

Inherence and the Immanent Cause in Spinoza

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Abstract

This paper shows that for Spinoza an immanent cause [*causa immanens*] is a species of the Aristotelian efficient cause that assimilates the latter with inherence. I also discuss the relationship between inherence and the material cause and suggest an explanation for Spinoza's avoidance of the terminology of material cause.

In his groundbreaking work of 1969, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation*, Edwin Curley attacked the traditional understanding of the substance-mode relation in Spinoza, according to which Spinozistic modes inhere in their substance. Curley argued that such an interpretation ascribes to Spinoza the committing of an obvious category mistake.

Spinoza's modes are, *prima facie*, of the wrong logical type to be related to substance in the same way Descartes' modes are related to the substance, for they are particular *things* (E1p25c), *not qualities*. And *it is difficult to know what it would mean to say that particular things inhere in substance*. When qualities are said to inhere in substance, this may be viewed as a way of saying that they are predicated of it. What it would mean to say that one thing is predicated of another is a mystery that needs solving.¹

In addition to putting forward the "wrong logical type" argument (and three other arguments cited from Bayle's 'Spinoza' entry), Curley suggests that to view particular things as God's properties would result in a certain odd conclusion, given Spinoza's view of God as the cause of all things (E1p16c1²). If a mode is a property of God and God is the cause of all modes, then God turns out to be the cause of his own properties. Yet, asks Curley, "how can a subject cause itself to have the properties it has? How can the relation of inherence which a property has to its subject be anything like the relation an effect has to its cause?"³ While I do not agree with Curley's criticism and his alternative interpretation,⁴ I do think he raises several crucial and very interesting points. Particularly, I think he is right in pointing out that the relation between inherence and causation in Spinoza deserves

much more attention and scrutiny than that which has so far been assigned to it. One can, of course, respond to Curley's last question by claiming that there is not much of a mystery in a subject's ability to cause itself to have the properties it has. I can press my nose upwards, and hence cause a change in one of my properties.⁵ Yet, if I understand Curley's point correctly, the issue is not the possibility of some *coincidental* overlap between the two relations, but rather what appears to be a systematic overlap of the substance-mode relation and (a certain type of) causality in Spinoza. Obviously, one can claim that God is both the subject of inherence of all modes and the cause of all modes, and yet that the two roles are completely separate.⁶ Though such a coincidence may seem atypical for a strict rationalist like Spinoza (insofar as this alleged coincidence demands an explanation), it should not be rejected outright.

Don Garrett suggests (rightly, I believe), that "what Spinoza calls 'immanent causation' implies inherence, but what he called 'transient causation' does not."⁷ Thus, according to Garrett, the answer to Curley's question is rather simple. *Causa immanens* is a notion that unifies inherence and causation. Garrett's view is supported by the *Ethics*' official distinction between immanent and transitive [*transiens*] cause.⁸

E1P18: God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things.

Dem.: Everything that is, is in God, and must be conceived through God (by P15), and so (by P16C1) God is the cause of [NS: all] things, which are in him. That is the first [thing to be proven]. And then outside God there can be no substance (by P14), i.e. (by D3), thing which is in itself outside God. That was the second. God, therefore, is the immanent, not the transitive cause of all things. q.e.d.

"The first thing to be proven" - i.e., that God is the immanent cause of all things - relies on two previous claims: that all things are (i.e., inhere) in God (E1p15), and that God is the efficient cause of all things (E1p16c1). Hence, *causa immanens* seems to be the merging of *inherence* and *efficient causation*.⁹ Similarly, in the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza presents an eight-fold taxonomy of the *kinds of efficient cause* that were common in his day.¹⁰ One of these is the distinction between immanent and transitive causes.¹¹ Hence, there seems to be little doubt that *causa immanens* is just a *species of efficient cause*.

