

**SPINOZA'S VERSION OF THE PSR:  
A Critique of Michael Della Rocca's Interpretation of Spinoza**

by

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## **Abstract**

Michael Della Rocca has provided an influential interpretation of Spinoza relying heavily on the principle of sufficient reason. In order to challenge this interpretation, I identify three assumptions Della Rocca makes about the PSR and demonstrate that it is not clear Spinoza shares them. First, Della Rocca contends that the PSR is unlimited in scope. I show that the scope of Spinoza's version of the PSR is ambiguous. While it is clear that substances and modes are included, it is unclear just how widely the scope extends. Second, Della Rocca argues that the PSR demands there are no illegitimate bifurcations. I argue that Della Rocca's account of illegitimate bifurcations is too strong. I show that Spinoza offers a distinction in explanatory types that should be considered illegitimate and inexplicable according to Della Rocca's definition of illegitimate bifurcations. Third, Della Rocca argues that explanations which satisfy the demands of the PSR must be in terms of the concepts involved. I show that Spinoza does not use conceptual explanations. Instead, in almost all cases, the explanations Spinoza relies on to satisfy the demands of the PSR are in terms of a thing's cause.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

While many commentators and readers have recognized the importance of the principle of sufficient reason in Spinoza's philosophy<sup>1</sup>, few have argued that it is as essential to his thought as Michael Della Rocca. For Della Rocca, the principle of sufficient reason [hereon referred to as the PSR] takes center stage. He systematically examines the *Ethics* to show how the PSR underlies, and is motivated by, most of Spinoza's philosophical positions. "Spinoza's philosophy" Della Rocca argues, "is characterized by perhaps the boldest and most thoroughgoing commitment ever to appear in the history of philosophy, to the intelligibility of everything."<sup>2</sup> Despite Della Rocca's insistence that Spinoza "builds the notion of intelligibility [that is, the PSR] into the heart of his metaphysical system," on the face of it, the PSR plays little role in the actual demonstrations of the *Ethics*. Spinoza articulates the PSR only two, or arguably three,<sup>3</sup> times, and it is only used explicitly in two arguments, found in the second scholium to proposition eight of part one [1p8s2], and in the second demonstration to proposition eleven of part one [1p11d2].<sup>4</sup> For a work written in the geometric style, it would be quite odd for Spinoza to be motivated by a commitment to the PSR, yet not explicitly refer to it in

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in his influential book, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Jonathan Bennett identifies the principle of sufficient reason as one of "five aspects of Spinoza's thinking which lie deeper than any of his argued doctrines and [is] so influential in his thought" (p. 29).

<sup>2</sup> Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> As we will see, the two explicit uses are 1p8s2 and 1p11d 2. Along with those two, Della Rocca also argues that 1a2 should be read as a statement of the PSR (*Spinoza*, p.4-5; "A Rationalist Manifesto," p. 80; "Rationalism Run Amok," p. 35).

<sup>4</sup> To help the reader follow along, I have included complete arguments of 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 in Appendix A.

a demonstration. It would be odd, but not impossible. The lack of reference to the PSR may raise some doubt about this interpretation, but the lack of explicit use alone does not warrant that we simply put aside such an interpretation of the *Ethics*. Indeed, Della Rocca's interpretation is far too important and well-argued to be put aside. As well, it is hard to read Della Rocca's work and not be swept into his interpretation and its ability to make sense of some of Spinoza's wonderfully bizarre and challenging positions. It is certainly possible that Spinoza relied implicitly on the PSR throughout the *Ethics*, and Della Rocca has argued convincingly of this fact. As a result, if we want to challenge Della Rocca, we must engage with the text itself to see whether the Spinoza of the *Ethics* is the same as Della Rocca's Spinoza.

It seems to me that there are at least two different ways that one could challenge Della Rocca's interpretation of Spinoza. One could examine Della Rocca's individual arguments and interpretations to show how his use of the PSR misrepresents a Spinozistic doctrine. For instance, one could examine Della Rocca's argument to show that, for Spinoza, "to be is to be intelligible" and try to uncover if and where he went wrong. Alternatively, one could put individual arguments aside and attempt to challenge the basic assumptions that Della Rocca makes about Spinoza. In this thesis, I will employ this latter strategy. I would like to argue that the version of the PSR that Della Rocca attributes to Spinoza does not necessarily reflect Spinoza's own use of the PSR. As we will see, the two arguments in the *Ethics* that invoke the PSR do not clearly accord with Della Rocca's important assumptions about Spinoza's version of the PSR.

## 1.1 Versions of the PSR

My claim is that Spinoza's version of the PSR may not reflect Della Rocca's Spinoza. But what is a "version of the PSR"? To understand what I mean, let us begin with a definition. We can define the PSR as the principle that everything has an explanation. By treating 'explains' as a two-place predicate that holds between an *explanandum* and an *explanans*, we can symbolize this initial definition of the PSR.

$E(x,y)$ :  $x$  is an explanation for  $y$

$\forall x\exists y E(y,x)$  – Everything has something which explains it

I think this definition is in need of much clarification and can amount to very different positions. In order to clarify and distinguish between possible interpretations of this initial definition, we must provide an account for each of the variables in the expression.

*x*: *the things in need of explanation*

What is the scope of 'everything'? While our definition specifies that all  $x$ 's have an explanation, we do not know what the scope of  $x$  is; we do not know what items are in the set of things in need of an explanation. Can we assume that absolutely everything has an explanation? Every existing or non-existing thing, phenomenon or feature; every possible or conceivable proposition, state of affairs, fact, event, etc.? Or, should we assume that only a certain subset of these items require an explanation? Perhaps only contingent propositions require explanations, as Alexander Pruss has argued<sup>5</sup>; or perhaps any item can come under the scope of the

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<sup>5</sup> Pruss describes that his version of the PSR holds that, "[n]ecessarily, every true or at least every contingent true proposition has an explanation" (3). He reasons that "[w]e simply do not have a good handle on the nature of explanations of necessary propositions" and so cannot include them into the scope of the PSR. See Alexander Pruss' *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment*, especially pages 10-13.

PSR as Della Rocca argues.<sup>6</sup> Let us imagine a universe populated by four propositions, two necessary and two contingent. In this universe, there exists explanations for only the contingent propositions. For Pruss, this universe satisfies the PSR, whereas for Della Rocca, this universe violates the PSR. The scope of the variable  $x$  must be defined, and until defined, the PSR can have distinct meanings and truth values.

*The nature of the predicate  $E$*

What is the nature of the relation ‘explains’? We know that the variables in  $E$  are related to each other such that the former explains the latter, but we must present an account of the character of this relation. What *kinds* of explanations are acceptable? Are explanations nomological, mathematical, conceptual, intentional, causal, grounding, etc.? Does  $y$  explain  $x$  because  $y$  is the metaphysical ground of  $x$ , or is  $y$  explanatory because it is the cause of  $x$ , *etc.* Further, we could ask what kind of cause is  $y$ . Is  $y$  the final cause of  $x$ , or is  $y$  the efficient cause of  $x$ ? Do different phenomena call for different explanations or, to satisfy the demands of the PSR, must everything have one kind of explanation? For instance, if human actions are included into the scope of the PSR, one might argue that the appropriate kind of explanation will be intentional:  $y$  explains an action  $x$  because  $y$  was a person’s intention or desire for  $x$ . In contrast, we will likely not want to attribute such

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<sup>6</sup> See Della Rocca’s “PSR.” In this paper, Della Rocca defends the PSR on his own terms. In his defence, he formulates the PSR as the “forlorn principle according to which, for each thing (object, state of affairs, or whatever) that exists, or obtain, there is an explanation of its existence, there is a reason that it exists.” Even though Della Rocca’s views on the PSR seem to mirror his views on Spinoza’s PSR, it is important to keep Della Rocca’s views on the PSR distinct from the versions he attributes to Spinoza. For the remainder of this thesis, I will not be considering Della Rocca’s independent views on the PSR, but will be focusing only on the version of the PSR he attributes to Spinoza.



intentions or desires to explain the movement of rocks. Here too we find that the account of explanations offered will change the meaning of the PSR.

*y: the explanatory items*

What can feature as an explaining item? This too is in need of some clarification. Do the explaining things have the same ontological status as the explained thing? For instance, if we are explaining a finite object, will the explanation of that finite object itself be a finite object, or can we explain it by an infinite thing? Can  $y$  be identical to  $x$ , that is, can something be self-explanatory, or must explanations refer to something distinct from the thing being explained? Moreover, does the explaining item refer to a single entity, or can it refer to a collection of things? For instance, if we are talking about nomological explanations, then  $y$  will not refer to a single thing, but to two different things: existing conditions and laws of nature.

## **1.2 Michael Della Rocca's Spinoza**

The upshot of all this analysis is that the PSR can amount to very different positions depending on how one defines and restricts the variables. While we may speak of *the* PSR, in fact, there are many different possible versions of the PSR. This is important to keep in mind when interpreting Spinoza. If there are various ways of interpreting the PSR, we cannot presume that Spinoza adopts a specific version of it, and we must be careful not to attribute to Spinoza a version that he does not uphold. Now, Della Rocca makes three key assumptions about Spinoza's version of the PSR. First, the PSR is unlimited in scope; second, the PSR demands that we reject illegitimate bifurcations in nature; and third, the PSR demands that explanations are in terms of explicability itself.

First, the PSR is unlimited in scope. Della Rocca's Spinoza requires that any feature in his metaphysical system must have an explanation. Features such as causation, representation, inherence, consciousness, power, and all others must be explicable. As Della Rocca explains in the case of causation:

What is it for one thing to cause another? What is it in virtue of which a causal relation obtains? It is natural to think that there must be some informative account to be had here. Yes, there are obviously cases of causation, but it is not enough just to point and say that that's a causal relation. We want to know what such cases have in common and what it is for a causal relation to be present. What is it for one even to *make* another occur? To put it vividly, what does the *oomph* of causation consist in?<sup>7</sup>

For Della Rocca's Spinoza, no feature, thing, or phenomenon is off limits from the PSR. Anything that lacks an explanation would be a brute, that is, inexplicable, fact, and for Spinoza, brute facts are anathema.

Second, the PSR requires the rejection of inexplicable bifurcations in nature. Della Rocca ties Spinoza's demand for explicability with his naturalism. Della Rocca defines Spinozistic naturalism as "the thesis that everything in the world plays by the same rules; there are no things that are somehow connected with each other but that are not governed by the same principles."<sup>8</sup> Spinoza's naturalism emerges most clearly in the preface to part three of the *Ethics*. There, Spinoza argues that it is a mistake "to conceive man in nature as a dominion within a dominion" and to "believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature." Instead, Spinoza argues that

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<sup>7</sup> Della Rocca, "A Rationalist Manifesto," p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 5.

