Reason and Body in Spinoza’s Metaphysics

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Traditional labels for central tenets of Spinoza’s metaphysics support the view that, in response to Descartes, Spinoza maintains a strict symmetry between thought and extension. Descartes had argued that existence includes some things that are minds, others that are bodies, and still others that are both minds and bodies. Thus God and angels are minds; a chair is a body; and I, in at least one important sense, am both. In what has been known as the ‘dual aspect theory’, Spinoza rejects this view. He contends instead that all things, including God and ordinary objects and all persons, are in one way thinking and in another way extended. In the case of a person, for example, I am a mind; I am a body; and my mind and my body, although they are of different attributes, are identical. In his accounts of causal relations, Descartes had argued that mind can interact with mind in isolation from all body; that body can interact with body in isolation from all mind; that minds can affect bodies; and that bodies can affect minds. The causal history of the world for Descartes, then, might include chapters that are wholly mental, chapters that are wholly corporeal, and chapters that include interaction between mind and body. In what has been known as his ‘parallelism’, Spinoza rejects all mind–body interaction and maintains, moreover, that the causal interactions of bodies are in some sense the same as the causal interactions of minds and vice-versa. Bodies do affect other bodies and minds affect other minds. Mind and body are parallel in the sense that the order of those causal interactions is the same: there is only causal history of the world.

The dual aspect theory and parallelism undoubtedly offer advantages over their Cartesian rivals, notably in the accounts that they offer of the mind–body relation in human beings. Spinoza’s views raise problems of their own, however. A particularly pressing problem concerns causation among finite things. Ordinarily we might suppose, whenever A causes C and B is identical to A, that B is also the cause of C. For example, if Lorde has inspired the youth of the world, and if Lorde is identical to Yelich-O’Connor, then it just seems clear that Yelich-O’Connor has inspired the youth of the world. Spinoza cannot admit that suppositions of this sort are always warranted. In particular, while the dual aspect theory makes bodies and minds identical, parallelism rules out mind–body interaction. If a corporeal cause, $C_B$, has a given effect, $E_M$, and the cause is identical with something ideal, $C_M$, then, given ordinary assumptions, we would have to conclude that $C_M$
also has the effect, \( E_p \). For a mental cause to have a corporeal effect, however, is a violation of parallelism.

Like some other commentators, I think that Spinoza's response to this problem is to reject the ordinary supposition that anything identical to a given cause has the same effects as that cause.\(^1\) Spinoza does insist that every corporeal cause is identical to some mental cause. Despite this identity he also holds that only corporeal causes have effects on bodies and that only mental causes have effects on minds.

This chapter starts from a conviction of mine, which I will not defend here in its full generality, that Spinoza holds a similar conception of reason.\(^2\) That is, I think that on the account of the Ethics only a reason that is itself ideal explains something ideal and only a reason that is itself corporeal explains something corporeal. Just as Spinoza would find it to be a mistake to take something thoughtful to cause something extended, so he would find it to be a mistake to take something thoughtful to be a reason for something extended.\(^3\)

Although Spinoza's close association of reasons and causes in the Ethics lends the view some initial appeal, this conception of reason may strike some readers as odd or even as a kind of category mistake. For, beyond suggesting that reasons, like causes, are restricted to particular attributes, it suggests that reasons might be corporeal. Indeed, because Spinoza endorses a version of the principle of sufficient reason (hereafter, PSR), on which there must be a reason for whatever exists, and because he takes bodies to exist, the view that reasons for body must be themselves corporeal positively requires that many reasons be corporeal.

The notion of a corporeal reason might seem just incoherent, however, if one thinks that a reason is not the sort of thing that can be extended.

'Reason' in English, like its closest Latin counterpart \( \text{ratio} \), has a broad range of meanings, and the reflexive response on which reasons just cannot be corporeal may simply result from an emphasis on some rather than other senses of the term. Certainly a reason that someone has consciously in mind, as a basis for some action, seems as though it has primarily a psychological sense. So does the notion of reason as a process of thinking, for example, from some premises to some conclusions. The sense of reason most relevant here is that of explanation, and for this sense, I think that there is a natural and clear way to understand reasons, particularly for things that are themselves corporeal, to be corporeal. Suppose, for example, that a disc slides across the ice. What is the reason, or explanation, for this? The ice is slick. Such a reason, even if understanding it would be a mental act, seems to be corporeal.

