation is at the same time a causal relation, given the conflict, in light of the causal barrier, between (2) and the claim that the mind expresses the body. If this is right, then the sphere of the causal is a delimitation of, and not coextensive with, the sphere of the conceptual, for Spinoza.

I turn now to my second counterexample to (2) and (3). This example hinges on the relationship between Spinoza’s views on causal and part/whole dependence. Let us start by assuming that

(2) If \( x \) expresses \( y \), then \( x \) is caused by \( y \).

If (2) is correct, we should assume that, for Spinoza, parts are caused by their wholes. Now Spinoza holds that causes are prior, both in nature and in knowledge, to their effects. A text from which we can derive the latter kind of priority is 1a4. That causes are also prior in nature to their effects can be gleaned from (among other texts) 1p36: “Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow.” The facts collected should, then, lead us to the result that, if the part expresses the whole, then the whole causes, and is therefore prior, in nature and in knowledge, to its parts.

Yet this is not the picture of part/whole dependence one finds in
Spinoza. He states in no uncertain terms that parts are prior to their wholes. Thus he writes in Letter 35: “For component parts must be prior in nature and knowledge to what is composed of them” (G IV.181.24–25/C II.27). The view is echoed in the Ethics, where Spinoza writes that it would be absurd to think that “the whole could both be and be conceived without its parts” (1p12d). So maintaining that expression implies causation leads us to expect the opposite conclusion about part/whole priority from the one Spinoza actually accepts. This again seems like a solid reason for rejecting (2).

What about the case of inherence? A quick way to dispense with the view that expression implies inherence is to revert to (6), the claim that inherence implies causation. Given that I have once again cast doubt on the view that expression implies causation, it seems, in light of (6), that we must reject the view that expression implies inherence. A more careful way to arrive at this rejection would be to explore the disanalogy between the relation of a part to its whole and that of a property to that in which it inheres, and thus to show that ‘expression’, in describing the former relationship in addition to being implied by inherence, constitutes a broader notion than is captured by the notion of inherence.

Spinoza presents his understanding of the relationship between parts and wholes in Letter 32:

> By the coherence of parts, then, I understand nothing but that the laws or the nature of the one part adapts itself to the laws or the nature of the other part so that they are opposed to each other as little as possible. Concerning whole and parts, I consider things as parts of some whole to the extent that the nature of the one adapts [accommodal] itself to the nature of the other so that they agree [consentiant] with one another as far as possible. But insofar as they disagree with one another, to that extent each forms in our Mind an idea distinct from the others, and therefore it is considered as a whole and not as a part. (G IV.170a14–171a2/C II.18)

Spinoza here describes what’s sufficient to form a whole, which boils down to a kind of compositional unity. A whole is constituted to the extent that certain parts “agree” (consentiant) with one another. To be a whole of a certain nature just is to be composed of parts in a characteristically unified way. We can now cash out the difference between the notion of a compositional part and that of an inhering property using a device introduced above. We could say that a part is “situated” in its whole, just as a property is “situated” in that in which it inheres. But there is a crucial difference. Suppose that W is a whole, p one of its parts, and p’ just any portion of matter. Recall, next, that E stood for our “Extension context” and e for a mode of extension. We said that, for all E, ‘e is situated in E’ implies redness is situated in E. This is a way of representing Spinoza’s view that redness inheres in e, and both redness and e inhere in Extension. Spinoza would say, for example, that both e and redness “follow from” (sequitur), or are properties of, Extension, because both of the former are ways of being extended. By contrast, Spinoza would not similarly hold that, for all W, ‘p is situated in W’ implies p’ is situated in W. The entailment doesn’t hold because neither p nor p’ follow from the nature of W. The fact that p is situated in W is not a fact about p’s dependence on W, or about p’s way of being W, but rather about p’s contribution to the compositional unity of W.

57. This can be true, moreover, even while such compositional unity is maintained by relations of efficient causation among the parts of a whole. Perplexingly, Grey (2014) seems to think that we must interpret Spinoza as reducing the former condition on wholeness to the latter condition.