Nothing happens in nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, for nature is always the same, and its virtues and powers of acting are everywhere one and the same, i.e., the laws and rules of nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. So the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, viz. through the universal laws and rules of nature. (3Pref)

Spinoza here is talking specifically about the “Affects, and men’s way of living.” ‘Affect’ is Spinoza’s favoured term for the emotions, and is tightly bound to human action.<sup>9</sup> Spinoza’s critique in the preface is directed towards philosophers (specifically Descartes) who treat the human way of living and acting as distinct from all other things in nature.

Della Rocca extends Spinoza’s critique in the preface beyond human interactions with nature to any phenomena which are related but operate according to different principles. He claims that the preface amounts to the view that “there are no illegitimate bifurcations in reality.”<sup>10</sup> He explains that,

In general, for Spinoza, whenever there is a dominion within a dominion, that is, whenever there are two kinds of things that operate according to different principles and are related to each other in some way, then the ways in which these things are related to each other are disturbances and ultimately, inexplicable, that is they would violate the PSR. In this way, we can see that Spinoza’s naturalism as driven by his rationalist denial of brute facts.<sup>11</sup>

As we can see, Della Rocca links Spinoza’s naturalism to his PSR. If two related things play by different rules, there must be an explanation for their relation, but

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<sup>9</sup> The affects are understood explicitly in terms of the possibility of a body or mind acting. 3d3: “By affect I understand affections of the Body by which the Body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of those affections.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

Della Rocca contends no such explanation is possible. Let us say we have two related items *a* and *b*. If both *a* and *b* are ultimately explicable in terms of some more general laws, there would be no problem present. In that case, neither *a* nor *b* is being treated as a dominion within a dominion. However, if *a* does not operate according to the same rules as *b*, then there is no way to account for the relation between the two. Both *a* and *b* would be operating according to brute local laws which are not derivable from the general laws at work. As a result, the PSR demands that we reject these bifurcations.

Della Rocca invokes the PSR to show that any bifurcation between related items must be, and is rejected by Spinoza. For example, Della Rocca invokes the PSR to show that, for Spinoza, there cannot be a legitimate distinction between representational and non-representational mental features. If there were a distinction between these two features, then Della Rocca's Spinoza would ask, "in virtue of what are these features both specifically *mental features*?"<sup>12</sup> Here we have two related phenomena—two kinds of mental features—and each seems to operate according to different principles insofar as one is able to enter into the space of reasons, whereas the other is not. On Della Rocca's reading, Spinoza's naturalism and his commitment to the PSR demand that there must be some reason in virtue of which both representational and non-representational mental features are mental features. The distinction cannot be a brute fact. Della Rocca contends that there is no such reason. He writes:

If we grant, because of the PSR, that there must be such an explanation, what would it be. It's hard to see what kind of answer would be legitimate on Spinozistic terms.

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<sup>12</sup> Della Rocca, "Rationalism Run Amok," p. 33.

One might say that these features are both mental because each is such that one can be *conscious* of it...But this doesn't get us very far because we can now ask in virtue of what are representational features and qualitative features both accessible to consciousness? So this explanation really amounts, in Spinoza's eye's, to no explanation at all.<sup>13</sup>

Without an explanation, Della Rocca collapses the distinction between representational and non-representational mental features. Specifically, he argues that, for Spinoza, mental features can only be representational; to allow mental features to be non-representational would countenance brute facts. I am glossing over much important detail here. What is relevant for our purposes is to see that Della Rocca thinks Spinoza rejects inexplicable bifurcations in all cases. Rather than allowing inexplicable bifurcations in nature, the PSR leads to a "drive for unification."<sup>14</sup> Della Rocca argues that Spinoza collapses distinctions between the existence of modes and substances, inherence, causation and conception, mental features, necessary and possible truths, and others, in part, based on his naturalism.

Finally, the PSR demands that explanations be in terms of explicability itself. Della Rocca attributes to Spinoza a "twofold use" of the PSR. Della Rocca argues that the demand for explicability circles back onto itself: first, one demands that each thing have an explanation, and, second, one sees that this thing is just a form of explicability or conceivability itself. "Spinoza", Della Rocca argues, "single-mindedly digs and digs until we find that the phenomenon in question is nothing but some form of intelligibility itself, of explicability<sup>15</sup> itself."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

<sup>14</sup> Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Della Rocca uses the words 'explicability', 'intelligibility' and 'conceivability' interchangeably throughout his works, indicating that he thinks these terms are synonymous.

After accepting the demand that a feature like causation must have an explanation, Della Rocca invokes the demand for explicability again to argue that the only acceptable explanation of causal connections must be in terms of explicability. He writes,

What, then, must the connection be, if it is not brute? I think that—for one who insists on an explanation of causation—it must be some kind of conceptual necessity. In a case in which *a* is the total cause of *b*, if *a* causes *b*, then the claim that “if *a* occurs then *b* occurs” must be conceptually true, true somehow by the virtue of the concepts of *a* and *b*. If the connection between *a* and *b* were not settled by the very notions of *a* and *b*, if it were some kind of fact beyond the concepts at work here, then it would be unclear why this connection holds, and indeed the connection would, I believe, be ultimately inexplicable. For the question would always remain unanswered, unless we could see the concepts of *a* and *b* as themselves the source of the connection.<sup>17</sup>

As we can see, Della Rocca thinks that the PSR demands that explanations ultimately are conceptual. Consider an example of a cue ball striking an eight ball. If a committed rationalist demanded that I give an account to explain the movement of the eight ball, I might respond by saying, “the cue ball was the cause of the eight ball’s movement.” At first glance, this seems like a perfectly reasonable explanation. The rationalist, however, remains unsatisfied. He continues his pestering: “you claim that *y* explains *x* because *y* is the cause of *x*, but what is it for *y* to be the cause of *x*, what is the basis for the connection between causally related items?” My rationalist interlocutor is applying the PSR a second time to demand that my causal explanation must itself be explicable. Similarly, if I were to claim that *y* is the cause of *x* because there is a necessary connection of some kind between these two items,

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<sup>16</sup> Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Della Rocca, “A Rationalist Manifesto,” p. 76.

the rationalist would contend that a “necessary connection” between the causal *relata* is itself brute unless there is a further account of what this necessary connection consists of.

The only type of explanation that will satisfy the PSR is an explanation in terms of the conceptions involved. As Della Rocca explains, if

the connection is not an extra-conceptual fact, but is instead conceptually grounded, then the connection would be completely explicable. It would be explicable in precisely the same way that, to pick a simple case, the connection between being a bachelor and being an unmarried man is explicable. It makes no sense to try to dig deeper at this point and ask: why does this conceptual connection between being a bachelor and being an unmarried man hold? In the end, this connection is self-explanatory and to ask this question is a manifestation of a failure to grasp properly or fully the conceptions of these properties. In a similar way, once we claim that “if *a* occurs then *b* occurs” is conceptually true, then we cannot ask why this conceptual connection holds without betraying a misunderstanding of the concepts involved in that claim or at least a failure to grasp those concepts completely.<sup>18</sup>

A proper conception of the eight ball will involve the concept of the cue ball; I cannot properly conceive the movement of the eight ball without also conceiving the cue ball. Now, Della Rocca thinks Spinoza upholds this account of causation. He argues that, for Spinoza, “causal connections are grounded in and stem from conceptual connections.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, he argues the reason Spinoza accepts this view of causation is, in part, due to his rationalism.<sup>20</sup> For present purposes, it is not important whether Della Rocca’s account of causal relations is either representative of Spinoza’s treatment of causation or is plausible as an account of causation itself.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78-79.

<sup>19</sup> Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

What is important is that the second demand for explicability characteristic of the twofold use of the PSR places a general restriction on acceptable explanations. Put simply, explanations are *either* in terms of explicability itself *or* explanations rest on brute facts. For a thoroughgoing rationalist like Spinoza, any explanation which does not bottom out in conceivability itself would ultimately rest on a brute fact. For one committed to the PSR, an explanation which itself rests on a brute fact “really amounts, in Spinoza’s eyes, to not explanation at all.”<sup>21</sup> The only possible kind of explanation for any fact, feature, or phenomenon must be conceptual in nature: *y* explains *x* because the concept of *x* involves the concept of *y*. Only when we see that the relation between the *explanandum* and the *explanans* is conceptual will the rationalist’s demand for conceivability be satisfied.

### 1.3 Spinoza’s PSR

In order to test whether or not these are fair assumptions, in what follows I will examine Spinoza’s two uses of the PSR closely. One of the best ways to help understand any of Spinoza’s views is to see how Spinoza himself uses and relies on them. By seeing how Spinoza employs and relies on a view, one sees what it amounts to, and what it entails. As previously mentioned, Spinoza only uses the PSR explicitly in two arguments in the *Ethics*. Given that these are the only two explicit uses of the PSR, they will be crucial to help determine what version of the PSR we can attribute to Spinoza. The content of the arguments in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 is not crucial. The fact that Spinoza is arguing that there is only one substance of the same nature in 1p8s2 and that he is arguing for the necessary existence of God

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<sup>21</sup> Della Rocca, “Rationalism Run Amok,” p. 34.



in 1p11d2 is not important for our purposes. Instead, I will only go through the parts of both of these arguments that will help us determine whether Della Rocca's assumptions about Spinoza are supported by Spinoza's own understanding of the PSR. Now, I do not think that Della Rocca's assumptions are self-evident. In what follows, I will go through each assumption in turn to show that Della Rocca's Spinoza does not accord with the Spinoza of the *Ethics*.

In chapter two, I will examine Della Rocca's claim that the scope of the PSR is absolutely unlimited. I will argue that, despite Della Rocca's claim that all items are in need of explanation, Spinoza only explicitly extends the PSR to substances and modes. Without a further argument to show that Spinoza would be willing to extend beyond substances and modes, it is not self-evident that the scope of the PSR extends as widely as Della Rocca believes.

In chapter three, I will examine the claim that the PSR demands that there are no illegitimate bifurcations in nature. I will argue that, in both 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 Spinoza introduces a bifurcation in explanatory types. Problematically, this bifurcation seems to violate Della Rocca's own account of Spinozistic naturalism. I will argue that rather than attributing to Spinoza a contradiction, it is more likely that Della Rocca attributes to Spinoza a stronger version of naturalism than Spinoza upholds.

In chapter four, I will examine the claim that Spinozistic explanations must be conceptual in nature. Supplementing 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 with evidence from various elements of part one, I will show that Spinoza thinks explanations are causal in nature, not conceptual. Nonetheless, Della Rocca could maintain his thesis and claim that causal explanations ultimately amount to conceptual explanations

because the PSR requires that causation is reducible to conception. Here too, I will show that Della Rocca provides insufficient evidence to support the reduction of causation to conception.

## Chapter 2

### The Twofold Use of the PSR: Unlimited Scope

Let us begin with Della Rocca's first assumption concerning the scope of the PSR. While Della Rocca argues that the scope of Spinoza's PSR is unlimited to include any feature or thing, we will see that the scope of Spinoza's PSR extends only to substances and modes.

