

## 17. SPINOZA'S TEMPORAL ARGUMENT FOR ACTUALISM

HAROLD ZELLNER

Kent State University

**ABSTRACT.** In three places Spinoza presents an argument from (a) determinism and (b) God's "eternity" to (c) "actualism", i.e., the doctrine that this is (in some sense) the only possible world. That he does so shows that he distinguishes (a) from (c), which he has been thought to conflate. On one reading of 'eternal', he is claiming that an infinite past entails no other world was a "real" possibility. As might be expected, the argument is a failure, but it may help explain why Spinoza holds that there are no contingencies.

**S**pinoza's temporal argument for actualism is an attempt to get from determinism, together with the claim that "God" is eternal, to the conclusion that this is the only possible world. As might be expected the argument is not persuasive, but it does seem to show Spinoza was clear about a distinction he has often been thought to ignore. Moreover, it may well help us understand Spinoza's attitude towards contingencies.

A version of the argument appears in the *Ethics* at Part I, P33 Scholium 2:

. . . even if it is conceded that will pertains to God's essence, it still follows from his perfection that things could have been created by God in no other way or order. It will be easy to show this if we consider, first, what they themselves concede, viz., that it depends on God's decree and will alone that each thing is what it is. For otherwise God would not be the cause of all things. Next, that all God's decrees have been established by God himself from all eternity. For otherwise he would be convicted of imperfection and inconstancy. But since in eternity there is neither when, nor before, nor after, it follows, from God's perfection alone, that he can never decree anything different, and never could have, or that God was not before his decrees, and cannot be without them.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that this is supposed to be an *ad hominem* argument against traditional theism, and thus cannot be safely used as a guide to Spinoza's own views. Some commentators explain the passage in terms of the Aristotelian identification of the omnitemporal with the necessary, and this is not an implausible reading of the text.<sup>2</sup> However, there is a similar argument in the *Short Treatise* which suggests a much more interesting and Spinozistic line of thought.

But now the dispute arises again as to whether God can omit doing everything that is in his Idea and that consequently he can produce perfectly? and whether such an omission is a perfection in him? We say that since everything that happens is done by God, it must be predetermined by him. Otherwise he would be changeable, and that would be a great imperfection in him. And since this predetermination by him must be from eternity, and since in eternity there is neither before nor after, it follows inevitably from this that God was not able before to predetermine things in a way different from that in which they are now determined from eternity, and that before or without these determinations God could not have been.<sup>3</sup>

A quick check of the text will show that in this case Spinoza is speaking for himself, rather than drawing conclusions from someone else's views. This strongly suggests the argument in the *Ethics* does not turn primarily on the views of medieval Aristotelians, though of course Spinoza thinks he and his opponent have enough in common that he too should accept the Spinozistic conclusion. What will the argument look like purely from Spinoza's point of view?

Before turning to that question, it is worth making a point based on the general structure of these passages. Using 'actualism' to mean the (obscure) doctrine that this is the only possible world, the arguments have the form:

Determinism

+

"Eternity"

So

Actualism.

Here, at least, Spinoza clearly distinguishes between determinism and actualism, a distinction some scholars have thought Spinoza was muddled about.<sup>4</sup> If Spinoza conflated the first item with the third, he would not have thought to bring in the second. Of course, it is happy that one of the passages is from the early *Short Treatise*; if he had the distinction earlier on, presumably he had it later.

There has been considerable debate about what Spinoza means by 'eternity'.<sup>5</sup> There is a tradition according to which temporal predicates are not ascribable to God, and in that sense he is not supposed to be "in" time. On this interpretation 'eternal' would mean 'timeless'. The other school of thought is that an "eternal" object would

have infinite durations, together with necessary existence. This would have it that, when Spinoza says that there is no "before or after" in eternity, what he means is that, since an eternal thing exists at all times, there are no times before which it existed or after which it does not exist. I am going to assume that this latter view is correct, though I am not going to argue for that here. In the present case the issue is especially complicated, since in one passage Spinoza is not speaking wholly for himself, while the other quote is from an early work where his views may not be the same as they are in the *Ethics*. In any case the most interesting argument uses 'eternal' in the way I suggest.