58. There is, however, a separate sense in which the part is a way of being the whole, namely, insofar as it affects or modifies the whole. Spinoza writes in one of the passages labeled ‘axiom 1’ in the Physical Digression: ‘All modes by which a body is affected by another body follow both from the nature of the body affected and at the same time from the nature of the affecting body’ (G II.99.9–13). Whereas a part contributes in a distinct way to the compositional unity of the whole (in virtue of its configurational coherence with the other parts), it also plays a more dynamic causal role consisting in sheer structural maintenance, a type of action that could involve ‘constraining’ the
his claim that parts express their wholes in Letter 36. In 1p16d, he states that the more a definition expresses the properties of a given thing, the more it expresses that thing’s reality. In other words, the properties that inhere in a thing, as inferred from that thing’s definition, express the thing’s reality. But these claims about expression, as we’ve just seen, cannot be equivalent: they cannot reduce to the claim that expression implies inherence. For Spinoza, modes can express other modes without inhering in them. So while there is no case of inherence that is not a case of conception and therefore expression,61 there are cases of conception — and hence expression — that do not imply inherence. This prompts us to reject (3) as an interpretation of Spinoza’s view of expression.

4. The Brute Within: Expression, Necessity, and Spinoza’s Rationalism

We’ve now been able to determine what the expression relation is, as well as what it is not. My final task is to establish the claim that Spinoza genuinely endorses the idea of a basic unity or determinate nature that I’ve been associating with his talk of expression all along. This will allow me to connect Spinoza’s claims about expression and the nature of determinacy to what I believe to be their underlying basis and role in his metaphysical system.

Spinoza famously declares: “For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason [causa seu ratio], as much for its existence as for its nonexistence” (1p11d2). This statement is typically read as meaning that there can be no account of a thing’s existing as the thing it is that appeals simply to the thing itself: there must be some independently specifiable feature, a causa seu ratio, that serves to make the thing’s characteristic existence comprehensible. The individuation of a thing


60. Although propria are not part of the essence of a thing, they are regarded as being consequences of the nature of a thing. Spinoza thus claims that once the essence of a circle can be constructed, all of the things that can be known about the circle will be seen to be consequences of (‘deduced from’) that essence, and these things are the circle’s propria (TIE §96). But nowhere in this context does Spinoza discuss any kind of structural connection among a thing’s propria, or even interdependence. Indeed, if one considers a standard Scholastic example of a proprium — risibility in humans — one can infer that the list of propria belonging to most types of things is likely to be disconnected and heterogenous.

61. To see that this is so, just consider the definition of ‘mode’ — “By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived” (1d5) — together with the claim in 1p25c that modes are affections that express God’s attributes. These texts suggest that Spinoza holds that if $x$ inheres in $y$, then $x$ is conceived through/expresses $y$. Note, however, that while Spinoza is willing to derive conception from inher- ence (see e.g. 1p3d and 2p1d), he apparently never derives inherence (universally) from conception (see Melamed 2013, 95).
depends on something other than the thing, some exogenous cause or reason, even if that cause or reason is something attributed to the thing as one of its features. It is, then, only such a cause or reason that can be sufficient for conceiving of the thing, only that which can supply its identity conditions along with the explanation of why it does rather than does not exist (or vice versa). On this reading, 1p11d2 is taken as the quintessential statement of what is widely regarded by Spinoza's commentators as the categorical expression of Spinoza's thoroughgoing rationalism.62

The first thing to observe about this interpretation of 1p11d2 is its apparent incoherence in light of Spinoza's concept of expression. If the individuation of a thing x didn’t appeal to x itself, then x could not be expressed. For any purported expression of x would then really be an expression of something else, say what caused x or what properties x has. But as long as x can’t be expressed — as long as there’s nothing that’s sufficient for conceiving of x itself — x’s properties or what caused x can’t be expressed either, for no longer do these properties and causes adhere to anything that can be conceived.

If this objection is valid, then how could Spinoza have meant what he said in 1p11d2? Spinoza indeed meant what he said in 1p11d2, but what he meant was not what he is usually taken to mean. To grasp his true intentions, it’s necessary to understand what his invocation of causes and reasons amounts to, and how it relates to his views on individuation. The first thing to do in this regard is examine the purpose and character he assigns to definitions of things. It is well known that Spinoza considers proper definitions to specify the cause of what is defined. In the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, Spinoza says that a definition should identify a thing’s “proximate cause”, from which, he claims, all of a thing’s properties may be deduced (TIE §96).

In Letter 60, he writes: “To know which of the many ideas of a thing is sufficient for deducing all its properties [proprietates], I pay attention to one thing only: that the idea or definition [idea, sive definitio] of the thing expresses the efficient cause” (G IV.270.20–23/C II.432–433). One might gather from these formulations that knowing the (independently specifiable) cause of a thing is sufficient to antecedently settle what that thing is, to establish in virtue of what a thing is such as it is. But Spinoza’s further elaborations of the character of definition belie this proposal. In 3p4d, he writes:

[T]he definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing’s essence, or it posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away. So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it.