#### 2.1 All "Things" Have an Explanation

We can start with 1p8s2. In the second Scholium to proposition eight, Spinoza articulates the PSR in the following way: "There must be, for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists." Notice that in 1p8s2, Spinoza demands that there must be an account, that is, an explanation, for "each existing thing." While this may seem too vague to be of much consequence, Spinoza is quite clear on what kinds of things exist. See, for instance, 1p4d and 1p6c.<sup>22</sup>

1p4d: Whatever is, is either in itself or in another (by 1a1), [in other words] i.e. (by D2 and D5), outside the intellect there is nothing except substances and their affection.

1p6c: For in nature there is nothing except substances and their affections, as is evident from 1a1, 1d3, and 1d5.

I think the natural way to understand the demand that there be an account "for each existing thing" is in light of passages like these. For Spinoza, the things that exist are either substances or modes. As a result, the scope of PSR in 1p8s2 contains all substances and modes.

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<sup>22</sup> See also 1p15d: "...except for substances and modes there is nothing."

We find that Spinoza attributes a similar scope to the PSR in 1p11d2. The relevant passage of 1p11d2 states that:

For each thing there must be assigned a cause, *or* reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence. For example, if a triangle exists, there must also be a reason *or* cause why it exists; but if it does not exist, there must also be a reason *or* cause which prevents it from existing, *or* which takes its existence away.

Spinoza writes that there must be a “cause, or reason” for each thing, and that this cause or reason must be able to explain that thing's existence or nonexistence. Given that the only things that can exist in Spinoza’s system are substances and modes, we find that Spinoza is consistent in his stance that the scope of the PSR extends to all substances and modes. Notice, as well, that Spinoza extends the scope of the PSR to include non-existing items. For Spinoza, even non-existing things must have an explanation. Spinoza is explicit about this in 1p11d2; whether a triangle exists or not, it must have an explanation. This means there are four kinds of things included in the scope of the PSR: (1) existing modes, (2) non-existing modes, (3) existing substances, and (4) non-existing substances.

What about other phenomena that are not things, other features, such as causation, conception, inherence, truth, adequacy, etc. that Della Rocca argues must have an explanation? One straightforward way of dealing with these features is by demonstrating that they are either substances or modes. For, given what we have seen so far, if these features are either substances or modes, then they too must have an explanation. Unfortunately, it is not self-evident that these things fit into these ontological categories. Take for instance, the feature of inherence. As we have seen, if inherence is a substance or a mode, it requires an explanation. Let us start with the possibility that inherence is a mode. Spinoza defines modes as “the

affections of substance, *or* that which is in another through which it is conceived” (1d5). The definition itself refers to the relation of being ‘in another’ thing. Rather than being something that is subsumable under this definition, the inherence relation is part of the definition itself. I take this as evidence that, for Spinoza, inherence is not itself a mode. If inherence is not a mode, is it a substance? This too is unlikely. Given that God is the only substance, inherence cannot be a substance. Moreover, inherence too is part of the definition of substance and so we can offer the same argument as we did above.

If these features are not substances and modes,<sup>23</sup> can we conclude that they are exempt from the demands of the PSR? It is not that straightforward. Even if these features are not themselves substances or modes, Spinoza’s statement of the PSR may still require that they be explicable. If features like inherence are not substances or modes, and if the things that exist are either substances or modes, then it seems that these features do not exist. As we have seen, in 1p11d2, Spinoza extends the scope of the PSR to include non-existing things as well. If non-existing things must also be explicable, and if features like inherence do not exist, then it turns out that these features are covered by the scope of the PSR. Perhaps the scope of the PSR is unlimited after all.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Della Rocca brought the following problem to my attention during the Spinoza Symposium held at Queen’s University on November 18, 2013. If I will deny that a feature like inherence is not a substance or a mode, then what is it? As I explain below, rather than being a substance or a mode itself, inherence seems to be a relation that holds between two entities. But that leaves us with another question: if relations are not substances and modes, then how do they fit into Spinoza’s ontology? Spinoza is explicit that “except for substances and modes there is nothing” (1p15d). If, as Spinoza says, nothing but substances and modes exist, and if inherence is not a substance or a mode, Spinoza is violating his ontological minimalism. Indeed, Spinoza does not say that “except for substance, modes, and relations between the two, there is nothing.”

<sup>24</sup> Professor Henry Laycock brought this objection to my attention.

Nonetheless, we still have reason to be hesitant of the unlimited scope reading of 1p8s2 and 1p11d2. A careful reading of both 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 indicates that it is “things” [*rei*] that are bound by the scope of the PSR, and it is the existence or non-existence of these “things” that must be explicable. Unfortunately, Spinoza does not explain precisely what he means by the word “things” in these two propositions. We can be certain that “things” does include substances and modes. While Spinoza never provides a general account of ‘things’ in the *Ethics*, he does define substance in a way which implies it is a thing<sup>25</sup>, and, in later propositions, Spinoza refers to modes as things<sup>26</sup> as well. Moreover, Spinoza’s use of the PSR in both 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 indicates that by “things” he means at least substances and modes. Beyond substance and modes, it is not clear what else, if anything, is a thing that requires an explanation. Returning to the example of inherence, it is not clear that inherence is itself a thing. Instead, inherence seems to be a relation between things. If inherence is not itself a thing, then it may be outside the scope of the PSR and does not need an explanation. As far as I can tell, Spinoza does not offer a general theory of relations in the *Ethics*. He does not explain whether we should regard relations as things, or if he considered them as qualities or properties of things rather than things themselves.

Should we assume that, by “things” Spinoza means absolutely everything, or should we rely on a restricted reading of “things”? The fact that Spinoza only applies the PSR to substances and modes in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2, and the fact that he does not

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<sup>25</sup> 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 any other thing [*rei*], from which it must be formed.” The claim that I can know substance without knowing any other thing seems to imply that substance itself is a thing.

<sup>26</sup> Consider 1p33: “Thing [*res*] could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced.” The “things” produced by God are the modes.

provide explicit explanations or accounts of relations anywhere else in *Ethics* may support the restricted scope reading of the PSR. However, these facts are not conclusive. It may be the case that relations are also things and so require an explanation even if Spinoza does provide explicit explanations for them. Simply put, without clarifying the meaning of the word ‘things’, the two statements of the PSR will remain ambiguous, and because of this ambiguity, commentators cannot assume that absolutely everything is included in the scope of the PSR. Instead, I would contend that the onus is on commentators to demonstrate and provide evidence that items other than substances and modes demand explanations.

## 2.2 Restricted Scope and Violations of the PSR

As far as I can tell, Della Rocca does not provide an argument to show that the PSR must have unlimited scope.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, I think we can construct a PSR-style argument to show that Spinoza cannot both be committed to the PSR and limit the

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<sup>27</sup> One could interpret Della Rocca’s reading of 1a2 as an argument for the unlimited scope of the PSR. 1a2 states: “That which cannot be conceived through another thing must be conceived through itself.” While it may not be clear how this directly supports the PSR, Della Rocca insists that we should read this axiom as a statement of the PSR. In support of his claim, Della Rocca offers a quick three-step argument:

[P1] Spinoza says, in effect, that each thing must be conceived through something (either itself or another thing). [P2] For Spinoza, to conceive of a thing is to explain it. [C] Thus, in presupposing in 1a2 that everything can be conceived through something, Spinoza presupposes that everything is able to be explained, he builds the notion of intelligibility into the heart of his metaphysical system. (*Spinoza*, 4-5)

Let us grant Della Rocca’s second premise and allow the substitution of ‘explained’ for ‘conceived’ without changing the meaning of 1a2. Even if we grant his reading of this axiom, I do not think it supports the view that the PSR is unlimited in scope. First, 1a2 remains unused in the *Ethics*. As a result, it is not clear how much we can infer from this axiom. Second, the ‘conceived through’ relation only seems to hold for substances and between substances and modes: a substance is conceived through itself, and a mode is conceived through substance. Spinoza does not talk about other features being conceived through something. As a result, if 1a2 is an articulation of the PSR, it seems to support the limited scope interpretation of the PSR.

scope of the PSR to existing and non-existing substances and mode. Specifically, one can argue that it would be a brute fact if one were to exclude certain items from the scope of the PSR. Here is a possible, extra-textual, argument to that effect:

Show: There cannot be a class of items that has no explanation

- 1) Assume: There is a class of items that has no explanation
- 2) If an item is not included in the scope of the PSR, then there must be a reason why that item is outside the scope of the PSR
- 3) There is no explanation for why things should be excluded from the scope of the PSR
- 4) Something without an explanation is a brute fact
- 5) But Spinoza, a proponent of the PSR, denies the existence of brute facts
- 6) Therefore, no item can be excluded from the scope of PSR, contrary to our assumption

It seems that, in principle, Spinoza must include absolutely everything into the extension of explicable items, and not just substances and modes. While Della Rocca does not present an argument like this, it does seem to be in line with his interpretation of Spinoza.

Should we accept this argument? I do not think so. I think we have good reason not to accept it. First, step four is misleading. While Spinoza provides no reason in either 1p8s2 or 1p11d2 that explains why he limits the scope of the PSR, we cannot conclude from the fact that we do not have an explanation, that there is no explanation. It is certainly possible that Spinoza has a reason that he wants to limit the PSR to just substances and modes. Perhaps Spinoza thinks that only substances and modes are amenable to explanations. The point is, we simply do not know why Spinoza limits the scope of the PSR as he does, and our ignorance of such a reason does not allow us to conclude that there is no possible reason for excluding items from the scope of the PSR. Second, what we are discussing is the scope of Spinoza's PSR, yet in steps three and five, we presume that absolutely everything would be



included in the scope of his version of the PSR. Given that very assumption is under investigation, this move begs the question. We cannot demand that an item has an explanation if it is excluded from the collection of things that are in need of an explanation. Yet, this is precisely what we do in step three. Similarly, an item is a brute fact only if that fact is bound by the PSR in the first place. We cannot accuse Spinoza of admitting brute facts in step five unless that item is covered by the scope of the PSR. Put otherwise, brute facts are brute only if they are in need of explanation. However, the only items that we know are bound by the PSR are substances and modes. To presume otherwise would need a separate argument that does not invoke the PSR itself. As a result, unless there is a substance or a mode without an explanation, we cannot accuse Spinoza of allowing brute facts simply by limiting the scope of the PSR.

This argument might work to show that a thoroughly committed rationalist must accept a PSR with an unlimited scope. Indeed, it may be the case that a committed rationalist should just bite the bullet and adopt the position that absolutely everything is in need of an explanation. However, my aim is not to discover the most acceptable version of the PSR; I am only trying to uncover *Spinoza's* version of the PSR. And we cannot presume from the outset that absolutely everything must have an explanation simply because a perfect rationalist must. It is possible that Spinoza is less than a perfect rationalist; perhaps he upheld a watered-down version of the PSR<sup>28</sup> where not every item was bound by it.

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<sup>28</sup> This phrase comes from Della Rocca. In *Spinoza*, he refers to Alexander Pruss's defence of a PSR that only demands that contingent propositions have explanations and does not entail necessitarianism as a "watered down...version of the PSR." (*Spinoza*, p. 313.)