Whatever our own intuitions about corporeal reasons, I accept these implications of parallelism for the interpretation of Spinoza together with the burden of argument that accompanies them. The thesis of this chapter, however, is still more narrow: finite bodies, on Spinoza's account, are defeasibly and finitely self-explanatory. That is, they supply their own reasons, and, of course, because they are bodies, these reasons are corporeal. The Latin term \( \text{ratio} \) has several different meanings, including both that of the English term 'reason' and many of the meanings of the English term 'reason'. Where Spinoza writes about a particular
body's ratio, I think that he is best understood to refer both to a characteristic ratio or proportion of motions among that body's parts and also to the reason that defeasibly and finitely explains the body's existence. What I mean by 'defeasibly' is that the reason a body supplies for its own existence may not in fact explain the body's existence. If it does not, then like a cause that would have had a given effect but for influence of other causes, what it explains will not come about: the body will not exist. What I mean by 'finitely' is that, while each body does explain its own existence, it is not a complete explanation. The slickness of the ice is a finite explanation of the movement of the disc, in this sense, because other things are also important to the explanation.

The argument will have the following structure. I will start with an account of the PSR in the Ethics. This will contribute to the case for my thesis. I want to show that Spinoza does not in his most detailed account of the PSR invoke a conception of reason that we frequently associate with sufficient reason and that is distinctively ideal: he does not invoke God's will. Moreover, even at this high level of generality (an account of reason which applies to all existences and to all attributes), Spinoza seems to take reasons important to human beings to be corporeal. My discussion of the PSR will have another point as well, however, that will inform the rest of my discussion. It will show that Spinoza conceives of reasons as being either internal or external to existing things. That distinction, then, will govern my discussion of particular reasons for body in the Ethics. I will show that both internal reasons and external reasons for body are, as Spinoza understands them, corporeal. The internal reason for a given body, it will turn out, is the reason or ratio that is that body's nature.

The Demand for Reasons

On any familiar version of the PSR, existence and changes to existence must have a sufficient reason. I hope to show that, on the argument of the Ethics, such reasons can be — indeed the most important reasons to human beings are — corporeal. However, that project faces an immediate obstacle: a reason may not seem to be, as it is ordinarily understood, the sort of thing that could be corporeal. Instead it would seem to be a proposition, a concept, an idea, or a motive. In this section, I will offer an interpretation of the PSR as Spinoza presents it in the Ethics. Although I will offer some argument for the conclusion that, even in his broadest account of reason, Spinoza considers some familiar sorts of reasons to be corporeal, my case is largely negative: I will argue that the demand for reason in the Ethics does not characterise reason in psychological terms. Spinoza's account of sufficient reason does not itself present reasons as propositions, concepts, ideas, or motives. Notably, Spinoza's version does not include the common psychological sense of reason most closely associated with the explanation of particular existences from the PSR, on which reason is a kind of motive. So there is no basis in Spinoza for taking reason to be ideal beyond our own ordinary understanding of reason, a risky tool to use as a guide to the meaning of technical terms in the Ethics.
A comparison of well-known passages from Spinoza and Leibniz shows that Spinoza’s presentation of sufficient reason in the *Ethics* lacks its most familiar psychological sense. The work of interest, Leibniz’s ‘Principles of Nature and Grace’, was written in 1714, decades after Spinoza’s death. I do not mean to suggest in discussing it that Spinoza responds to Leibniz (although undoubtedly Leibniz does respond to some extent to Spinoza). The point of the comparison, rather, is to compare a well-developed and familiar psychological account of sufficient reason to what I take to be a very different account in Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

Leibniz begins his discussion of the PSR by distancing the search for sufficient reasons from the level of physical inquiry, suggesting already that he will not find any reasons in bodies:

§7. So far we have spoken only at the level of physical inquiry; now we must move up to the metaphysical, by making use of the great principle, not very widely used, which says that nothing comes about without a sufficient reason; that is, that nothing happens without its being possible for someone who understands things well enough to provide a reason sufficient to determine why it is as it is and not otherwise. (Leibniz 1998: 262)

Leibniz introduces a principle here on which whatever happens happens for a reason, and that reason can be, in principle, fully known. He takes the account of such reasons to be metaphysical rather than physical or, perhaps, merely physical.

