Spinoza vs. Descartes on substance, dependence, and causation
Anat Schechtman

Descartes: “By substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God’s concurrence. Hence the term ‘substance’ does not apply univocally, as they say in the Schools, to God and to other things; that is, there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures.” (Principles of Philosophy I.51)

Spinoza: “One substance cannot be produced by another substance”. (Ethics Ip6)

Nadler: “I [=Spinoza] agree that a substance is essentially what exists in such a way that it depends on nothing else for its existence; but then, as you [=Descartes] yourself admit, strictly speaking only God is a substance; and I, in order to be fully consistent, refuse to concede to finite things even a secondary or deficient kind of substantiality.” (Spinoza’s Ethics, 56)

Della Rocca: “Spinoza would agree with Descartes that only God meets the requirements for being a substance, but, unlike Descartes, he does not look for a way to have finite things count as substances as well.” (Spinoza, 42)

Melamed: “What Spinoza does in E1p6 is to show that given certain assumption, which he expects the Cartesians to share with him, he can prove that substance must be causally self-sufficient.” (“Spinoza’s metaphysics of substance”, fn. 98)

Spinoza’s argument against Descartes:
1. A substance is an ontologically independent being. (Principles I.51)
2. Finite minds and bodies are causally dependent on God. (Principles I.51)
3. Therefore, minds and bodies are not substances.

A missing premise (required for validity):
4. If \( x \) causally depends on \( y \), then \( x \) ontologically depends on \( y \).

EId3: “By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed.
- \( x \) conceptually depends on \( y \) iff \( x \) ontologically depends on \( y \).

Ela4: “The cognition of an effect depends on, and involves, the cognition of its cause.”
- \( x \) conceptually depends on \( y \) iff \( x \) causally depends on \( y \).

Equivalence: \( x \) conceptually depends on \( y \) iff \( x \) causally depends on \( y \) iff \( x \) ontologically depends on \( y \).
(See, e.g., Della Rocca and Newlands; cf. Garrett, Lin, and Carriero; opposition: Morrison and Melamed)
- (4) follows from Equivalence.

Descartes (as I read him) endorses neither (4) nor Equivalence. For he holds that causation is not equivalent to, and does not entail, ontological dependence, since causal relations do not hold by the essences of their relata, whereas relations of ontological dependence do.

My Question: Do causal relations hold by the essences of their relata, according to Spinoza? (Specifically, for a given entity \( x \), is \( x \) is caused by \( y \), is it part of \( x \)’s essence that it is so caused?)
- If the answer is YES, then we will have identified a partial explanation of their disagreement over (4).
- If the answer is NO, then we must look elsewhere for such an explanation.

Also: what reasons are there for thinking that causal relations hold (or do not hold) by the essences of their relata?

Passages that suggest YES

TIE 95: “For a definition to be regarded as complete, it must explain the inmost essence of the thing, and must take care not to substitute for this any of its properties… If the thing be a created thing, the definition, as we have said, must include its proximate cause.”

Ep60: “Next, in order that I may know which out of many ideas of a thing will enable all the properties of the object to be deduced, I follow this one rule, that the idea or definition of the thing should express its efficient cause.”

EIId2: “I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is [NS: also] necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily [NS: also] taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.”

Passages that suggest NO

TIE 101: “[T]he essences of particular mutable things are not to be elicited from their series or order of existing, which would furnish us with nothing but their extrinsic characteristics, their relations, or, at the most, their circumstances. All these are far from the inmost essence of things. This essence is to be sought only from the fixed and eternal things, and at the same time from the laws inscribed in these things as in their true codes, which govern the coming into existence and the ordering of all particular things. Indeed, these mutable particular things depend so intimately and essentially (so to phrase it) on the fixed things that they can neither be nor be conceived without them. Hence, although these fixed and eternal things are singular, by reason of their omnipresence and wide-ranging power they will be to us like universals, i.e., the genera of the definitions of particular mutable things, and the proximate causes of all things.”

Elp8s2: “And from this we can infer in another way that there is only one [substance] of the same nature, which I have considered it worth the trouble of showing here. But to do this in order, it must be noted,

I. That the true definition of each thing neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined. From which it follows,

II. That no definition involves or expresses any certain number of individuals, since it expresses nothing other than the nature of the thing defined.

III. [T]here must be, for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists.

IV. [T]his cause, on account of which a thing exists, either must be contained in the very nature and definition of the existing thing (viz. that it pertains to its nature to exist) or must be outside it.

From these propositions it follows that if, in Nature, a certain number of individuals exists, there must be a cause why those individuals, and why neither more nor fewer, exist. For example, if twenty men exist in Nature…it will not be enough (i.e., to give a reason why twenty men exist) to show the cause of human nature in general; but it will be necessary in addition to show the cause why not more and not fewer than twenty exist. For (by III) there must necessarily be a cause why each [NS: particular man] exists. But this cause (by II and III) cannot be contained in human nature itself, since the true definition of man does not
involve the number 20. So (by IV) the cause why these twenty men exist, and consequently, why each of
them exists, must necessarily be outside each of them.”

Elp33s1: “A thing is called necessary either by reason of its essence or by reason of its cause. For a
ingredient’s existence follows necessarily either from its essence and definition or from a given efficient cause.
And a thing is also called impossible from these same causes—namely, either because its essence, or
definition, involves a contradiction, or because there is no external cause which has been determined to
produce such a thing.”

EIIIp4, d: “No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause. This proposition is evident
through itself. For the 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.”

EIVp4: “It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo
no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the
adequate cause.”

Another relevant passage

TIE 57: “[W]e may say, “Let us suppose that this burning candle is not now burning,” or “Let us suppose
that it is burning in some imaginary space where there are no bodies.”… In the second case I merely
withdraw my thoughts from the surrounding bodies so that the mind concentrates its attention on the
candle alone, regarded in itself. This leads to the conclusion that the candle contains in itself no cause for
its own destruction, so that, if there were no surrounding bodies, this candle and likewise its flame would
remain immutable, or some such conclusion.”