This much is clear: at least substances and modes are in the scope of the PSR. I must be careful not to overextend my arguments. I cannot claim that a feature like inherence is, or must be, excluded from the scope of the PSR. I can only claim that it is not self-evident that it is included. Similarly, I have not provided an argument to show that *only* four kinds of things are included in the scope of the PSR; all I have shown is that there are *at least* four items covered by the PSR. It is certainly possible that Spinoza thinks we could invoke the PSR to demand an explanation for something other than substances and modes. However, given that we have no evidence that Spinoza extends the PSR beyond substances and modes in the two arguments in which he invokes the PSR, I contend that if one wants to argue that Spinoza's PSR extends beyond these things, then one must have an argument to show that Spinoza himself was willing to do so.

## Chapter 3

### The PSR and Naturalism: Illegitimate Bifurcations in Nature

We can now move from the scope of the PSR to the second assumption concerning inexplicable bifurcations. As we will see, what Spinoza tells us about explanations challenges Della Rocca's view on inexplicable bifurcations. While I will not be able to provide a complete account of explanations here, I want to show that, contrary to Della Rocca, Spinoza thinks that explanations themselves are bifurcated. Moreover, we will see that this bifurcation in explanatory types is not inexplicable, but is grounded in the different natures of substances and modes.

#### 3.1 Bifurcations in Explanations

First, let us show that Spinoza thinks that there is a bifurcation in explanations. Spinoza is consistent in both 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 that there are two different ways of explaining the existence of a thing. In 1p8s2, after claiming that each thing must have a cause which explains it, he claims: "That this 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."

Here, Spinoza is distinguishing between two types of causes that can account for, or explain, a thing's existence. Either a thing's causal explanation "must be contained in the very nature and definition of the existing thing," or the cause which explains it will be outside or "external" to the thing. Spinoza consistently employs this distinction between causal explanations in 1p11d2. Immediately after claiming that everything must have a "reason or cause" that can account for its existence or nonexistence, Spinoza claims that "this reason, *or* cause, must either be contained in

the nature of the thing, or be outside it.” Moreover, Spinoza holds that in the second type of explanation, the explanatory item that is external to the thing is the ‘order of nature.’ I will not discuss what Spinoza thinks the definition or nature of a thing is, or what he means by the order of nature here. I will address these difficulties in the next chapter. All I would like to point out is that Spinoza consistently holds that explanations are bifurcated. There are explanations in terms of the thing’s nature or definition, and explanations in terms of a thing’s external cause or the order of nature.

Second, let us show that Spinoza thinks that these two types of explanations are appropriate for different kinds of things. I think that this is quite straightforward. Spinoza thinks that substance can be explained only in terms of its nature alone. As he explains in 1p8s2: “since it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist... its definition must involve necessary existence, and consequently its existence must be inferred from its definition alone.” As well, in 1p11d2, Spinoza also claims that the nature of substance explains its existence. In contrast, the explanation appropriate for modes is not in terms of its nature. Instead, one must go outside the definition or concept of a thing and refer to that thing’s external causes to explain why it exists. Spinoza consistently uses modes as examples of things explained externally in both arguments. As a result, we can see that substances and modes are explained in different ways.

### **3.2 Is the Explanatory Bifurcation Illegitimate?**

Problematically, Della Rocca’s Spinoza should not allow this bifurcation in explanations. Recall that Della Rocca argues,

whenever there are two kinds of things that operate according to different principles and are related to each other in some way, then the ways in which these things are related to each other are disturbances and ultimately, inexplicable, that is they would violate the PSR.<sup>29</sup>

As we can see, the criteria for illegitimate bifurcations are quite general. For any two kinds of things, if those two things are related and those two things operate according to different principles, then the relation that holds between these two things is inexplicable. Given this very general account of illegitimate bifurcations, Della Rocca's Spinoza could offer the following argument against himself. The explanatory principles of substance differ from the explanatory principles of modes. Substances and mode are different kinds of things, and substances and modes are related to each other. But, by our definition of illegitimate bifurcations, if two kinds of things operate according to different principles and are related to one another, then this relation is inexplicable. That is, if the explanation for substance is different from the explanation for modes, but substances and modes are related, then the substance-mode relation itself should be inexplicable. It seems, then, that Spinoza's account of explanatory types conflicts with naturalism and, ultimately, the demand for explicability. Rather than holding that different things be explained according to different explanations, it seems Spinoza should hold that all things be explained the same way, either through their nature alone or through their external causes. While Spinoza does not seem to think that all things in nature must be explained the same way, perhaps he is just mistaken. It is possible that Spinoza is admitting a brute fact into his system by accident, and that his commitment to rationalism demands

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<sup>29</sup> Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 7.

that all things are explainable either by their natures alone or by the order of nature alone.

Yet, the bifurcation in explanatory principles is not inexplicable. Spinoza has good reason to uphold the view that certain things call for certain explanations. In the case of substance, Spinoza argues in 1p7 that “it pertains to the nature of substance to exist.” If the essence or nature of a thing involves existence, a clear conception of the essence of substance is sufficient to explain a substance’s existence. That is, substance is of such a nature that it can be explained in terms of its nature alone. However, we can dig even deeper here. We can show that not only is the nature of substance sufficient to explain it, but that there is no other possible explanation for substance. In the last three paragraphs in the demonstration of 1p11d2, Spinoza offers a rather complex argument to show that there is no possible explanation for the non-existence of God. He argues that, if we assume that God does not exist, then the PSR demands that there must be an explanation why God does not exist. “But”, Spinoza writes,

if there were such a reason, or *cause*, it would have to be either in God’s very nature or outside it, i.e., in another substance of another nature. For if it were of the same nature, that very supposition would concede that God exists. But a substance which was of another nature would have nothing in common with God (by 1P2), and therefore could neither give him existence nor take it away.

Within that argument, we find Spinoza explaining why only certain explanations are appropriate for substance. In this argument, Spinoza relies on three previous demonstrations:

1p5: In nature there cannot be two or more substance of the same nature or attribute.

1p2: Two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with each other.

1p3: If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other.

While there is much complexity here, Spinoza argues that these three demonstrations rule out the possibility of there being an explanation for a substance that is external to the nature of substance. If substances cannot share natures or attributes (1p5), and things of different natures have nothing in common with each other (1p2), then one substance cannot be the cause of another (1p3). Conceptually, there is no way that a substance can either cause another substance to exist, or cause another substance to cease existing. If substances cannot causally relate to one another, then explanations which refer to external causes or reasons are inappropriate for substances. There is nothing outside of a substance which explains why a substance exists or does not exist. Simply put, for Spinoza, substances are not the kind of thing that can be explained by an external thing. Now, because Spinoza argues that the explanation for the existence of a thing is either in terms of their nature, or in terms of an external cause, and, as we have just seen, its very nature as substance rules out the possibility of explaining it externally, by disjunctive syllogism we can conclude that substance must be explained through its nature alone. As a result, what explains substance must be its nature, and, as we have seen, its nature is sufficient to explain why it exists.

We can also see the reasons why Spinoza thinks modes must be explained in terms of external causes. In 1p11d2, he writes of modes that,

[The] reason, *or* cause, must either be contained in the nature of the thing or be outside it. E.g., the very nature of a square circle indicates the reason why it does not exist, viz. because it involves a contradiction...But the

reason why a circle or triangle exists, or why it does not exist, does not follow from the nature of these things, but from the order of the whole of corporeal Nature. For from this [order] it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now, or that it is impossible for it to exist now.

Spinoza adds more complexity to the account of explanation for modes as he splits modes into three categories and argues that different categories of modes are explained differently. The three categories of modes are: (a) modes with a contradictory nature, (b) non-contradictory and existent modes, and (c) non-contradictory and non-existent modes.<sup>30</sup> Like substances, modes with a contradictory nature are explained through their very nature. Whereas the nature of substance explains why it must exist necessarily, the nature of a mode with a contradictory nature, explains why that mode cannot exist. While Spinoza does not explicitly state his reasons for thinking that contradictory modes must be explained in terms of their natures, it seems Spinoza assumes that it is impossible for a thing with a contradictory nature to exist. If these modes cannot exist, then there is no need to appeal to something other than that thing's nature to explain why it does not exist.

However, in the case of a non-contradictory mode, the explanation cannot be in terms of a mode's nature. We can see Spinoza's reasons for why this is the case as well. Unlike substances, the essence of modes does not involve existence, so it follows that we cannot explain their existence from their essence alone. Spinoza is quite clear of this fact. See, for instance, 1p24:

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<sup>30</sup> Spinoza affirms a similar distinction in modes in 1p33s1: "A thing is call necessary either by reason of its essence or by reason of its cause. For a thing'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—viz. 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."



1p24: The essence of things produced by God does not involve existence

Demonstration: This is evident from 1d1. For that whose nature involves existence (considered in itself), is its own cause, and exists only from the necessity of its nature.

As a result, the nature of a mode is not sufficient to explain its existence.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, unlike substances, external explanations are appropriate for modes. We can construct a parallel version of Spinoza's argument that explains why external causes are not appropriate for substance to show that external causes are appropriate explanations for modes. While substances cannot share attributes, there are infinitely many modes in each attribute (1p16). Given that modes can share an attribute, modes of the same attribute do have something in common with each other. If these modes have something in common with each other, then these modes can cause one another to exist, and so their existence can be explained by other modes. While Spinoza does not argue this way, it is clear that he does support this view. See for instance, 1p28:

Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence...and so on, to infinity.

While substances cannot be caused to exist by another thing, modes can and are caused by other modes to exist, and, as a result, it is the causal order of modes which explains why modes without a contradictory nature do or do not exist.

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<sup>31</sup> Consider, as well, 2a1: "The essence of man does not involve necessary existence, i.e. from the order of nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist, or that he does not exist."

Ultimately, far from being illegitimate and inexplicable, Spinoza has good reason to uphold this bifurcation in explanations. As we have seen, the different explanatory principles reflect the kind of thing being explained. Substances can be explained by their natures, but not by something outside their natures; modes, so long as they do not have contradictory essences, cannot be explained by their natures alone and are the kind of thing that are explained by something outside their nature. Just as I would be conceptually misguided to look for an external explanation for God, so too would I be foolish to look for an external cause that prevents a square circle from existing. In either case, I have misconceived the object I seek to explain. Similarly, if I walk into a classroom and find a square drawn on a blackboard, it would also be a conceptual mistake for me to explain that square through its nature alone. Instead, to explain why that square exists, I must refer to the causal order of modes to see that the professor who drew that square on the blackboard brought about that square's existence. As a result, the bifurcation is explicable, and is explicable through the differences between substances and modes.