In the next section Leibniz explains why such a thing could not be a body. He offers two slightly different reasons, one from the nature of body and one from the order of causes in the deterministic chain of motions:

§8. Now, the sufficient reason for the existence of the universe can never be found in the series of contingent things, in bodies and their representations in souls, that is, because matter in itself is indifferent to motion or rest, and to this motion or that. Therefore we could never find in matter a reason for motion, and still less for any particular motion. And since any motion which is matter at present comes from previous motion, and that too from a previous one, we are no further forward if we go on and on as far as we like; the same question will still remain. Therefore the sufficient reason, which has no need of any further reason, must lie outside that series of contingent things, and must be found in a substance which is the cause of the series: it must be a necessary being, which carries the reason for its existence within itself, otherwise we still would not have a sufficient reason at which we can stop. And that final reason for things is what we call God. (Leibniz 1998: 262)

The first reason Leibniz offers for the conclusion that sufficient reason could not be body depends upon an understanding of the nature of body that makes it ‘indifferent to motion or rest, and to this motion or that’. Suppose that a billiard ball is rolling across the table, and we want to understand why it is rolling in just that way. Leibniz argues that by its nature, it could be rolling any number
of different ways or even not rolling at all, so we will not find a reason in its nature. The second reason that Leibniz offers responds to a different strategy for finding corporeal reasons: why might we not look to some other body for an explanation of a given body's motion? Leibniz responds to this suggestion that such a reason could never be sufficient; that is, it could never fully explain the motion because we would have to continue backward infinitely in the chain of particular motions, searching for further reasons. So neither the nature of the particular body in question nor reference to other bodies will explain a body's motion. We must, Leibniz argues, therefore look for a final reason in God.

God, Leibniz makes clear at §8, is Himself self-explanatory, so any chain of reasons will stop with God. Leibniz proceeds to give an account of the sufficient reason that God provides for the whole system of created things, on which it not a physical reason at all. Instead, it is an inherently psychological kind of reason, a choice:

§10. It follows from the supreme perfection of God that in producing the universe he chose the best possible design, in which there was the greatest variety, together with the greatest order. (Leibniz 1998: 263)

To take stock, Leibniz finds nothing in the nature of a particular body to explain its particular motion; he also finds nothing in bodies external to the particular body; but he does find a reason in God's choice of the best. The complete explanation will be psychological.

Let us turn now to Spinoza's invocation of the PSR in his argument for the existence of God at Ep11Dem.2:

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 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, viz. 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 F7). 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 the [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, but from them it follows that a thing necessarily exists if there is no reason or cause which prevents it from existing. Therefore, if there is no reason or cause which prevents God from existing, or which takes his existence away, it must certainly be inferred that he necessarily exists.
Spinoza draws a distinction between two classes of things to be explained that is similar to the one that we see in Leibniz: what we ordinarily regard as eternal things belong to one class; what we ordinarily regard as contingent things belong to another. Moreover, the sort of reason that Spinoza supplies for the first class is also similar to that supplied by Leibniz. Leibniz’s God is self-explanatory. Spinoza writes here that substance is self-explanatory. There is only one substance for Spinoza, however: God. Clearly, he also takes God to be self-explanatory.

Turning to those existences that are of interest to us, a first point to make is that Spinoza could not offer a reason for them anything like the one that Leibniz offers, even if it were psychological. Leibniz explicitly makes such reasons depend upon a kind of personhood in God; it is God’s choice of the best that supplies the reason for particular motions. Spinoza denies the sort of personality to God that Leibniz depends upon, regarding such a view as a kind of misguided anthropomorphism, and he famously rejects teleology in nature.\(^5\)