Here, however, we reach a certain perplexity. As John Carriero has pointed out, the inherence of modes (or accidents) in their subject was traditionally allied with *material* causation.¹² Suarez, for example, suggests that "God supplies

INHERENCE AND IMMANENT CAUSE IN SPINOZA

the dependence of an accident on a subject, even though [the dependence of an accident on a subject] *is in the genus of material cause.*"¹³ Indeed, some of Spinoza's readers in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ascribed to him the notoriously heretical view of *God as the material cause of the world* precisely because Spinoza's God is the subject of inherence of all things. Bayle writes that "according to Spinoza, creatures are in God either as an effect in its material cause, or [ou] as an accident in its subject of inhesion, or [ou] as the form of a candle stick is in the pewter of which it is composed."¹⁴ Similarly, the less known but not less fascinating philosopher, Salomon Maimon (1753-1800) suggested that Spinoza, like the Kabbalists, made God the material cause of all things insofar as Spinoza considered God "the ultimate subject...of all things."¹⁵ Interestingly, we can find *some* traces of this view in Spinoza. In the early *Short Treatise* Spinoza suggests that modes relate to their attributes as their genera.¹⁶ Now, for Aristotle, "the genus is *the matter* of that of which it is called the genus" (Met. 1058a22-3),¹⁷ and the same view seems to be widely held in the early modern period.¹⁸ Yet, Spinoza *never* claims that the substance (or the attributes) is the material cause (or the matter) of the modes. In fact, Spinoza never explicitly uses the terminology of material cause [*causa materialis*].¹⁹

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In assimilating inherence with *efficient* causation - through the notion of the immanent cause - Spinoza seems to be breaking with the Aristotelian tradition. The Aristotelians considered efficient and final causes as *external* causes, while the material and formal causes were *internal* causes.²⁰ In contrast, Spinoza claims, "I take it that an efficient cause can be internal as well as external" (Ep. 60).²¹ Spinoza's reasons for this expansion of the notion of efficient causality are not quite clear. One may think that this expansion was motivated by the need to make God the efficient cause of the modes (which are *internal* to God). Yet, as Carriero points out, Aquinas and other medieval Aristotelians considered substance to be "sufficiently external to its accidents to support the intelligibility of [the substance's] efficiently causing an accident."²² Spinoza might have rejected such a weak criterion of externality, and as a result had to allow efficient causality to be internal.

One may also wonder why Spinoza avoided the notion of material causality, which was traditionally associated with inherence. I suspect that for Spinoza the material causality terminology was too closely related to the Aristotelian

notion of prime matter, a notion which Spinoza ridiculed as a fictional and self-contradictory “extended thing without extension” (CM II, xiii I/280/19&32. Cf. CM II, xi I/270/13).²³ Had Spinoza claimed that God is the material cause of the world, one could understand this claim as making God a bare and formless substratum (like prime matter). This would have been a deep misunderstanding of Spinoza’s views. Indeed such an interpretation of Spinoza’s God as free from any determination was widely accepted among the German Idealists, but as far as I can see it is not consistent with his commitment to universal intelligibility, stated boldly in E1a2.²⁴

Conclusion

Spinoza’s notion of immanent cause falls under the genus of efficient causality, and assimilates the latter with inherence. It is important to note that efficient causality *does not have to be accompanied by inherence*, as Spinoza recognizes a different kind of efficient causality - transitive cause - where the effect is *not* in the cause (or at least not fully in the cause²⁵). Hence, efficient causality is not necessarily linked with inherence. Let us now consider the converse. Does inherence imply efficient causation? It depends on the nature of the properties that inhere in the subject. I have argued elsewhere that a comparison between sections 95-96 of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and E1p16d shows that Spinoza considered modes to be *propria* that *follow* from the essence of the substance.²⁶ In E1p16c1 Spinoza derives from this that God is the efficient cause of the modes.²⁷ It would seem therefore that for Spinoza the relation of “*x* follows from *y*” entails that *y* is the efficient cause of *x*. We may conclude that for any thing *x*, *x*’s *propria* are efficiently caused by *x*’s essence. Yet, apart from God, all other things have properties which do not follow *only* from their essence (but rather from their essence in conjunction with external causes). The latter properties, though they inhere in their subject, ²⁸ are only partially caused by their subject’s essence.²⁹ Hence, it seems that inherence entails at least partial efficient causation.

Returning now to Curley’s original question we bring our discussion to a close by suggesting that in the case of *immanent causation* the relation of inherence *overlaps* with the relation of cause and effect.³⁰

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INHERENCE AND IMMANENT CAUSE IN SPINOZA

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INHERENCE AND IMMANENT CAUSE IN SPINOZA

Notes

¹ *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, 18 (Italics mine). Cf. Curley's *Behind the Geometrical Method*, 31. I am indebted to Michael Della Rocca and Nasser Zakariya for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. I would also like to thank the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture which supported me while I was writing my dissertation that contained an earlier version of this article.