I see no reason that the PSR or naturalism should demand that we dissolve this bifurcation. Rather than think Spinoza's views on explanations contradict his naturalism, it seems that Della Rocca has misrepresented Spinoza's naturalism. For the Spinoza of the *Ethics*, not everything that falls under Della Rocca's account of illegitimate bifurcations is, in the end, inexplicable. We have seen that there is at least one explicable bifurcation, and this bifurcation is grounded in the different natures and properties of substance and its modes. Rather than forcing Spinoza to reject bifurcations which are, after all, explicable, we might be better off finding less general criteria for Spinoza's naturalism. Della Rocca is certainly right that certain

bifurcations are inexplicable, and that Spinoza must reject illegitimate bifurcations, but his account of illegitimate bifurcations is far too general and cannot accommodate Spinoza's distinction in explanatory types. It seems that Della Rocca must define naturalism in such a way that it does not require that we reject explicable and legitimate bifurcation.

### 3.3 Bifurcations, Naturalism, and Acosmism

There is a possible way for Della Rocca to maintain his account of illegitimate bifurcations. Given that the bifurcation in explanatory principles is grounded in the differences between substances and modes, Della Rocca could argue that the substance-mode distinction itself is illegitimate. That is, Della Rocca could appeal to Spinoza's naturalism and the PSR to argue that Spinoza is an acosmist, or to use modern terminology, he could argue that Spinoza is an existence monist. For the acosmist or existence monist, there is only one object—i.e., God or Nature—and the apparent plurality of objects—i.e. the series of finite and infinite modes—are illusory and unreal. Hegel is the most notorious proponent of the acosmist interpretation of the *Ethics*.<sup>32</sup> While this interpretation of Spinoza is not widely accepted among contemporary interpreters of Spinoza, Della Rocca could maintain his interpretation of Spinoza's naturalism and its relation to the PSR by following Hegel and arguing that the distinction between substances and modes itself is inexplicable. In fact, Yitzhak Melamed has argued that Della Rocca's account of naturalism might

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<sup>32</sup> "Spinoza's simple reality is absolute substance; only absolute substance truly is, it alone is actual or is actuality...With regard to the determinate, Spinoza establishes this thesis: [all determination is negation].Hence only the non-particularized or the universal *is*. It alone is what is substantial and therefore truly actual. It alone is what is substantial and therefore truly actual. As a singular thing, the soul or the mind is something limited. It is by negation that "a singular thing is." Therefore, "it [the singular thing] does not have genuine actuality. This on the whole is Spinoza's idea." (Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, VIII, p. 153-4)

ultimately require that we dissolve the bifurcation between substances and modes.<sup>33</sup> Given that substances have a certain set of characteristics and modes have a different set of characteristics, and that these two things are related to one another, it seems Spinoza's naturalism demands that the substance-mode relation is ultimately illegitimate. If Spinoza were an acosmist, such that the distinction between substance and its modes were illusory, then the bifurcation in explanatory types is, after all, illusory as well. Rather than having different explanatory types that are appropriate for different kind of things, then there is only one explanation for the one existing thing.

Now, the substance-mode distinction is one of the most fundamental and important aspects of Spinoza's system. Indeed, Melamed has presented numerous arguments that show how an interpretation of the *Ethics* which dissolves the substance-mode relation, is inconsistent with some core Spinozistic doctrines.<sup>34</sup> Rather than thinking Spinoza is inconsistent, I think it is more likely, and perhaps more charitable, to suggest that Della Rocca attributes to Spinoza a stronger version of naturalism than Spinoza upholds. Indeed, the fact that Della Rocca's interpretation of naturalism does demand that we read Spinoza as an acosmist could provide reason to reject Della Rocca's interpretation of naturalism and its relation to the PSR. For instance, the fact that Della Rocca's account of naturalism leads to acosmism is part of Melamed's reasons for rejecting Della Rocca's interpretation of the *Ethics*.<sup>35</sup> However, even if the acosmist reading is controversial, I have not shown that it is wrong. The fact that Della Rocca's account of naturalism leads to

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<sup>33</sup> Melamed, "The Sirens of Elea," p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> See Melamed's, "Why Spinoza is not an Eleatic Monist (Or Why Diversity Exists)," and, "The Sirens of Elea," p.84-88.

<sup>35</sup> Melamed, "The Sirens of Elea," p. 86-88.

the acosmist interpretation does not necessarily imply that Della Rocca's account of naturalism is incorrect. Della Rocca could be correct that Spinoza is, or should be, an acosmist, and it is possible that he could provide convincing textual evidence to support that interpretation.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that Della Rocca's assumption leads to acosmism does provide reason to be hesitant about accepting Della Rocca's account of Spinozistic naturalism. Indeed, given that in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 Spinoza does, on the face of it, allow there to be a bifurcation between the explanation of substance and mode, rather than assuming from the start that the PSR demands that all bifurcations are illegitimate and inexplicable, we would need further textual evidence to accept this position.

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<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Della Rocca does argue that Spinoza is an existence monist of a certain kind. In "Rationalism, Idealism, Monism, and Beyond," Della Rocca offers the following argument for the acosmist reading of Spinoza:

Consider the relation between a substance, S, and one of its states (or if you prefer, modes), m. If S and m are distinct and thus not identical, they stand in a relation. What is this relation grounded in? It cannot be grounded in S alone or in m alone or in both together. So this relation within S seems...also not to be real. (p. 19)

While Della Rocca's reaches this conclusion based on an argument that denies the existence of relations, this argument relies on the same PSR-based reasoning as we saw in Della Rocca's account of naturalism. An explanation for the relation between substance and its mode cannot be in terms of either substance itself or the modes themselves. For Della Rocca the PSR demands acosmism: "because Spinoza accepts the PSR, he is committed to existence monism or something like it. So perhaps Hegel's reading of Spinoza is correct" (p.20). It is important to note that Della Rocca's views are much more nuanced than Hegel's acosmist reading. He argues that there are degrees of existence. While substance is the only fully existing thing, there are other partially existing things. Unfortunately, a complete analysis of Della Rocca's acosmist reading of the Ethics and his argument for the degrees of existence exceeds the scope of this paper.

## Chapter 4

### The Twofold Use of the PSR: Conceptual Explanations

We can now tackle Della Rocca's final assumption concerning the nature of explanations. As we saw in the introduction, Della Rocca thinks that explanations must be in terms of explicability itself, otherwise explanations would be brute. By building off our analysis of 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 in the previous two chapters, we will see it is not clear that Spinoza thinks that explanations must be conceptual. Instead, we will see that, for the most part, Spinoza thinks explanations that satisfy the demands of his PSR are causal in nature.

#### 4.1 Reasons and Explanations

Before we begin, it is necessary that we need to draw a distinction between two kinds of explanations or reasons. Consider Della Rocca's articulation of the PSR at the beginning of *Spinoza*:

...the PSR, the principle according to which each fact, each thing that exists, has an explanation. The explanation of a fact is enough—sufficient—to enable one to see why the fact holds. The explanation of a fact enables us to see the explained fact coming, as it were. If the explanation of a thing were not sufficient in this way, then some aspect of the thing would remain unexplained, unintelligible. The PSR is thus the embodiment of Spinoza's commitment to intelligibility.<sup>37</sup>

Notice for Della Rocca that, the PSR requires that every aspect of a thing must have an explanation. On his reading, by accepting the PSR Spinoza demands that everything be fully explicable and intelligible. Arguably, Della Rocca's reading of the PSR is much stronger than Spinoza's own articulation of the PSR. Spinoza only

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<sup>37</sup> Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 4

demands that there be a reason for the existence or non-existence of a thing. That is, Spinoza version of the PSR requires that there be something which explains why a thing exists or does not exist, and it is not clear that his version of the PSR requires that any other aspect of the thing is explicable.

It is important that we do not conflate an explanation for the existence or nonexistence of a thing with the claim that everything must be fully explicable. These two kinds of explanations are not necessarily identical. For example, in order to explain why a thing exists, the Aristotelian could point to a thing's efficient cause, given that the efficient cause is what initiates change, and she could argue that the presence or absence of an efficient cause explains why a thing exists or does not exist. While the efficient cause may be part of the explanation of a thing, the efficient cause alone does not constitute a complete or sufficient explanation of the thing.<sup>38</sup> For an Aristotelian, without taking into consideration the thing's other causes, a thing is not fully intelligible, and not fully explained. Given that existential explanations are not always complete explanations, it is possible that one may hold that everything has a reason that can account for its existence or non-existence, without also asserting that every aspect of a thing is intelligible. Demanding that each thing has a reason to exist or not to exist is not the same thing as demanding that each thing be fully intelligible or explicable.

In the two arguments, Spinoza is only concerned with the ontological status of things, and only demands that the existence of a thing be explicable. As a result, we cannot presume that Spinoza's claims in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 commit him to a version of the PSR that commits Spinoza to the complete intelligibility or explicability of

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<sup>38</sup> Carriero, "Spinoza on Final Causality," p. 107-116.

everything. Moreover, there is nothing in the arguments which indicate that Spinoza thinks that the explanation for the existence or non-existence of a thing is identical to a complete explanation for a thing. Now, I do think that Spinoza does think that every aspect of a thing is, in principle, intelligible, and is rendered intelligible through the cause(s) of a thing. However, I would argue that these claims are not addressed directly until part two when Spinoza discusses parallelism, *idea dei* or, what is the same, infinite intellect, and adequacy.<sup>39</sup> Whether Spinoza thinks that everything is intelligible is not something I can attempt to defend here. What is important is that any claims about the intelligibility or conceivability of every aspect of a thing exceed the scope of the PSR found in 1p11d2 or 1p8s2. For the remainder of this paper, I will only address Spinoza's views on reasons and explanations for the existence of a thing, leaving aside concerns about Spinoza's views on complete explanations.

With that qualification in mind, we can turn to the two arguments. The claim that explanations are in terms of a thing's causes seems to be quite easy to demonstrate. In 1p8s2, Spinoza claims that each thing has a cause "on account of which it exists." Similarly, in 1p11d2, Spinoza explains that each thing must have a "cause or reason" that can account for its existence and non-existence. As Curley indicates in his translation, the 'or' in the phrase 'cause or reason' indicates an identity rather than a disjunction. It is not the case that things have *either* a cause *or* a reason; the cause *is* the reason that accounts for the existence or the non-

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<sup>39</sup> Since there exists for each existing thing an idea of that thing in infinite intellect (2p3), and since all ideas insofar as they are in infinite intellect are adequate (2p36d), and since it is through adequate ideas that things are known or made intelligible (Letter 60), it follows that everything that exists is conceivable or intelligible. Moreover, in 2p8 Spinoza claims that there are also ideas of non-existing things in the infinite intellect, indicating that non-existing things are intelligible as well.



existence of a thing. Unfortunately, things are not so straightforward. As we saw last chapter, Spinoza thinks there are two kinds of explanations; explanations in terms of something external to the object, and explanations in terms of a thing's internal nature. In either case, it is not always clear that Spinoza employs causal explanations to account for the existence or nonexistence of either modes or substance. In what follows, I will go through each of the explanations Spinoza provides in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 to examine whether Spinoza consistently employs causal explanations to account for existence or nonexistence of a thing.