It is clear by the end of the passage, I think, that Spinoza takes reasons of the sort that interest us to be corporeal. In considering the existence of extended things that we would ordinarily consider to be contingent – a particular circle or a particular triangle – Spinoza writes that it is the ‘order of the whole of corporeal Nature’ that provides the reason external to them for their existence or non-existence. Insofar as he characterises such reasons at all, then, Spinoza takes them to be corporeal.\(^7\)

Here we arrive at a clear disagreement between Spinoza and Leibniz, which rests, I think, in a disagreement about necessitarianism. Leibniz is clearly a determinist: he thinks that one could look outside of a given body for a cause of its motion. He rejects, however, any view on which knowledge of such causes could yield a reason sufficient for the motion. His position rests, it seems, on the conviction that even knowledge of the whole order of events could not explain the motion because one could not, from this knowledge, explain why that order of events rather than some other order exists. In the end, it is God’s choice of the best that explains why this order of events, including this particular motion, exists. Of the various orders of events that are possible, God chooses the best one. Spinoza, by contrast, takes the order of all corporeal nature to explain fully any particular corporeal existent. Knowledge of the whole order of events could be a sufficient reason for Spinoza just because, on Spinoza’s view, there turns out to be only one possible order of events.

The passage from E IP11 Dem.2, then, yields a clear difference from Leibniz in Spinoza’s conviction that some reasons are corporeal. It also yields a clear response to one of Leibniz’s objections to the project of finding reasons in bodies. Leibniz’s second reason, from 87, was that we cannot look to external causes of particular motions for sufficient reasons. Spinoza clearly disagrees. He argues that the reasons for all contingent things are, in fact, external to them.

This point, that Spinoza takes external reasons to explain bodies, may suggest that Spinoza would accept the first point that Leibniz makes about body. One might think, after all, that if reasons are external to a thing, then they are not internal. Spinoza writes, notably, at the beginning of the second paragraph of the
quoted passage, that 'this reason, or cause, must either be contained in the nature of the thing, or be outside it'. The sentence suggests an exclusive disjunction: if the reason is external to a thing, then it cannot be contained in the nature of the thing. So understood, we have some evidence to conclude that corporeal reason for a given body is never in the body itself for Spinoza. Perhaps, as Leibniz believes that the nature of body is indifferent to motion, so Spinoza believes that the nature of body is indifferent to existence.

On the other hand, a given body is itself part of the order of the whole of corporeal nature. If that order is the reason for the body, then the body is part, perhaps a small part, of the reason for its own existence. On such an interpretation, we might emphasize the phrase 'contained in' in the crucial disjunction. Suppose that the reason for a finite body is body but is not fully contained in the body. Rather it is fully contained in something more than the body. If this interpretation were correct, then Spinoza would not after all have to hold a view like Leibniz's. He could hold that the nature of a body is not indifferent to its own existence. Adjudicating this issue, then, is the central question moving forward: for Spinoza, does a particular thing give a reason for itself?

Body and Particular Reasons

It may seem odd to think about a thing's nature contributing to the explanation of its own existence. Perhaps it is particularly so if one identifies reasons with causes. I think of efficient causes, at least typically, as preceding their effects. Such a view might require, then, the nature of a thing to exist somehow before the thing itself so that it can do the necessary metaphysical work of pushing the thing into being.

On reflection, however, I think that it is the correct position to say that the nature of a thing contributes to the explanation of its existence. Perhaps seeing this point depends upon taking the identification of causes and reasons in Spinoza to be more a reduction of causes to reasons than a reduction of reasons to causes. Crows exist, at least in part, because the sort of thing that they are can exist, given the various external constraints on them. They exist because they stick together, eat a lot of different things, and possess a lively intelligence. On the other hand, dementors - the soul-sucking, darkness-lurking creatures of the Harry Potter books - do not exist at least in part because, although there is plenty of darkness, there are no souls to suck. Dementors are just not the sort of thing that could exist. Perhaps a similar point could be made in response to Leibniz. A billiard ball does not have a nature such that it is a sufficient reason, that is, a complete explanation, for its motion. Nevertheless, the nature of a billiard ball - its hardness, its roundness, and so on - surely contributes to any explanation of its motion. An anvil would not respond to external causes in the same way.