And in 1p8s2 he states: “[T]he true definition of each thing neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined.”

For Spinoza, as the sentence from 1p8s2 shows, definitions require us to appeal only to the thing defined, whose nature is antecedently assumed, not some independent feature without which we have no purchase on that nature. And as the passage from 3p4d indicates, a definition cites the efficient cause of a thing’s nature, not because that nature is nothing other than the effect of that cause, but because the cause is the one thing specifiable to which the thing’s nature is not opposed. No other cause could be invoked as accounting for a thing’s
characteristic unity, since then we would not be referring to the conditions under which that thing’s nature could be posited. But there is something prior to the notion of what cause is sufficient to enable the positing of a thing’s nature, insofar as it excludes every cause that would “inappropriately” relate to the positing of it. And that is the nature of the thing itself.

Nor is deducing all of a thing’s properties on the basis of an idea of the thing’s cause sufficient to explain in virtue of what the thing is what it is. Spinoza does not believe that to know a thing is to know its properties. The properties of a thing express or exhibit that thing’s determinate nature, or characteristic unity, as that unity is causally maintained. Quite plausibly, what Spinoza means to suggest by proposing that we may be able to deduce all of a thing’s properties from its cause is that understanding what causes maintain a thing’s unity enables us to identify any property that would exhibit such unity. This, moreover, suggests a distinction between the nature of a thing and the causes that maintain it, a view reflected in Spinoza’s definition of an ‘individual’ in the Physical Digression:

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, [i] are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or [ii] if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all compose one body or Individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies. (G II.99.26–II.100.5)

As is often recognized, Spinoza here specifies two different types of causal conditions, what might be called “external” and “internal”

63. “To be called perfect, a definition will have to explain the inmost essence of the thing, and to take care not to use certain propria in its place” (TIE §95/G II.34.29–31).

64. Garber 1995, 57; italics in original.

65. We can represent this fact using the model proposed above for analyzing the expression relation. Let $\phi$ be the expression of $x$’s being caused by $y$. Then there would be a conception, $\psi$, corresponding with $\phi$, whose content we could specify as: is an effect of $y$. Now recall that $\phi$ must be a property of $x$. We see that though $\psi$ corresponds with $\phi$, it will not be a conception of $x$; since all that is contained within its “parameters” is the content is an effect of $y$, which does not include the conception of its being $x$ that was caused by $y$. It appears, then, that facts about a thing’s being externally caused cannot be expressed by them, because no such expression could be sufficient for conceiving of them. Note, however, that there can be expressions of what a thing causes: an expression of what $x$ causes could be represented by the content: is caused by $x$, thus entailing $x$’s inclusion within the parameters of the corresponding conception. This is an illustration that what follows from a thing, its propria, are genuine expressions of it, even while the properties that accrue to a thing insofar as it has been affected by other causes are, to that extent, not expressions of it. And it further links the notion of what may count as an expression of a thing to that thing’s actual essence, which is its specific pattern of causal activity, and constitutes its characteristic striving (conatus).
not only to exist, but to exist in a certain way, and to produce effects in a certain way.” For Spinoza, to exist as determinate is to express the necessity of God's nature. The deeper motivation undergirding Spinoza's metaphysics of expression would therefore appear to be that of revealing the character of metaphysical necessity, and of deriving everything that may be conceived from it. Just as the determinate natures of actually existing individuals are not settled by external factors or principles, so the nature of necessity itself is not the consequence of anything further. A careful look at 1p7 reveals that necessary existence does not accrue to substance in virtue of its essence:

1p7: It pertains [pertainet] to the nature of a substance to exist.

Appearances notwithstanding, this proposition is making a claim not about existence's being a consequence of the nature of substance, but rather about the substance's nature as existence. The giveaway is Spinoza's use of 'pertinet' to relate existence to the nature of substance. In 1p19d, Spinoza explains the terms 'pertinetre', 'exprimere',