## **4.2 External Explanations**

As we saw last chapter, Spinoza thinks that there are two categories of modes that are explained by something external to their nature: non-existing modes with a non-contradictory nature, and existing modes with a non-contradictory nature. In both cases, the explanation that accounts for the existence or non-existence of these modes is causal in nature. For instance, consider Spinoza's remarks in 1p11d2:

[T]he reason why a circle or triangle exists, or why it does not exist, does not follow from the nature of these things, but from the order of the whole of corporeal nature. For from this [order] it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now, or that it is impossible for it to exist now.

As we can see, Spinoza claims that the reason a triangle exists or does not exist will not be internal to its nature, but will be due to the "order of the whole or corporeal nature." One might doubt that Spinoza is specifically talking about causal explanations here. Spinoza does not mention external causes here, but mentions the "order of...nature." Nonetheless, given that the bulk of part one explains how the order of nature causally follows from God's nature, it seems likely that Spinoza

means the *causal* order of nature is the reason a mode with a non-contradictory nature exists or does not exist.

That Spinoza is talking specifically about the causal order of nature in 1p11d2 becomes even clearer once one takes into consideration the third axiom of part one:

1a3: From a given determinate cause, the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow.

In 1a3 Spinoza asserts two modal claims. Let us say that  $x$  is the cause of  $y$ . In the first clause, Spinoza asserts that, given the cause  $x$ , it is necessary for the effect  $y$  to follow [ $x \rightarrow \Box y$ ]. That is, the cause  $x$  could not produce an effect other than  $y$ ; it is not possible that an effect other than  $y$  follows from  $x$ . In the second clause, Spinoza asserts that, without  $x$ , it is not possible that the effect  $y$  could follow [ $\sim x \rightarrow \sim \Diamond y$ ]. Taken together, in 1a3 Spinoza is making a causal claim that establishes a necessary connection between causes and effects:<sup>40</sup> an effect of a cause follows necessarily from its cause and if there is no cause, it is not possible for an effect to follow.

There are clear similarities between the causal claim 1a3 and the explanation for the existence and nonexistence of a triangle. Indeed, the explanation for the existence or nonexistence of a triangle is simply an application of each clause of 1a3. If, in the order of nature, a triangle has a determinate cause, it follows necessarily as an effect; if a triangle does not have a cause, it is impossible for the triangle to follow or to exist. If the claim of 1p11d2 is an application of the causal claim made in 1a3, we can see that Spinoza must be referring to the causal order of nature. As a result, the explanation given in 1p11d2 for the existence or nonexistence of a

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<sup>40</sup> Jerrett, "The Logical Structure of Spinoza's "Ethics", Part I," p. 29, 62-63 n.69.

triangle is causal, relying specifically on the fact that there is a necessary connection between causes and effects.

In 1p8s2, it is clear that Spinoza accounts for the existence or non-existence of a mode causally as well. Using the example of twenty men, Spinoza writes:

If 20 men exist in nature...it will not be enough (i.e., to give a reason why 20 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 20 exist. For (by III) there must necessarily be a cause why each exists.

As we can see, if twenty men exist, Spinoza claims that it is necessary for these men to have a cause which explains why they exist. Spinoza here is simply applying his statement of the PSR in 1p8s2. If “there must be, for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists” it follows that twenty existing men must have a cause, and that it is the cause through which the men are explained.

Spinoza also requires that there is a “cause why not more and not fewer” men exist. Now, Spinoza’s statement of the PSR in 1p8s2 only covers existing things; if something exists, it exists because of a cause. However, Spinoza claims that there must also be a cause for nonexistent things. Given that Spinoza is not talking about the explanation for existing men, his statement of the PSR in 1p8s2 says nothing about how we ought to explain the nonexistence of certain men. Moreover, it seems odd to claim that there is a cause which explains why a thing does not exist. If a group of men ceased existing, then it would make sense for him to say that there must be a cause which brings about the men’s nonexistence. However, Spinoza is not talking about men who ceased existing, but men who never existed in the first place. It seems odd to claim men who never existed have a cause which explains why they do not exist. Indeed, they have no causes and no causal history. Here too, we can

make sense of Spinoza's claim using 1a3. The first clause of 1a3 asserts that an effect of a cause cannot be otherwise. If causes necessitate their effects in this way, then we can explain why a state of affairs does not obtain by showing how it is not possible for it to follow from a certain cause. Consider if I flipped a coin and it lands on heads. To explain why it lands on heads rather than tails, I might explain that there is a fifty percent chance of landing on either side, and it just happened to land on heads rather than tails. For Spinoza, this explanation is deficient. For him, I cannot explain this scenario by appealing to odds or chance. The effect—the coin landing heads—follows necessarily from the cause—the flip. Given the way I flipped the coin, there is not an equal possibility of the coin landing either heads or tails. As a result, to explain why the coin does not land on tails, I must show that the actual coin flip determined that the coin will land head-side down. Similarly, the cause that explains the existence of the twenty men will also be the cause which explains why at most and at least twenty men exist. While Spinoza does refer to 1a3 in 1p8s2, 1a3 also seems to be the motivation behind his account of non-existing men. Once I see that the determinate causes of the twenty men must necessarily produce twenty men, I have shown why a state of affairs in which more or fewer men exist is not possible.

The explanations of modes without contradictory natures are in all cases causal. If a mode exists, the reason it exists is because it has an external cause. If a mode without a contradictory nature does not exist, the reason it does not exist is because it lacks a cause in the order of nature or because it is impossible for it to be the effect of a cause.

### 4.3 Internal Explanations

While it is reasonably clear that the existence of modes without a contradictory nature are explained causally, we still must show that explanations that refer to a thing's internal nature are causal as well. Let us start with the ways in which Spinoza explains God's existence. The reasons Spinoza offers to account for God's existence are as follows:

1p8s2: "[substances'] definition must involve necessary existence, and consequently its existence must be inferred from its definition alone."

1p11d2: "the reason why a substance exists...follows from its nature alone, because it involves existence"

It is not at all clear that either of these are causal explanations. In the first case, Spinoza infers God's existence from his definition; in the second, Spinoza explains God's existence from his nature. Rather than being causal explanations, in these passages Spinoza seems to be claiming that God's existence follows as a kind of conceptual necessity. Indeed, Spinoza seems to be arguing that God's existence is explained from the fact that the concept of God involves existence. Rather than being causal explanations, Spinoza's remarks bring to mind the ontological arguments of Anselm or Descartes which infer God's existence from God's conception or perfection.

If these are not causal explanations, then we encounter a couple of problems. First, Spinoza does not deny that God has a cause. Spinoza argues in 1p7d that substances are self-caused. Consider, as well, 1p18 and the first part of the demonstration:

1p18: God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things

Demonstration: Everything that is, is in God, and must be conceived through God (by 1p15), and so (by 1p16c1) God is the cause of things which are in him...

Given that, by definition, a substance is in itself (1d6), one thing that follows from the demonstration is that God is the cause of himself. Moreover, Spinoza is talking specifically about immanent causation here. As John Morrison explains<sup>41</sup>, immanent causation is a kind of efficient causation. It follows that, if God is his own immanent cause, God is his own efficient cause as well. While God will not be produced by an external cause, God is nonetheless a causal product of himself.<sup>42</sup> Since God does have a cause, it would be odd for Spinoza to explain God's existence in terms of something other than his efficient cause. Second, Spinoza's PSR in 1p8s2 states that "there must be, for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists." Given that God is an existing thing, it follows that the account we provide for God's existence would be in terms of God's cause. If Spinoza's explanations for God's existence are not causal, it seems Spinoza would be in violation of his version of PSR.

Given these problems, we might be better off reading Spinoza's claims about God as causal claims. Indeed, on a closer reading it seems that these do amount to causal explanations. To see that these are causal explanations, we will have to understand how Spinoza understands God's definition and God's nature. As we will see, Spinoza understands God's definition or nature in terms of God's cause. As a

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<sup>41</sup> Morrison, "Restricting Spinoza's Causal Axiom," p. 4, n.11.

<sup>42</sup> For further evidence that God is his own efficient cause, see 1p16c1: "God is the efficient cause of all things which fall under an infinite intellect." In 2p4 Spinoza explains that infinite intellect comprehends God himself. (Morrison, "Restricting Spinoza's Causal Axiom," p. 4).

result, when Spinoza explains God's existence in terms of God's definition or nature, Spinoza is explaining God causally.

Let us start with God's definition. For Spinoza, the definition of a thing states its cause.<sup>43</sup> While Spinoza does not offer an account of 'definitions' in the *Ethics*, we can see that Spinoza does support this position in Letter 60. In this letter, Spinoza writes,

[T]he idea or definition of the thing should express its efficient cause. For example, in order to investigate the properties of a circle, I ask whether from the following idea of a circle...I can deduce all its properties; that is to say, I ask whether this idea involves the efficient cause of a circle...So, too, when I define God as a supremely perfect Being, since this definition does not express the efficient cause (for I take it that an efficient cause can be internal as well as external), I define God as a Being, etc. (see *Ethics*, Part 1, Definition 6).<sup>44</sup>

Letter 60 is useful for two reasons. First, it confirms that, at the time Spinoza wrote the *Ethics*, he considered definitions to be causal. Specifically, it tells us that, in general, Spinoza thinks that the definition of either a substance or a mode must state a thing's efficient cause. Second, this letter is also helpful insofar as it states God's definition in particular. As we can see, Spinoza claims that God, too, must be defined in terms of his efficient cause, and he claims that his definition of God in the *Ethics* does define God correctly. Now, in 1d6, Spinoza defines God as a being with infinite attributes. Given that this definition states its cause, this means that God's attributes are God's cause. This idea may seem rather odd. In what sense do God's

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<sup>43</sup> Garrett *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, p. 147-151.

<sup>44</sup> *Spinoza: Complete Works*, p. 913.

attributes cause God to exist?<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, Spinoza does not develop or explain this position in the letter, and it would exceed the scope of this paper to attempt to explain how Spinoza understands God's self-causation through the attributes. What is important for our purposes is that God's definition states God's cause, and God's cause is the attributes.

What about God's nature? Spinoza does not explain what he thinks constitutes the nature of a thing, nor does he provide a definition for this concept. Nonetheless, Spinoza uses the terms 'nature' and 'essence' interchangeably, indicating that he thinks the two terms are synonymous.<sup>46</sup> Now, for Spinoza, God's attributes constitute God's essence (1d4). It follows that God's cause constitutes God's essence. As a result, it turns out that God's definition, essence, and cause are all closely related: the definition and essence of God, are expressed and constituted by God's cause.

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<sup>45</sup> Spinoza gives a possible answer in 1p15s. In one of the arguments found there, Spinoza attempts to show that people who maintain that extension is distinct from, and created by God, are mistaken. He writes:

But meanwhile, by the other arguments by which they strive to demonstrate this same conclusion they clearly show that they entirely remove corporeal, *or* extended, substance itself from the divine nature. And they maintain that it has been created by God. But by what divine power could it be created? They are completely ignorant of that.