² Unless otherwise marked, all references to the *Ethics* and the early works of Spinoza are to Curley's translation. I use the abbreviation **KV** for Spinoza's *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being* [*Korte Verhandeling van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand*]. Passages from the *Ethics* will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: **a**(-xiom), **c**(-orollary), **p**(-roposition), **s**(-cholium) and **app**(-endix); '**d**' stands for either 'definition' (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or 'demonstration' (in all other cases). Hence, E1d3 is the third definition of part 1 and E1p16d is the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1.

³ Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, 36.

⁴ I argue against Curley's interpretation and for the traditional understanding of the substance-mode relation, in a recent paper titled "Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance: The Substance-Mode Relation as a Relation of Inherence and Predication".

⁵ In "On Bennett's Interpretation" Curley presents the same question in a slightly different manner. "[I]f a substance is by definition something causally self-sufficient, and a mode is, by definition, something causally dependent on something else, ultimately on the substance, we need some explanation of just how it is that a substance is a cause of its mode....One thing every interpreter of Spinoza agrees on is that Spinoza connects the causal relation with the relation of logical consequence, and it is not easy to see how the properties of a thing could be thought to follow from the thing itself, conceived simply as a subject of predication" (48). This stronger version of the question ("how the properties of a thing could be thought to follow from the thing itself, conceived simply as a subject of predication") would be difficult to answer were Spinoza's substance a formless, bare substratum. Fortunately, Spinoza's substance is not of such a nature; it cannot be detached from its attributes insofar as this will make the substance inconceivable, while Spinoza clearly asserts that everything is conceivable, or intelligible (E1a2).

⁶ Carriero seems inclined toward this view. See his “Mode and Substance in Spinoza,” 260.

⁷ Don Garrett, “Spinoza’s *Conatus* argument,” 157 n. 31.

⁸ The Latin ‘*causa transiens*’ is rendered by Curley as ‘transitive cause.’ Garrett differs slightly in translating it as ‘transient cause.’

⁹ Similarly, at the end of Letter 12 we find Spinoza talking about things which are infinite “by the force of the cause in which they inhere [*inhaerent*]” (IV/61/2-3), making the same assimilation of inherence and causation.

¹⁰ KV, I, iii [I/35/20]. The distinction appears in Burgersdijck’s popular manual, *Institutionum Logicarum*. See *Spinoza’s Short Treatise*, pp. 190-3. The Port-Royal Logic (III, 18) presents a taxonomy of efficient causes that partly overlaps with that of Burgersdijck’s, though unlike the latter, it does not include the distinction between transitive and immanent causes. According to Robert Wisnovsky’s persuasive article (“Avicenna’s Distinction between Immanent and Transcendent Causes”), the distinction between immanent and transcendent kinds of efficient cause appears already in Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals* (724a31-35) and variations of this distinction (though not always as a distinction *internal* to the category of efficient cause) were widely discussed among the Neo-Platonic commentators. This would lead us to a wider review of the history of the distinction, and particularly to a study of Burgersdijck’s sources.

¹¹ KV I, iii (I/35/20).

¹² Carriero, “Mode and Substance in Spinoza”, pp. 254 and 260.

¹³ Suarez, *On the Formal Cause of Substance - Metaphysical Disputation XV*, p. 119 (my emphasis). For a discussion of a similar view in Thomas, see Carriero (“Mode and substance”, p. 254 n. 18 and p. 260) and John F. Wippel (“[Aquinas’s] Metaphysics,” p. 109).

¹⁴ Bayle, *Dictionary* 336 (Remark DD)| *Dictionnaire*, V 225. In Remark A to the Spinoza entry, Bayle argues that Spinoza’s view of God as the subject of inherence of all things is not new, and traces it back to several philosophers who considered God ‘the matter’ of all things. Among these philosophers, Bayle mentions Alexander the Epicurean, Strato the disciple of Theophrastus, and David of Dinant. Giordano Bruno’s absence from this glorious list of heretics is salient. (Remark A is not translated in Popkin’s selection).

