

Spinoza on substance as cause

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Dissertation abstract

The dissertation is an attempt to begin a fundamental reconstruction of Spinoza's *causal metaphysics*, one that undermines some of the basic assumptions of contemporary Spinoza scholarship. In particular, it contests the widespread interpretative premise that we ought to approach Spinoza's philosophy through the prism of the influence on his thought of the Early Modern scientific revolution, and thus regard his metaphysics as basically a generalization of Cartesian *physics*. This interpretative approach has two principal consequences, both of which are regarded as self-evidently correct, yet both of which, I argue, are in fact profound distortions of Spinoza's most basic views. The first is the rampant tendency to construe Spinoza's notion of "cause" as the "blind" mechanistic efficient cause. The second is to insist that his metaphysics must have ontological room for *finite* individuals.

The fundamental building blocks of my reconstruction of Spinoza's causal metaphysics are concepts central to Spinoza's metaphysics: concepts of substance, essence, cause, God, mode, and finitude. These concepts form the groundwork that constrains – and indeed in significant manner *dictates* – the entirety of Spinoza's philosophical views.

The dissertation's aim is to provide a more adequate interpretation of these key concepts than is currently on offer, by means of inquiring into Spinoza's understanding of the nature of *substance as cause* in particular. Given that for Spinoza the nature of "causes" proves to be inseparable from the nature of "essences", and given his basic metaphysical theses – such as "substance monism" (the doctrine that there is only one causally and

conceptually independent entity); his identification of this substance with “God”; and reduction of all other entities to the status of divine properties or “modes” – clarifying the nature of substantial causality allows me to shed light on all of the aforementioned fundamental concepts of Spinoza’s metaphysics.

This general problem of the nature of substantial causality in Spinoza’s metaphysics can be conveniently separated into two distinct questions. First, we can ask about the *mode* of causality exhibited by substance – that is, *how* this substance causes, or what kind of cause is Spinoza’s God? Secondly, we can ask about *that which* the divine substance generates, i.e. both about the *nature of its effects*, and about the *reasons* why substance causes anything at all. The structure of the dissertation is thus divided along the lines of these two sub-questions. The first two Chapters examine the *mode* of substantial causality. From a historical point of view, to pose this question is to ask where precisely Spinoza’s causal metaphysics falls within the context of the notorious Early Modern rejection of the Aristotelian four-part model of causal explanations. On this point, the principal thesis of the dissertation is that contrary to the contemporary consensus among scholars, according to which Spinoza embraces first and foremost mechanistic or “blind” *efficient* causes, and makes room for selected *final* causes, Spinoza in fact endorses a *formal* cause model of causation, and unequivocally eliminates *all* final causes from his metaphysics.

Having clarified the mode of substantial causality, the second part of the dissertation addresses the question of what entities a substance that operates through this kind of causality causes and why. Here my contention is again that we must reject the now-prevalent understanding of this aspect of Spinoza’s metaphysical picture, and recognize that in Spinoza’s eyes a true account of Nature has no room for any *finite* individuals, i.e. that substance cannot be said to be the cause of any finite entities.