Here we get a hint of what Spinoza means when he says that the efficient cause of God is the attributes. Extension is one of the attributes of God. For Spinoza, the attributes contain some kind of power, and it is this power which gives God the power to create. Put otherwise, it is the attributes which provide God with the power to produce an effect. Perhaps the same attributes which provide God the power to produce an effect are the same things which themselves produce God. For an in depth discussion of the ways God's definition is causal see Garrett's *Meaning in Spinoza's Method* p. 175-181.

<sup>46</sup> See for instance 2p10s. In this scholium Spinoza is arguing against "...many [why] say that anything without which a thing can neither be nor be conceived pertains to the nature of the thing." In this passage Spinoza is quoting part of the definition of essence (2d2) almost verbatim, but replaces the word 'essence' with the word 'nature.' This indicates that Spinoza thinks the terms are interchangeable.



Once we understand that Spinoza understands definitions and natures in a causal way, we can read Spinoza's explanations for God's existence causally. In both cases, Spinoza is explaining God's existence through God's internal cause; in 1p8s2 by referring to God's definition, and in 1p11d2 by referring to God's nature. Moreover, by stating that God's nature or definition "involves existence" Spinoza does not mean that existence is one of the predicates of a perfect being. For Spinoza, the 'involvement' relation seems to be about implication or entailment. For instance, in 2p49d Spinoza provides something akin to a definition of 'involvement.' He writes, "to say that A must involve the concept of B is the same as to say that A cannot be conceived without B." What Spinoza seems to mean here is that A involves B insofar as A necessarily implies B. If one grasps A correctly, then one must also grasp B. Now, in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2, Spinoza claims that God's definition or nature, involves existence. Given Spinoza's understanding of 'involves,' this indicates that he thinks God's existence is implied by, or can be inferred from, God's definition or nature. Given that God is by his nature self-caused and is defined as such, God's definition "involves existence" insofar as one cannot correctly comprehend God's definition without also comprehending that God exists.

It is not clear that Spinoza is correct that God's self-causation alone implies (or involves) that God exists. In order to infer from God's definition that God necessarily exists, one must supplement that definition with Spinoza's views on causation. As we saw last chapter, Spinoza asserts that substance-to-substance causation is impossible; substances cannot causally interact with one another (1p6). If substances cannot causally react with one another, then it is not possible that one substance could prevent another substance from existing. This means that no

substance can prevent God from existing. When God's self-causation is conjoined with Spinoza's views on causal relations between substances, then the fact that God is self-caused does imply that God exists. The fact that God's cause is internal, and that there is nothing outside God that can prevent his cause from bringing about his existence, implies that God exists. As a result, when explaining God's existence through God's definition or nature, Spinoza is offering a causal explanation. God's existence can be explained through God's definition or nature alone because God's definition or nature express God's internal cause, and, by having an internal cause, it follows that God must exist.

God is not the only thing that is explained internally according to its nature. Spinoza also thinks that the non-existence of modes with a contradictory nature is also explained in terms of its nature. Using the example of a square circle, Spinoza claims that "the very nature of a square circle indicates the reason why it does not exist, viz. because it involves a contradiction." Unlike the internal explanation of God, it is not clear to me that this is a causal explanation. Modes with a contradictory nature are modes that never existed, so they will have no causal history through which we can explain their nonexistence. Moreover, unlike Spinoza's explanation for non-existent modes without a contradictory nature, Spinoza is not explaining the nonexistence of a square-circle by appealing to the necessary connection between causes and effects. Instead, he explains the nonexistence of a thing due to the fact that the concept of a square and a circle are contradictory. It is not clear that there is a causal claim underlying this position. Indeed, the explanation for the non-existence of contradictory modes is in terms of its conceptual nature, not its cause. Now, one could attempt to argue that, like substance,

contradictory modes are kinds of self-caused entities. However, unlike God, these entities are self-annihilating, and their nature of self-annihilation implies that they do not exist.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, Spinoza does not provide us with the resources to make such an argument. While Spinoza tells us much about God in the *Ethics*, he tells us very little about things with contradictory natures.<sup>48</sup> As a result, any attempt to interpret Spinoza's claims about the nonexistence of contradictory modes is purely speculative.

For the most part, then, Spinoza does uphold that the reason a thing exists is causal. All of Spinoza's explanations for the existence or nonexistence of God and modes without contradictory natures are causal. Nonetheless, when it comes to things of a contradictory nature, the reason these things do not exist is not causal, but conceptual. As a result, it seems that, contrary to Della Rocca, explanations which satisfy Spinoza's version of the PSR are, for the most part, causal. A thing's cause is the reason that a thing exists or does not exist.

#### **4.4 Causal Explanations and Brute Facts**

Even though in the version of the PSR found in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 explanations that satisfy the demands of the PSR are causal, Della Rocca could maintain that explanations must be conceptual. Specifically, he could object that my analysis of Spinozistic explanations remains incomplete. As we saw in the introduction, Della Rocca argues that if causal relations were not explained by conceptual connection

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<sup>47</sup> Problematically, this would violate Spinoza's principle, crucial to his argument for the *conatus*, that "No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause." (3p4)

<sup>48</sup> As far as I can tell, the only other place Spinoza mentions things with contradictory natures is in 1p33: "a thing is called contingent only because of a defect of our knowledge. For if we do not know that the thing's essence involves a contradiction, and nevertheless can affirm nothing certainly about its existence." Here too, all Spinoza tells us is that having a nature that involves a contradiction is sufficient to ensure a thing cannot exist.

between the causal *relata*, then the causal connection that holds between two objects remains brute and inexplicable. If Della Rocca is right that causation is explained by conceivability, then he could argue that causal explanations amount to conceivability explanations. It seems then that my analysis is incomplete. I stopped short by failing to see the causal relation between things must be explained by explicability itself.

In *A Rationalist Manifesto*, Della Rocca's basic argument seems to be as follows.<sup>49</sup> Della Rocca first invokes the PSR specifically in the case of causation:

- 1) The PSR demands that each thing be explicable
- 2) The PSR demands that there be an explanation for causation
- 3) Either causation is explained in terms of the concepts involved or causation is explain by some other fact *F*

We can iterate the PSR again to show that it cannot be the case that causation is explained by *F*.

- 4) Assume that causation were explained by *F*
- 5) The PSR demands that *F* must also be explicable
- 6) Either *F* itself is explained in terms of the concepts involved, or *F* is explained by some fact *G*
- 7) In order to avoid a regress, *F* must be explained in terms of the concepts involved, or *F* would be a brute fact
- 8) By the PSR, *F* cannot be a brute fact
- 9) Therefore, *F* cannot explain causation

It turns out, then, that causation itself must be explained in terms of the concepts involved. The main motivation underlying this argument is Della Rocca's assumption that the only possible explanation for a causal connection that can satisfy the demands of the PSR is one in terms of conceptual connections. As he argues, if we assume that causal relations were not explained by the concepts

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<sup>49</sup> "A Rationalist Manifesto" p76-80. I discuss the argument in more detail in the introduction.

involved, then “it would be unclear why this connection holds, and indeed the connection would, I believe, be ultimately inexplicable.”<sup>50</sup> If we attempt to explain a causal connection in any other way, we can continually iterate the demand for explicability. In contrast, if the connection between the cause and the effect were conceptually grounded, “then the connection would be completely explicable...in precisely the same way that...the connection between being a bachelor and being an unmarried man is explicable.”<sup>51</sup> Unless we explain causal connections in terms of conceptual connection, causal relations would be a brute fact, and would violate the PSR.

We have good reason to reject this argument. First, it is not clear that Spinoza shared Della Rocca’s assumption that the only explanations that are fully explicable are conceptual explanations. Della Rocca provides no evidence that this is, in fact, Spinoza’s position. Moreover, given that the explanations Spinoza provides for the existence and non-existence of a thing in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2 are all in terms of a thing’s cause; it is not self-evident that Spinoza shares this assumption. Second, in step two, Della Rocca assumes that Spinoza’s version of the PSR requires that causal relations are in need of explanation or are amenable to explanation. As we saw in chapter one, given that causation itself is not a substance or a mode, it is not self-evident that Spinoza demands that causation itself is included in the scope of the PSR. Prima facie, it is not clear that Spinoza does ever provide an explanation for causation. Spinoza never provides a definition of causation, nor does he demonstrate that causation is reducible to conceivability. Lacking an argument that convinces us that Spinoza does extend the scope of the PSR to include a feature like

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

causation, we cannot presume from the outset that causal relations must themselves have an explanation. If causal relations are not in need of an explanation, then Della Rocca's argument cannot get off the ground. While Della Rocca's argument may be successful in showing that certain proponents of the PSR would require that causal relations be explained conceptually, it does not show that Spinoza must share that view as well. As a result, this argument alone does not provide sufficient justification for us to conclude that Spinoza must hold that causation is explained in terms of explicability itself.

We cannot conclude that Spinoza must explain causation conceptually from the PSR alone. Instead, to see whether Spinoza actually upholds this view, we must find other textual evidence demonstrating that Spinoza does have a conceptual explanation for causation. To be fair to Della Rocca, while the PSR is the primary motivation and appeal of Della Rocca's claim that causation is explained by conceivability, we should note that he does provide some textual evidence to supplement this argument. For the purposes of this paper, I will not address Della Rocca's textual evidence. Explaining the relationship between causation and conceivability in the *Ethics* is a rather tricky matter. While causation and conceivability are two of the most basic and pervasive features found in the *Ethics*, Spinoza does not define them nor does he articulate exactly how the two relate. As a result, understanding the relation between these two features is one of the most difficult interpretive challenges for a scholar of the *Ethics*. The enormity of the task is evident when one sees the diverse ways that scholars have attempted to explain the relationship between causation and conception. In addition to Della Rocca's claim that causation is explained by conception, Curley argues that causation and

conception are different expressions of logical dependence<sup>52</sup>; Melamed argues that causation and conception are co-extensive with one another but he does not hold that one is reducible to, or explained by, another<sup>53</sup>; and Morrison argues that causation and conception are not co-extensive in all cases, and, in stark contrast to Della Rocca, argues that causation and conception are two of Spinoza's "foundational, unanalyzed notions."<sup>54</sup> Attempting to address Della Rocca's textual evidence, examining whether his interpretation is consistent with the way Spinoza employs causation and conceivability, and determining if his interpretation is more convincing than other interpretations far exceeds the scope of this paper.

Given that I have not shown that Della Rocca's claim that causation is explained by conceivability is wrong, here too, all we can conclude is that Della Rocca's final assumption that explanations must be in terms of conceivability itself is not self-evident. What is clear is in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2, Spinoza employs causal explanations to satisfy the demands of his version of the PSR.