Everybody knows that Spinoza is a pantheist, so when he says God is eternal what he must mean is the universe (or some aspect of it sufficient to cause the rest) is eternal. Though Spinoza explains eternity in terms of necessary existence, a careful reading of the texts shows this is not what is operative in the move to actualism. It is something about God's filling all times that is supposed to bring that off (the "God was not able before . . ." in the *Short Treatise* argument). I would suggest the following as a reasonable reconstruction of the argument:

1. (Eternity Premiss) The actual world exists at all times throughout an infinite past and future.
2. (Determinism Premiss) All the facts obtaining at a time in the actual world can be causally explained by the facts at earlier times together with the laws of nature.
3. If a presently non-actual world could have been actual then there is a time at which God could have caused such a world to exist. (Assumed)
4. If there is a time at which God could have caused a presently non-actual world to exist then that time was before a time at which the presently actual world began to exist. (From the Determinism Premiss)
5. If 1., then it is not the case that there is a time before a time at which the presently actual world began to exist (since there is no time at which it began to exist).
6. It is not the case that there is a time before a time at which the presently actual world began to exist. (1,5)
7. It is not the case that there is a time at which God could have caused a presently non-actual world to exist. (4,6)
8. It is not the case that a presently non-actual world could have been actual. (From 3,7)

Several unconnected comments are in order before we turn to what all this means and why Spinoza might have found this convincing. I should perhaps hasten to point out that I am not claiming the above is clear or coherent, must less true; at the moment I am interested in what seems to be behind a text. Using the possible worlds terminology is not entirely happy, but it is the easiest and most familiar way of restating the argument. The price is that as in so many such discussions, God and a temporal metric are being thought of as "outside" possible worlds in a peculiar way. I have lumped together in 1. the infinite duration claim with the idea that the universe exists at all times; these are really distinct, but I think Spinoza would conflate them, or at least infer the latter from the former.<sup>6</sup> In the above reconstruction it is the actual world, rather than God, which is "eternal", but that should be all right on a Spinozistic reading of the texts. It will be remembered Spinoza sometimes speaks of God as the one substance and the attributes as distinct from the system of modes, so having some sort of distinction between the world and God does not necessarily conflict with the pantheism. There is a large amount of metaphysical stuffing in this argument that will fall outside the scope of this paper, e.g., what he means by 'God' and 'God's causality', etc. It is 4. that is distinctive, that is, the claim that God's causing a different world would have had to occur before the origin of whatever world actually obtains. What this comes to is that only a world with a finite history would have had alternatives; since he thinks our world does not have a finite history, it has no alternatives.

There is an immediate and obvious objection to the above which goes:

All that this argument could show is that no other world could have existed, given the one we've got; whatever the details, what happens is that something about the actual world conflicts with any other world's being actual.

The conclusion is thus trivial, and it hardly requires an elaborate argument to show what is essentially the claim that no two possible worlds could be actual. This objection is conclusive if what the argument is supposed to do is show that only one world is consistently describable or something of the sort; but I shall try to show that there is a weaker but still interesting reading of the conclusion. Suppose that determinism is true, and we want to say that an event could have occurred which did not occur. And we do not mean just that it was logically possible or self-consistent. Presumably we mean (at least) that there is a true counterfactual conditional which describes that event in its consequent. Of course, such a conditional analysis of 'could have done otherwise' has been important in compatibilist theory about human action given determinism. I think it is this kind of 'could have' which may (who knows?) be leading Spinoza's thought in the quoted texts. Using this kind of 'could have' to claim a different world could have been actual would mean that, if some state of affairs had obtained which did not in fact obtain, then that world would have become actual. Consider the way (as it is often said) Leibniz introduces contingency, through the free choice of God.<sup>7</sup> For Leibniz, to say that a different world could have been actual means that it would have if God so chose at the time of the creation. Whether Leibniz himself thought of this choice as being in time is not a question which need concern us here; the important point is that this is the sense in which Spinoza seems to be

saying that a different world is not possible, since there is no time at which things might have been different.

Without worrying about the historical Spinoza for a moment, consider present-day accounts of how counterfactuals are to be understood under determinism. According to one theory, the truth of a counterfactual should be understood in terms of what would have happened given that each in a series of events in the whole past of the antecedent and consequent would have been different. According to the other theory, a true counterfactual under determinism would state what would happen given a "divergence miracle" just prior to the events described in the antecedent and consequent.<sup>8</sup> Now will either account allow for it to be true that, if certain states of affairs had obtained which did not, then a different world would have been actual? With a finite past, a different world might have existed if there had been a different start-up, i.e., initial facts. Or it might be that a divergence miracle just after the start-up would have produced a different series. Does the supposition of an infinite past mean that no such counterfactual could be true?