In this section, I will argue that Spinoza does take the reason for a given finite body's existence to be internal to it. Such a reason is not in itself sufficient for existence, of course. Only God is fully self-explanatory. The finite thing itself is, however, part of its reason. I think that Spinoza is very clear about this. He
takes the nature of any finite thing to be a defeasible tendency to cause its own existence. For bodies, Spinoza calls the reason explaining any effect of a given body the ratio of motion and rest among the body's parts.

Spinoza's definition of 'individual' in the physical discursus following E IIIP13 is the principal evidence for this interpretation in the Ethics:

> Definition: When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner [certa quaedam ratione], we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies.8

Curley translates ratio here as 'manner'. This is correct. 'Ratio' or 'proportion', which Curley uses four times in similar contexts in the demonstration and scholiwm to E IVP39, are also correct. The term has a variety of connotations. I do think, however, that Spinoza capitalises on the different meanings of the Latin term in order to find what he needs: a distinctively corporeal kind of reason.

One might well think, initially, that it is merely a coincidence that Spinoza uses a single term to describe two different, important concepts in the argument of the Ethics. I will build a case for taking ratios to be, at the same time, reasons by trying to make it more and more difficult to maintain this opinion. Whatever work reasons do to explain existence in the Ethics, that is the work that ratios do with respect to body.

As we have seen, one of the few things that Spinoza writes about reason in his characterisation of the PSR is that a thing whose existence is not explained by something external to it has a reason internal to it in virtue of which it exists. A first point to make, then, is that the ratio characteristic of an individual body, which Spinoza describes in his definition of an individual, is necessary for the individual's existence.

In early propositions of Ethics III, Spinoza argues that nothing can be destroyed except through an external cause (E IIIIP4); that each thing, to the extent that it can by its own power, strives to persevere in being (E IIIIP6); that this striving is the actual essence of the thing (E IIIIP7); and that those things that increase or diminish the power of the body likewise, considered as ideas, increase or diminish the power of the mind (E IIIIP9). These propositions establish the basis for Spinoza's theory of the affects, on which an individual's striving is its desire (E IIIIP9S) and increases or decreases to the power of striving are its passions (E IIIIP11 and E IIIIP11S). The argument of these propositions is somewhat self-contained because Spinoza takes E IIIIP4 to be self-evident. This insularity makes it difficult to establish a connection between it and earlier doctrines of the Ethics. Nevertheless there are two ways of connecting the doctrine of striving and the account of an individual body from Ethics II.

I will start with the more complex but also more informative way. Lemmata
5 and 7 of the physical discursus following E II P13 refer back to the definition of the individual in describing ways in which an individual can retain its nature despite change:

E III5: If the parts composing an Individual become greater or less, but in such a proportion that they all keep the same ratio of motion and rest to each other as before, then the individual will likewise retain its nature, as before, without any change of form.
E III7: Furthermore, the individual so composed retains its nature, whether it, as a whole, moves or is at rest, or whether it moves in this or that direction, as long as each part retains its motion, and communicates it, as before, to the others.

Both lemmata clearly invoke the definition of the individual, which Spinoza cites in both demonstrations. Lemma 5 associates the \textit{ratio} closely with the individual’s nature or form. Spinoza argues there that it does not matter if the parts composing an individual grow or shrink; it is the same individual so long as the ratio remains the same. Likewise, Spinoza argues at L7 that so long as the ratio remains the same, the motion or rest of the whole will not change an individual’s nature. Both lemmata, then, associate the ratio characteristic of an individual body with its nature or form. Indeed, later in the Ethics, at E IVP39Dem., Spinoza refers to his definition of an individual as an account of form: ‘what constitutes the form of the human body consists in this, that its parts communicate their motions to one another in a certain fixed proportion [ratio] (by the definition)’. Taking nature and form to be equivalent in these contexts, this, then, is a first important result.

1. An individual body’s ratio is its nature [by E III5 & 7, E IVP39Dem.]

The lemmata offer assurances that we human beings might take to hold special importance, since human individuals grow, shrink, and move. In a series of postulates following E III7, which describe the human body, Spinoza offers more detailed information. Postulate 1 will be of particular importance here:

E II Post.1: The human body is composed of a great many individuals of different natures, each of which is highly composite.