¹⁵ Maimon, *Lebensgeschichte*, 84| *Autobiography*, 105. Maimon himself endorsed the view of God as the material cause of the world in his early Kabbalistic manuscripts, as well as in his commentary on Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*. See

my article, “Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism in German Idealism,” 79-88. In 1676, Leibniz also mentions the view of “those who believed that God himself is the matter of all things” (A VI, iii, 392, translated and quoted in Adams, *Leibniz*, 124). Whether Leibniz had Spinoza in mind, or other philosophers (perhaps the Stoics), is hard to tell. Among modern scholars, Charles Jarrett comes very close to the view of Spinoza’s God as a material cause. Jarrett claims that “there is no doubt...that Spinoza’s unique substance is matter.” Jarrett speculates that perhaps “thoughts are composed of mental stuff, or energy, in the same way that physical objects are composed of matter” (“Substance and Mode,” 102).

¹⁶ In the context of his discussion of definitions Spinoza distinguishes between the definition of attributes and the definition “of those things which do not exist through themselves, but only through the attributes of which they are modes, and through which, *as their genus*, they must be understood” (KV I, viii I/47/4-6. Italics mine).

¹⁷ Emphasis mine. Similarly, see Porphyry’s *Isagoge* 15/7: “[t]he genus is like matter, but the difference like form.” Cf. *Ibid.*, 11/15-17.

¹⁸ See Goclenius, *Lexicon Philosophicum*, 669 (“Analogice Materia est Genus Logicum”). Similarly, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant notes, “The logicians formerly called the universal the matter, but the specific difference the form” (A266/B322).

¹⁹ In the *Cogitata Metaphysica* (II, vii), Spinoza contrasts a builder who “is forced to seek suitable material outside himself” with God, who “sought no matter outside himself” since “both the essence and the existence of things have been made from his intellect *or will*” (I/262/13-5). This last claim can be read as making God’s intellect or will the matter from which the world was created. Arnauld and Nicole’s contemporary definition of ‘material cause’ takes it to be “that *out of which* things are formed” (*Logic or the Art of Thinking*, III, 18). This seems to be Spinoza’s closest approximation of the view of God as the material cause of the world.

²⁰ See, for example, Suarez, *On Efficient Causality - Metaphysical Disputation* 17, 3.

²¹ Spinoza, *Complete Works*, translated by S. Shirley, p. 913.

²² See Carriero, “Mode and Substance in Spinoza,” p. 259-60.

²³ Alternatively, one may suggest that were Spinoza to claim that God is the material cause of the world he would deprive God of any activity since matter was traditionally conceived as passive. Yet, when we look carefully at sixteenth century discussions of matter, we find more and more activity ascribed to it. This is so

not only in the works of a heretic like Bruno (who makes matter divine and the generator of forms), but even in mainstream works, such as Suarez's. For Bruno's discussion of matter, see the fourth dialogue of *Cause, Principle and Unity*. For Suarez on matter's causal powers and influence, see *On the Formal Cause of Substance*, pp. 54-5.

²⁴ "What cannot be conceived through another, must be conceived through itself." E1a2 entails that everything is conceived, and as Della Rocca points out (*Representation*, 9-13 and 173n10), at least part of what it is to conceive something is to render it intelligible.

²⁵ In the *Short Treatise* Spinoza seems to take the distinction between immanent and transient causes to be one of degree (see KV, II, xxvi [I/111/29-30]: "...they are nearest to internal effects.").

²⁶ See my "Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance: The Substance-Mode Relation as a Relation of Inherence and Predication". This point was made first by Don Garrett in "Spinoza's Necessitarianism" and "Spinoza's *conatus* Argument", p. 156-7, n. 24.

²⁷ "E1p16: From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect).

E1p16c1: From this it follows that God is the efficient cause of all things which can fall under an infinite intellect."

²⁸ The question remains, do these properties inhere *fully*, or only *partially*, in their subject? If the latter, does this mean that externally caused properties inhere partly in their subject, and partly in their external cause? I have not yet come to a firm conclusion with regard to these issues.

²⁹ See E3d2, where Spinoza states that even when we are acted on, our nature is still a partial cause.

³⁰ Indeed, Spinoza's God must be an immanent, and not transitive, cause, "since he does everything in himself, and not outside himself because outside him there is nothing" KV I, iii [I/35/20].