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<sup>52</sup> Edwin Curly, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation*, p. 40

<sup>53</sup> Melamed articulates this position in "Parallelisms and the Multifaceted Structure of Ideas," see especially p.675-678 and note 82. The co-extensiveness of causation and conception is now a standard reading of the *Ethics*. See Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*, p. 10-12; Jarrett, "The Logical Structure of Spinoza's *Ethics*, Part 1", p. 29; Melamed, "Spinoza on Inherence, Causation, and Conception," p. 366-367; and Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, p. 128n1.

<sup>54</sup> Morrison, "The Relation Between Conception and Causation in Spinoza's Metaphysics," p.1.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

I began my analysis of Spinoza's use of the PSR by symbolizing the PSR in the following way:

$E(x,y)$ :  $x$  is an explanation for  $y$

$\forall x \exists y E(y,x)$  – Everything has something which explains it

As discussed in the introduction, this definition is ambiguous insofar as it permits various interpretations about the scope of the PSR, the nature of explanations, and the nature of the explanatory items. These challenges to Della Rocca's reading have also informed our understanding of the version of the PSR that emerges in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2. Having examined these two arguments closely, we can now attempt to clarify and update this definition to fit Spinoza's own version of the PSR.

*$x$ : the things in need of explanation*

For Spinoza, all existing and non-existing modes and substances must have an explanation for their existence or non-existence.

*The nature of the predicate  $E$*

Modes without a contradictory nature are given causal explanations for their existence and nonexistence. If they exist, they have a cause which brings about their existence; if they do not exist, it is impossible for a cause to bring about their existence. Similarly, the explanation for God's existence is causal. While God lacks an external cause in the order of nature, he exists as a product of his own internal cause. In contrast, modes with a contradictory nature are explained by the



impossibility of their nature. Spinoza does not explain that this is a causal reason; instead it seems to be conceptual in nature.

*y: the explanatory items*

For God, the item which explains his existence is himself, or, to be more precise, his nature. Similarly, the item which explains the existence of a mode with a contradictory nature is also that mode's nature. In contrast, we do not know much about the specific items which explain the existence or nonexistence of a mode. While we know the item will be a mode's cause, we do not know which of its causes will be included in a sufficient explanation. For instance, how far back in the mode's causal history must an explanation go in order to explain why a mode exists or does not exist? Can I explain a mode's existence simply through the mode's proximate causes, or must I also explain that mode through its remote causes? Or must I explain a mode through its entire causal history, taking into account all of a mode's proximate, remote, transitive, and immanent causes. Unfortunately, Spinoza does not provide answers to these questions in either 1p8s2 and 1p11d2, and more work is needed to determine how a specific mode is to be explained.

Let us update the schema of abbreviation and the symbolization to take into account these claims:

$E(x,y)$ :  $x$  is an explanation for  $y$

$C(x,y)$ :  $x$  is the cause of  $y$

$Px$ :  $x$  is a mode

$Qx$ :  $x$  is a substance

$\forall x \exists y [(Px \vee Qx) \rightarrow (C(y,x) \wedge E(y,x))]$  – All substances and modes have some cause which explains it.

This symbolization greatly disambiguates the PSR. It takes into account that, for Spinoza, the scope of the PSR includes substances and modes, and that explanations are in terms of a thing's causes.

We can be even more perspicuous if we distinguish between two versions of the PSR, one for substance, one for modes. As we saw in chapters two and three, different explanations are appropriate for different things. The cause that explains a substance is God's nature itself; the cause that explains a mode is distinct from that mode. Given the different types of explanations, we can distinguish between two versions of the PSR: one for substance, one for modes.

Substances:  $\forall x [Qx \rightarrow (C(x, x) \wedge E(x, x))]$  – All substances are self-caused and explained through their cause.

Modes:  $\forall x \exists y [Px \rightarrow (C(y, x) \wedge E(y, x))]$  – All modes have some cause which explains it.

In the case of substance, this symbolization takes into account God's internal causation. Of course the universal quantifier is not really necessary for Spinoza given that there is only one substance, and it is God. In contrast, while substance is its own cause and explanation, modes are not. In the case of modes, the cause which explains them will be in terms of some cause external to their nature. While distinguishing between these two versions of the PSR does help to disambiguate the PSR further, the account of the PSR for modes is still lacking. Most importantly, it does not clearly capture the fact that Spinoza requires that non-existing things have explanations. Moreover, it ignores the fact that modes with a contradictory nature are not explained through their cause but are explained by the impossibility of their natures. Nonetheless, this symbolization presents a more adequate account of the version of the PSR Spinoza articulates in 1p8s2 and 1p11d2.

While a new account of the PSR has emerged from my analysis of 1p8s2 and 1p11d2, my primary aim in this project was to analyze the three main assumptions underlying Della Rocca's powerful reading of the *Ethics*. I hope to have shown that none of Della Rocca's assumptions about Spinoza's version of the PSR are self-evident. In chapter one, we saw that the scope of the PSR is ambiguous. While it is clear that substances and modes are included in the scope of the PSR, it is unclear just how widely the scope extends. In chapter two, we saw that Spinoza offers a distinction in explanatory types that should be considered illegitimate and inexplicable according to Della Rocca's definition of naturalism. I suggested that this indicates that Della Rocca's account of illegitimate bifurcations is too strong. Finally, in chapter three, we saw that Della Rocca's claim that all explanations must be in terms of conceivability itself does not conform to Spinoza's own views on explanation. For all three assumptions, Della Rocca must provide further evidence to support his claims. While Della Rocca's interpretation of Spinoza has opened up a new and fascinating way of interpreting the *Ethics*, there is still much work to be done to clarify how Spinoza articulates and employs the PSR in the *Ethics*.

## Appendix A

### The Arguments of 1p8s2 and 1p11d2

It may be helpful to the reader to offer some context about these arguments and to quote the arguments in their entirety. The second scholium to proposition eight is one of the more lengthy scholia in the *Ethics*. While the demonstrations are, or at least should be, based on deductions given a certain set of definitions and axioms, the scholia often function as breaks in the rigorous geometric style of the *Ethics*. In them, one finds Spinoza recapping his position after a certain number of axioms, offering less formal arguments to supplement his main arguments found in the demonstrations, and explaining what he thinks follows from a certain position just outlined. For the reader, the scholia are often a nice break from the dense and complicated arguments in the demonstrations.

Like many scholia, in 1p8s2 Spinoza offers secondary support for positions. In this scholium, Spinoza presents two main arguments. In the first part of the scholium, he argues that “the existence of a substance, like its essence, is an eternal truth”; in the second part quoted above, he argues that “there is only one [substance] of the same nature.” These are both positions Spinoza has already demonstrated earlier in the *Ethics*, the former in 1p7d, the second in 1p5d. Unlike most scholia, the second argument shares much in common with the rigorous deductive proofs found in the demonstrations. Spinoza presents four assertions that “must be noted.” These four positions function much the same way that the definitions and axioms do. Spinoza states them without justification and his conclusion is deduced from these four claims. Unlike the axioms and definitions, these four assertions play no role in the rest of the *Ethics*. Importantly, the third unjustified claim found in this

argument seems to state the PSR: that there must be, for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists.

In 1p11, Spinoza claims that “God, *or* a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.” 1p11 is one of the few propositions that has an alternate demonstration, and it is the only proposition with three demonstrations.<sup>55</sup> It seems that Spinoza wanted to ensure that there could be no doubt about God’s existence. Given the importance God has to Spinoza’s metaphysics and moral theory, perhaps this is not surprising. Spinoza’s primary demonstration for God’s necessary existence is much shorter. In that argument, Spinoza offers a fairly straightforward argument in his typical geometric style. He simply refers back to an earlier axiom and demonstration to show that it is impossible to conceive that God does not exist. In contrast, the lengthy and complex second demonstration breaks away from the geometric style. While Spinoza does explicitly and implicitly refer back to earlier propositions, axioms, and definitions, the most important deductive element in the proposition is not clearly an axiom or a definition, nor is it a position Spinoza has demonstrated earlier in the *Ethics*. Spinoza articulates this position at the outset of the demonstration: “For each thing there must be assigned a cause, *or* reason, both for its existence and for its nonexistence.” This too seems to be a statement of the PSR. Just as we saw in 1p8s2 Spinoza offers no support for this claim; Spinoza takes it as axiomatic or self-evident. Throughout these chapters, I will examine these arguments closely to see what insights they reveal about Spinoza’s version of the PSR. I will quote the arguments in full below.

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<sup>55</sup> As far as I can tell, three propositions have three alternate demonstrations, 4p37, 4p51, and 4p59. Unlike 1p11, these propositions only have two demonstrations.

## 1p8s2

...So it must be confessed that the existence of a substance, like its essence, is an eternal truth. 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. E.g., the definition of the triangle expresses nothing but the simple nature of the triangle, but not any certain number of triangles. It is to be noted,

- III. that there must be, for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists.

Finally, it is to be noted,

- IV. that this 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 (*to make the matter clearer, I assume that they exist at the same time, and that no others previously existed 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.

For that reason it is to be inferred absolutely that whatever is of such a nature that there can be many individuals [of that nature] must, to exist, have an external cause to exist. Now since it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist (by what we have already shown in this scholium), its definition must involve necessary existence, and consequently its existence must be inferred from its definition alone. But from its definition (as we have shown from II and III) the existence of a number of substances cannot follow. Therefore it follows necessarily from this, that there exists only one of the same nature, as was proposed.

## 1p11d2

For each thing there must be assigned a cause, *or* reason, both for its existence and for its nonexistence. For example, if a triangle exists, there must be a reason *or* cause why it exists; but if it does not exist, there must also be a reason *or* cause which prevents it from existing, *or* which takes its existence away.

But this reason, *or* cause, must either be contained in the nature of the thing, or be outside it. E.g., the very nature of a square circle indicates the reason why it does not exist, namely, because it involves a contradiction. On the other hand, the reason why a substance exists also follows from its nature alone, because it involves existence (see 1p7). But the reason why a circle or triangle exists, or why it does not exist, does not follow from the nature of these things, but from the order of the whole of corporeal Nature. For from this [order] it must follow either that the triangle necessarily exists now or that it is impossible for it to exist now.

These things are evident through themselves; from them it follows that a thing necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents it from existing. Therefore, if there can be no reason or cause which prevents God from existing, or which takes his existence away, it must certainly be inferred that he necessarily exists. But if there were such a reason, *or* cause, it would have to be either in God's very nature or outside it, that is, in another substance of another nature. For if it were of the same nature, that very supposition would concede that God exists. But a substance which was of another nature [NS: than the divine] would have nothing in common with God (by P2), and therefore could neither give him existence nor take it away.

Since, then, there can be, outside the divine nature, no reason, *or*, cause which takes away the divine existence, the reason will necessarily have to be in his nature itself, if indeed he does not exist. That is, his nature would involve a contradiction [NS: as in our second example]. But it is absurd to affirm this of a Being absolutely infinite and supremely perfect. Therefore, there is no cause, *or* reason, either in God or outside God, which takes his existence away. And therefore, God necessarily exists.

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