66. In TIE §101, Spinoza speaks of the essences of finite things' being determined strictly by 'fixed and eternal' things which are themselves 'singular'. These 'singular' (sc. determinate) things that are fixed and immutable are surely the precursors of Spinoza's attributes. The passage in question is worth quoting in full, both as a vindication of the picture of Spinoza's ontology offered in this paper and as a rebuttal to any reading that sees something extrinsic in the causes or reasons responsible for the essence or characteristic existence of a thing: "The essences of singular, changeable things are not to be drawn from their series, or orders of existing, since it offers us nothing but extrinsic denominations, relations, or at most, circumstances, all of which are far from the inmost essence of things. That essence is to be sought only from the fixed and eternal things, and at the same time from the laws inscribed in these things, and in their true codes, according to which all singular things come to be, and are ordered. Indeed these singular, changeable things depend so intimately, and (so to speak) essentially, on the fixed things that they can neither be nor be conceived without them. So although these fixed and eternal things are singular, nevertheless, because of their presence everywhere, and most extensive power, they will be like universals, or genera of the denominations of singular, changeable things, and the proximate causes of all things" (G II.36.30–II.37.9).

67. "...[B]y God's attributes are to be understood what (by 1d4) expresses [exprimere] an essence of the Divine substance, i.e. what pertains [pertainet] to substance. The attributes themselves, I say, must involve [involvere] itself" (G II.64.15–17).

68. For a textually and historically sensitive account of Spinoza's view of God as self-necessitated existence, see Melamed 2012a.

69. This proposal both is consistent with, and informs a proper understanding of, the distinction Spinoza invokes in multiple places in his writings between a thing's being necessary by reason of its own essence (necessaria ... ratione suae essentiae) and a thing's being necessary by reason of its cause (necessaria ... ratione cause). (See e.g. 1p33s1 and CM I.1.) It may be tempting to see the wording of this distinction as counterindicative of my claim that Spinoza does not see God's existence as 'following from' his essence, that is, that his essence does not embody a self-standing reason for his existence, and hence that his existence, not being grounded in a self-standing reason, is brute. But to the extent that it suggests such an objection, Spinoza's formulation of the former distinction is misleading. In 1p11d2, Spinoza appears to collapse the notions of 'reason' and 'cause' and recasts the distinction as one between a reason or cause of a thing's existence that issues from the nature of a thing, and a reason or cause for a thing's existence that is to be located outside of that thing's nature. Spinoza is here evidently drawing a contrast between the practice of accounting for a thing's existence by appeal to an independently specifiable fact, on the one hand, and on the other hand regarding something as true of a thing merely by appeal to what that thing must, of its own accord, be. The way we know how a thing must be such as it is, presumably, is by acknowledging
the foundation of Spinoza’s metaphysics is the view that the way a thing’s essence is expressed, though sufficient for conceiving of that thing, is not itself dependent on the way that thing is conceived. It rather dictates the way the thing must be conceived, if it is to be truly conceived at all. Hence, neither the necessary existence of a thing, nor the necessarily existing thing’s expression of its essence, issues from an independent reason. A parting comparison between Spinoza and Leibniz on this score should prove telling. For Leibniz, there can be no brute necessities, and that is because there is a “common notion” underlying both necessary and contingent truths. That common notion is how any departure from its being what we conceive it as being would be an impossible departure from actuality (see 1p11d). In the case of God, what is at stake for Spinoza is not the essence of an individual, but of reality itself, and in Spinoza makes clear that reason has no leverage to provide reality with an explanation beyond merely regarding it as necessary (a fact which he contrasts with the way in which singular things are conceived). God, on Spinoza’s view, is what we might (following Kment [2014, 151]) call the ultimate or most fundamental “aspect of reality”, which, combined with other aspects of reality (attributes) together with existing entities (modes), forms the facts of existence. It is concerning such facts that explanations in terms of independently specifiable reasons may be legitimately provided. Hence the claim of 1p7, which we might paraphrase as the proposition that It’s essential to a substance that a substance exists, doesn’t say that a certain relation (being-an-essential-truth-about) holds between the proposition x exists and substance. On this view, 1p7 wouldn’t be about the proposition x exists at all; rather, it is merely about substance, existence, and essentiality. On this interpretation, Spinoza’s notion of substance, his whole monistic ontology, is based on the view that to provide a complete description of reality, we must invoke a primitive concept that does not belong to the traditional partitioning of reality into individuals, properties, and relations, and the configurations they enter into. (For a contemporary treatment of such themes, see Kment 2014, ch. 6; I attempt to puzzle out related issues concerning modality, essence, and conceptual determination in Gartenberg ms.) In making this sweeping claim about Spinoza’s handling of the relationships among necessity, substance, essentiality, and explanation, I don’t pretend to have exhausted its intricacies and implications. For two particularly insightful accounts of Spinoza’s views of necessity and essence, see Carriero 1991 and Garrett 1991.