Spinoza does not offer arguments for Postulate 1 or for any of these postulates. Given their place immediately following the lemmata, however, we might assume that he takes the lemmata to hold special relevance for them. That is, at Postulate 1 he means to emphasise the point that a human body, despite its highly composite nature, need not lose its nature if its parts grow or shrink or if it moves.

A different postulate, from the beginning of Ethics III, vindicates this assumption by gathering many of the relevant passages:
E III Post. 1: The human body can be affected in many ways in which its power of acting is increased or diminished, and also in others which render its power of acting neither greater nor less.

This postulate, or axiom, rests on Post. 1, L5, and L7 (after IIIP13).

This postulate is the clearest connection in the argument of the Ethics between the notion of ratio in the physical discursus and the notion of a striving to persevere in Ethics III. It also presents a gap in Spinoza's argument, however, and an ambiguity that is difficult to resolve. The gap is in the transition from the nature or form of an individual, which characterises individual bodies in the physical discursus, to the power of acting, which characterises the human body at E III Post. 1. Clearly the terms capture something similar. Postulate 1 and the lemmata of the discursus concern circumstances in which the body is affected and form is not. Postulate 1 of Ethics III makes a general claim about circumstances in which the human body is affected and its power of acting does not, or does, change. Power of acting, which Spinoza uses at E III D3 in defining 'affect' but which does not appear in the discursus, is more complex notion than that of form or nature, however. What remains ambiguous is whether Spinoza identifies nature or form with just one aspect of a body's power of acting—the body's activity that might then be qualified as more or less powerful—or whether he identifies it with power of acting as a whole. In the former case, we would interpret E III Post. 1 as a claim that the body's nature or form is something that the body retains with more or less power, such that the power of a body can change while its nature remains the same. In the latter case, we would interpret the postulate as something closer to a restatement of the lemmata of the physical discursus: a claim that some effects on the body change its nature but that others do not.

Neither option is absolutely warranted by the argument of the Ethics, and the problem of whether the nature of an individual human being is its activity or its power of acting itself arises again in different contexts. Nevertheless, it seems best to take the former option, on which the notion of power of action introduces something in addition to the lemmata which make claims only about action. On this view, then, the form or nature of the human body is its activity, which it can then possess with greater or less power. A passage from the end of the Preface to Ethics IV provides some evidence for this interpretation:

When I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, or form, to another. For example, a horse is destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect. Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished.

Here, Spinoza argues that changes to perfection or to power of acting can take place while the form of a body does not itself change. That suggests that power of acting is not identical to form, or, what is the same in these contexts, nature or essence. On the basis of passages such as this one, then, I will suggest that it is
best to find at E IIIPost.1 an identification of an individual body’s nature or form with that body’s activity.

2. An individual body’s nature is its activity [by E IIIPost.1]

So understood, the postulate describes two sorts of changes: those that affect the power with which the body acts and those that do not. A body will certainly be destroyed if it loses all power of activity. So a decrease in the power with which it acts is a serious harm to it. Such a change, however, is not itself a change to the activity of the body. It is merely a change to its power. So it does not, unless it eliminates all power, destroy the body. Perhaps, since the activity of the body is a ratio of motions of its parts, power is something like the ability of the body to maintain this ratio in hostile environments. If this is right, then we will say that a more powerful body maintains its activity in a greater range of hostile environments or in more hostile environments. A less powerful body maintains its activity in a smaller range of hostile environments or in less hostile environments. A body with no power at all maintains its activity in no environments: it ceases to exist. A body with the greatest power would maintain its power in all environments.10

What is new with the theory of affects in Ethics III, then, is a detailed account of the power of finite individuals, which Spinoza associates in individual bodies with their variable ability to maintain their characteristic ratio and in all things with their perfection and reality.11 While their application to individuals is new in Ethics III, however, these notions do appear together in Spinoza’s account of substance in Ethics I. Attention to Spinoza’s treatment of them there can show the importance of an individual body’s ratio to its existence. I think that it shows that ratio plays an explanatory role for the existence of an individual body similar to that which the reason internal to substance plays in explaining the existence of substance.