Now some counterfactuals about when different worlds would have existed will be trivially true, even given an infinite past. Trivially, if a series of events in the past—infinite or not—were different from what it was, a different possible world would exist. Trivially, if an event currently ruled out by the laws of nature were to occur, a different possible world would exist. That is why even if determinism is true and past time is infinite, every time is still a time at which some other world could have been actual (in one sense), for of each time it will be true that, if something had been different at that time, a different world would have existed. But these counterfactuals will not relate a whole possible world to states of affairs which would explain how such a world might have been caused. I think Spinoza believes that to explain how a different world might have obtained it is necessary to have a true counterfactual in which the entire world is treated as an outsized event which would have occurred after, and been caused by, events described in the antecedent. Moreover, he would claim that the antecedent would have to explain not only why a different world would have obtained, but also why this one would not. Now consider the counterfactual corresponding to an analysis (altered past or divergent miracle) of "our world might not have existed" under determinism:

If p at t, then, after t, not-our world (rigid designator) and a different world instead

where p is thought of as somehow causing or producing a state of affairs in which no sequence in our world ever exists and the whole of some other world exists instead. (The reading must be stronger, that is, than the trivial 'If something happened which did not happen, then that would be a different world'.) Given a beginningless past there will be no time at which t will precede our world and thus there could be no explanation of why our world would not have existed or why some other world would have existed in its place. In that sense, Spinoza can claim, our world could not have failed to exist, and no other world could have existed. I take it that this is what he means in the texts above when he says the "decrees" and "ways" could not have been different.

I do not see how to make the argument look more interesting from a contemporary—and non-Spinozist—point of view. If we take out the dubious notion of whole possible worlds being caused, what would be left is:

- 3'. If a presently non-actual world could have been actual, then there is a time at which that world might have existed.
- 4'. If there is a time at which a presently non-actual world might have existed, then that time was before a time at which the presently actual world began to exist.

with 1., 2., 5., and the conclusion as before. But 4'. looks obviously false. As pointed out above, even assuming determinism and an infinite past, every time is a time at which a different possible world might have been actual, in the sense that, if anything had been different, a different world would have been actual. Perhaps Spinoza would respond that the only time at which a different world could have been actual would be before the existence of this one, since in our world nothing can be other than what it is. But this move will be question-begging in what appears to be an argument that there are no contingencies.

Even if the argument could be repaired in some way, there would be grave problems about getting from its conclusion to what Spinoza wants. At best the argument would show that there was a sense in which the totality of things could not have been other than what it is. But it would be doubtful at best to move from that to the claim that each thing cannot be other than what it is. Even if there were no true counterfactuals about under what conditions other possible worlds would have obtained, that would not mean that there were none about objects or events in worlds. However, the fact that the move will not come off does not mean that Spinoza did not make it; and I submit that the argument above may be one explanation of Spinoza's believing that there are no contingencies.<sup>9</sup> □

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Edwin Curley, trans., *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 437.

<sup>2</sup> See R.J. Delahunty, *Spinoza: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 148-50.

<sup>3</sup> Curley, 81-2.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1984), 123.

<sup>5</sup> Martha Kneale, "Eternity and Sempiternity", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 69 (1968-69).

<sup>6</sup> Spinoza often says 'infinite' when he means 'all'. See Bennett, 75-9.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Nicholas Rescher, *The Philosophy of Leibniz* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 32.

<sup>8</sup> David Lewis, "Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow", *Nous* 13, 1979, 455-76, and Jonathan Bennett, "Counterfactuals and Temporal Direction", *Philosophical Review* 93, 1984, 57-91.

<sup>9</sup> How does the argument above relate to an *ad hominem* argument against someone who believes in a personal God? I suspect that the crucial changes are:

- 1'. God is eternal (timeless).
- 5'. If God is eternal, then it is not the case that there is a time at which God could have caused a non-actual world to exist.

with the conclusion as before, using 3. I should suppose the argument for the crucial 5'. is that, since facts about God are not datable, it could not be a fact that at some time God caused one world in preference to another; perhaps the idea is that, since God is not in time, he could not decide at a time on one world rather than another. The role of determinism here is to make it plausible that worlds must be chosen whole and once and for all. Presumably, this is the argument in Chapter III of the Appendix to *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*; see Curley, 309. However, the latter work must be used with caution as a guide to Spinoza's own views and arguments. This argument depends in part on theological considerations, and I shall not consider it further here.