For Spinoza, by contrast, there is nothing in the notion ‘Adam who sins’ in virtue of which Adam exists. Adam who sins exists because he (the sinning Adam) is a way of being God, which is a way of existing.

So one can … ask whether this proposition is necessary: nothing exists without there being a greater reason for it to exist than for it not to exist. It is certain that there is a connection between subject and predicate in every truth. Therefore, when one says “Adam who sins exists,” it is necessary that there be something in this possible notion, “Adam who sins,” by virtue of which he is said to exist. (“On Contingency”, AG 29)

70. The notion that Adam is logically individuated by the complete concept containing all the predicates that may be ascribed to him is very important to Leibniz, for he sees the possibility of such individual concepts, which rests on the principle that truth consists in the containment of the predicate in the subject, as underlying the possibility of a distinction between necessary and contingent truths (see e.g. ‘Primary Truths’, AG 31). But for Spinoza, as Carriero (1995, 272) puts it, “[w]hat God does is not to exemplify certain essences or patterns, but rather to produce matter in motion, which may or may not sort itself out into certain kinds”. For Spinoza, predicates are fashioned and applied from archetypes that are themselves the confused workmanship of the imagination, and have no necessary bearing on what counts as sufficient to posit an actual given thing. While the predicate ‘sinning’ plays a key role for Leibniz in determining the modal properties of Adam, for Spinoza this predicate is merely something counterfactually connected to certain ideas we have — not uniquely connected to Adam — about what ‘perfection’ constitutes for a certain class of particulars (human beings). It plays no part in explaining Adam’s existence or role in the universe, because it neither grounds nor disrupts the necessary order of things in any way. Spinoza sums up his position nicely in an exchange with Blijenbergh (1665) about Adam’s sinning: “We would not do this [judge Adam to be deprived of a more perfect act] if we had not brought him under such a definition and fictitiously ascribed such a nature to him. But because god does not know things abstractly, and does not make such general definitions, because he does not attribute more essence to things than the divine intellect and power endow them with, and in fact give them, it follows clearly that that privation can be said only in relation to our intellect, not in relation to god’s” (Ep. 19/G IV.91.35–IV.21/C I.359; italics in original).

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necessarily. And this suggests a deeper answer to the question of what Spinoza means when he says that for each thing there must be assigned a reason or cause, either for its existence or for its nonexistence. For Spinoza, causality is simply ordered existence (1p16d&ct, 2p7d&ds). That order is a necessary order (1p29), and identifying the cause of a thing’s (non)existence amounts to nothing more or less than consulting the nature of necessity itself. For Spinoza, “a thing necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents it from existing” (G II.53.11–12). But we do not learn necessary truths from identifying the particular causes of particular things.72 We learn them through an adequate understanding of God’s nature (2p44c2d). In discovering a thing to follow from God’s nature as a matter of necessity, we thereby conceive of the reason or cause of its existence. Whatever does not follow from that nature, whatever is contrary to necessity, does not have a reason or cause for its existence.73 Spinoza’s stipulation that there may be a reason or cause that “prevents” a thing from existing necessarily is somewhat elliptical. Such a reason or cause does not prevent a thing’s existence in the face of necessity (since then its nonexistence would be contingent). Rather, any cause or reason for a thing’s necessarily not existing — barring sheer impossibility — is in fact no substantive cause

72. In fact, it’s impossible to have knowledge of any particular thing that is not knowledge of the necessity of the divine nature (5p24, 1p25c), so no necessary truths could obtain “strictly” between finite things.

73. Lest this seem to trivialize knowledge by presuming that what is sufficient for the latter is the representation of what is already known as necessary, consider that the significance of Spinoza’s position lies chiefly in the vast number of things it potentially excludes from bona fide knowledge on account of its inability to be conceived as necessary in the relevant way. Spinoza would include in the category of “nonexistent” things the testimony of others, discrete episodes of “random experience”, and such things as so-called nominal essences and all other abstracta, since none of these can be seen on his view to be genuine ways of being a particular thing, and so cannot be seen to be properly “situated” in one of God’s attributes. How then do we know which of our conceptions of a thing appropriately correspond to the ways its nature is necessarily expressed? This is a question about the epistemology, not the metaphysics, of expression. An adequate answer to this question would have to be based on a proper understanding of Spinoza’s doctrine of true ideas. That subject, however, extends beyond the themes discussed in this essay.

or reason at all: the nonexistent thing does not exist because it is not a necessary thing, or is not such that its existence follows necessarily from the latter. There is no context outside of necessity itself for adjudicating whether a thing exists necessarily or not.74