In the third demonstration to his claim that God necessarily exists at E IP11, Spinoza invokes the notions of power, existence, and perfection. He writes, first, that not to be able to exist is to lack power and to be able to exist is to have power. Next, at a scholium following the demonstration, he writes that perfection asserts the existence of a thing and that imperfection takes it away. Thus the three notions are most clearly related in the account of God: the most perfect, most powerful thing, exists most clearly, or, as Spinoza writes, absolutely (E IP11S). The argument, which is a kind of cosmological argument for God’s existence, proceeds from the observation that we, finite things, exist if we, beings of limited power, exist, but God, the most powerful being, does not exist, then, since to be able to exist is to have power, we would be, absurdly, more powerful than what is most powerful.

Ethics III builds upon this account of finite existents. God, by nature, is absolutely active and so absolutely exists. An individual body’s nature is also to exist, but, Spinoza suggests at the beginning of Ethics III, it can exist with more or less power, and, if it loses all power (or perfection), it can cease existing altogether.
The central propositions related to the striving to persevere in being reaffirm the association between activity and nature, and they characterise the effects of that activity: perseverence in being. At E IIIp6, Spinoza characterises particular things as expressions of God's own power and argues that each thing strives by its own power to persevere in its being. Power is for bodies the power of activity that Spinoza invokes so suddenly at E IIIp1: Spinoza refers to power as the power by which a thing is and acts in the demonstration to E IIIp6. Because activity is form or nature, the proposition implies that, for a body, the causal tendency of the ratio of motion and rest is being.

3. An individual body's activity produces its existence \(^2\) [by E IIIp6]

A comparison of the use made of the notions of power, perfection, and existence in Spinoza's argument for the existence of God at E IIP11 and of the use made of the same notions in Spinoza's accounts of individuals at the beginning of Ethics III suggests that the reason for an individual's existence will be, properly re-described of course, similar to the reason for God's existence. If God exists absolutely and from the nature of substance, then we ought to conclude that individual things exist something less than absolutely and from their nature as individual things. That is, the reason for the existence of individual bodies is precisely what Spinoza calls a reason, the characteristic ratio of the motions of their parts. This same inference is warranted by the results that I have summarised in this discussion:

1. An individual body's ratio is its nature [by E III5 & 7, E IVP39Dem.]
2. An individual body's nature is its activity [by E IIIp1]
3. An individual body's activity produces its existence [by E IIIp6]
4. Therefore, an individual body's ratio produces its existence [by 1, 2, and 3, substituting equivalents]

A more direct, although less informative, route to the same conclusion is supplied by the proposition following E IIIp6. Spinoza argues at E IIIp7 that a thing's striving to exist is its actual essence, a point that is very nearly implied by the definition of 'essence' at E II12 but which, in its use of the qualification 'actual' and its invocation of perseverence, more closely relates to those things that do exist.\(^3\) Essence, as we have seen, associates closely with nature and form in the Ethics. This association is most evident, perhaps, in the extract from the Preface to Ethics IV that I quoted above. Perhaps this sentence from the demonstration to E II24 is more direct, in that here Spinoza calls essence the ratio that elsewhere he calls nature or form: 'the parts composing the human body pertain to the essence of the body itself only insofar as they communicate the motions to one another in a certain, fixed manner [ratio] (see the definition after L3C). This association suggests clearly that striving, for a body, is its ratio.

These passages, together with the first premise, supply another basis for the argument to the conclusion that an individual body's ratio produces its existence.
1. An individual body's ratio is its nature [by E III5 & 7, E IVP39Dem.]
5. An individual body's nature is its essence [by the association of nature and essence, e.g., IV Pref., IVP24Dem.]
6. An individual body's essence produces its existence [by IIIP7, specified for body]
7. Therefore, an individual body's ratio produces its existence [by 1, 5, and 6, substituting equivalents]

The introduction of the notion of power of acting for finite things at the beginning of Ethics III, while it is critical to maintaining the distinction between finite things and substance, also obscures the argument. Either of these chains of association, however, suggests that corporeal ratio is a thing internal to an individual body in virtue of which it exists. This, however, is just what a reason is, in Spinoza's account of reasons: that in virtue of which a body exists. Spinoza, moreover, applies many of the same notions - power, perfection, and being - to his account of the natures of finite things that he applies to his account of the nature of substance at E IIP11. Recall that in his account of sufficient reason there, Spinoza takes the existence of substance to follow from its nature. So, one of his few examples of sufficient reason invokes the nature of God, in its absolute power and absolute perfection as a reason for absolute existence. Corporeal ratios are the natures of finite things. It seems to me that Spinoza's introduction of the notions of power and perfection into his account of the nature of finite things reinforces the claim that he takes those natures to be similarly, although defeasibly and finitely, reasons for their existences.

Conclusion

Spinoza's use of ratio to describe the essence of finite bodies in his definition of the individual and elsewhere is not a mere play on words. His strong, universal claim about reasons at E IIP11Dem.2 commits him to the views that all existents have a reason and that the reason for bodies is corporeal. So he owes readers an account of what a corporeal reason is. There is, however, only one genuine explanatory force and only one kind of explanatory force in Spinoza's metaphysics, and those are God and God's power as a self-explanatory thing. Individual things, E IIP6 makes clear, just are finite expressions of God's explanatory force. Any particular thing, that proposition suggests, will be like God, but finite: a finite self-cause. Where we turn to an account of how particular bodies cause themselves, Spinoza's physics suggests that they do so by means of their own peculiar reason.

To return, finally, to E IIP11Dem.2, it seems clear (to me, at any rate) in retrospect that finite things have an external reason in the sense that the reason for their existence is not fully contained in their nature. If you or I or a particular crow exist, it is in large part because the order of corporeal nature permits it. As Spinoza puts the point in the demonstration, nothing prevents or impedes (the Latin is impedit) God from existing. Nothing could because there is nothing
outside of God. God's nature to cause itself therefore must be efficacious. Things can impede us, however, and we are fortunate if and for as long as they do not. That point, however, does not mean that we do not supply a reason for our own existence. We do, and nature does not supply any other kind of reason.

Notes

1. Della Rocca (1996: ch. 8) is the classic statement of this and related positions.
2. I intend the argument of this chapter to appeal to readers of Spinoza who have a variety of views about what Spinoza means by 'reason' (Ratio). For a complete account of my view, see LeBuffe (2017).
3. I do not defend the identity of reasons and causes here, because it is widely accepted. For a recent defence of the view, see Newlands (2010). For a recent defence of the view that reasons for bodies are themselves corporeal, see Della Rocca (2012).
5. I use Curley's translation of the Ethics (Spinoza 1985).
6. These are themes of E I App. In the Ethics, Spinoza denies altogether that God (E IIP2C1) or human minds (E IIP4B) have free will.
7. Spinoza's determinism is most fully expressed at E IIP28. For a recent interpretation of determinism and the place of finite modes in the order of things, see Shin (2015).
8. Peterman (2014) is a recent, well-informed but also original and controversial introduction to the physical discourse in the Ethics.
9. A notable passage supporting the alternative interpretation is the demonstration to E IIIIP7. This is an issue that requires further extended discussion. My conviction that the power of a thing can change while its essence does not, on Spinoza's account, is principally based upon his accounts of the human affects, many of which are such changes.
10. This last option, however, Spinoza takes to be impossible for a finite body. At E IVA1, he asserts that there is no singular thing that cannot be destroyed by another, more powerful singular thing.
11. For accounts of the perfection and reality of finite things generally, see the end of E IV Pref, including the passage quoted in the main text here as well as the lines following it, G II 209 1–10.
12. A reasonable concern that a reader might have with this conclusion is that Spinoza emphasises perseverance in being rather than coming into being in these passages. I am convinced that this is not a genuine distinction in Spinoza's metaphysics. Just as God does not cause God, temporally, to come into existence at a particular point, so the power of perseverance in being is not distinct from some different power by which a particular thing comes into being. Spinoza is clearest about this issue at TP 2.2: 'the same power that [natural things] need to begin to exist they need to go on existing'. Thanks to Beth Lord for raising this issue.
13. Here is E IIID2: 'I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited, and which, being destroyed, the thing is necessarily destroyed; or this without which the thing can neither be, nor be conceived, and vice versa.'

Colophon


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