Thus, to say that Adam is a way of existing necessarily (and that this in fact is all there is to the latter) is not to give an independent reason why Adam exists necessarily, whether located in the notion of ‘Adam’ or outside it. Adam’s way of existing consists in the way Adam’s nature is expressed, and it is only in virtue of his being expressed that there can be anything sufficient for conceiving of Adam — and of how Adam is an expression of God’s essence. For Spinoza, reason’s purpose emerges solely from, and is fulfilled exclusively by, its act of conceiving of Adam in the latter way. It is only in the fulfillment of this office that reason serves to make the nature of things intelligible. And hence Spinoza can separate out this impartial function of reason from its proverbial status as a mode of our thinking and a servant of our explanatory, which is to say proprietary, aims: “For it is one thing to inquire into the nature of things, and another to inquire into the modes by which things are perceived by us” (CM I.1/G I.235.34–35/CI.302).75

74. Spinoza’s conception of nature is thus the conception — to appropriate a Kantian idiom — of the thoroughgoing determination of necessary existence. Part of Kant’s own critical enterprise will involve attempting to subvert this very conception by pointing out that the notion of an absolutely infinite being “does not signify the objective relation of an actual object to other things, but only that of an idea to concepts, and as to the existence of a being of such preeminent excellence it leaves us in complete ignorance’ (Critique of Pure Reason, A579/B607 [Kant 1998, 557; bold font in original]).

75. To be sure, knowledge of the nature of things is for Spinoza every bit as proprietary an aim for us as sorting out how things can be made intelligible to us as finite, durational beings who engage in ratiocination, argumentation, and the search for explanations. However, in Spinoza’s conception, “explanation” of the sort he is supposed by many to prize most highly (causal knowledge, knowledge of the principles of individuation) is in fact subordinated by him to a more immediate, rarefied knowledge of the essence of things. Cf. TLE §37: “…[T]he Method [of finding truth] must speak about Reasoning, or about the intellection; i.e., Method is not the reasoning itself by which we understand the causes of things, much less the understanding of the causes of things; it is understanding what a true idea is by distinguishing it from the rest of our perceptions....”
So, is Spinoza, after all, a rationalist? Given his deepest philosophical impulses, I believe he must be. But there is more than one possible way to connect these impulses to the notion of rationalism. If my understanding of the nature of that connection is correct, Spinoza’s rationalism consists not in the appointing of reason to the task of determining what is fundamentally real, but in the authentication of reason’s employment in the regard of what is really fundamental.

References


76. On my understanding, Spinoza believes there is a simple, fundamental truth, discoverable by reason (though not grounded in a reason), in relation to which all other truths are derivative. This would be a naked characterization of Spinoza’s assumption about what sort of thing it is philosophy’s business to seek. And it can be called a ‘rationalist’ position inasmuch as its approach of starting where knowledge bottoms out contrasts with the piecemeal, additive, and often confessedly circumscribed approach to knowledge that pro-verbially characterizes its empiricist counterpart.

77. I dedicate this paper to the memory of Allan Sisyphus Gartenberg, whose love for philosophy was second only to his love for his family. Earlier versions of the paper were presented to the Society for Early Modern Philosophy at Yale and at the 2016 Harvard-Yale History of Philosophy Graduate Conference. I’m grateful to audience members at these meetings for their insightful comments. The paper has benefitted from the generous feedback of Julia Borchering, Clifford Cohen, Michael Della Rocca, Raffi Kruit-Landau, Mogens Lærke, Matt Leisinger, Daniel Moerner, John Morrison, Samuel Newlands, Alex Silverman, Zoltán Szabó, Ken Winkler, and the anonymous referees for Philosophers’ Imprint. My foremost debt is to Yitzhak Melamed, whose teaching inspired the idea for this paper, and whose guidance helped see it through several iterations. I feel impelled to acknowledge the personal dimension of this debt as well. Throughout my years as Yitzhak’s student, I’ve been nourished by his affirming mentorship, exemplary scholarship, broad-minded enthusiasm for philosophy, and down-to-earth Mentshlekhkeyt. I look forward to enriching our partnership in the years to come.

Spinozistic Expression

Gartenberg, Zachary Micah. ms. “Noumenal Essences”.
Morrison, John. ms-a. “Two Puzzles about Thought and Identity in Spinoza”.
—. ms-b. “Spinoza on Mind, Body, and Numerical Identity”.