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The Stakes of Spinoza's Language: A Moderate Necessitarian Understanding of 'Ethics' and Spinoza's Conception of Freedom as Both Positive and Negative Liberty

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Abstract

This paper explores different readings of Spinoza's "Ethics" with a specific focus on Spinoza's understanding of the relationship between infinite and finite modes in his constructed universe. These different readings suggest that Spinoza's conception of human freedom can be read both as examples of positive liberty and negative liberty.

Keywords

Spinoza, Human Freedom, Positive Liberty, Negative Liberty, Necessitarianism

Disciplines

Ethics and Political Philosophy | Philosophy | Philosophy of Language | Philosophy of Mind

Comments

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Professor Vern Cisney

Spinoza

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The philosophic tradition is wrought with varying conceptions of human freedom, but few are as unique as that of Benedict Spinoza. In Spinoza's *Ethics* conventional philosophic notions of freedom are problematized by the philosopher's deterministic system in which all happenings necessarily follow from the mind of God and, thus, must necessarily happen exactly as they do. This determinism disallows colloquially understood and commonly accepted notions such as freedom of the will. Instead, Spinoza's conception of freedom involves affirming truth through the activity of the human intellect, which is accomplished by forming in the mind what Spinoza calls "clear and distinct perceptions" or "adequate ideas" of things. Like the majority of the philosophical tradition Spinoza lauds reason, believing that through the exercise of the faculty of reason human beings have the power to make themselves more perfect or, in Spinozian terms, more like God. In so doing the individual may check or limited the influence that external things, that is, things which cannot be understood through our own nature (which is a reflection of the divine nature), have on our actions. This disburdening of the self from the inhibiting influence of the external is what constitutes freedom in Spinoza's system. This aforementioned conception of freedom is complicated and demands an understanding of other key elements of his philosophy to be understood completely, which I endeavor to provide herein. Ultimately, the first section of this paper will illuminate what Spinoza means when he speaks of human freedom. I will show specifically how Spinoza conceives of freedom in a liberatory sense, arguing that the

free man is he who perceives truth clearly and distinctly, thereby enabling him to check and control his emotional responses to the external world in an effort to maximize his human potential. In this sense, Spinoza's conception of freedom appears to represent a form of "positive liberty," or, "the possibility of acting in such a way as to take control of one's life" (Carter). Nonetheless, one will come to see how, when considering an alternative understanding of the language of the *Ethics*, there is also room to argue that Spinoza tacitly endorses a form of "negative liberty."

Once this initial investigation is completed and we have firmly established what Spinoza intends when he refers to human freedom, I will expand my investigation, in the second section of this paper, to illuminate the contemporary scholarly debate concerning the true stakes of Spinoza's determinism. This debate focuses whether or not Spinoza's logic implies a strict or moderate necessitarianism (that is, whether the *Ethics* allows for one possible world or many plausible ones). The specifics of this debate, as one will come to see, depend on differing readings of Propositions 16 and 28 of Part I of the *Ethics*. Ultimately, the debate hinges on an understanding of the implied relationship between finite and infinite modes, for those who believe that Spinoza's finite modes are not directly affected by God's determinism endorse, either tacitly or directly, a moderate necessitarian reading of Spinoza. Nevertheless, it seems as though Spinoza himself numbered among those of the strict necessitarian camp. All of this will be explained at length in the second section, after which I will defend my own position as a moderate necessitarian, as well as my justification for why one could make the case that Spinoza's freedom represents an example of "negative liberty," in the paper's third and final section of this paper. In the meantime, however, it behooves us to begin our investigation of Spinoza's conception of human freedom.

Section I: Fleshing Out Spinoza's Notion of Human Freedom as Potential Positive Liberty

Any fruitful discussion concerning Spinoza's notion of freedom first necessitates an understanding of his conceptions of God and determinism, for his unique understanding of freedom is bound up in these aforementioned ideas. Spinoza labors in Part I of the *Ethics* to establish God as the only true substance, or "that which is in itself and conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing..." (Ethics 217). Furthermore, Spinoza contends that, owing to the divine nature, God is self-caused, the first cause, and the efficient cause of all things (Spinoza 227). This is absolutely crucial to an understanding of Spinoza's determinism, for what follows from the above propositions is the belief that "God acts solely from the necessity of his own nature" (Spinoza 228). We understand this to be true because, owing to the demands Spinoza makes of "substance," there could be no other substance which limits God in any capacity. Acting solely from his own nature, which being infinite may express itself in infinite ways, God necessarily manifests all extended things in the form of either attributes or modes. From this point Spinoza contends, in the corollary of *Part I* proposition 25, that "Particular things are nothing but affections of the attributes of God, that is, modes wherein the attributes of God find expression in a definite and determinate way" (Spinoza 232). Human beings, being themselves particular things, are therefore determined to express themselves in particular ways. Spinoza makes this point in *Part I* proposition 29 when he writes, "Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and to act in a definite way" (Spinoza 234). Finally, Spinoza explicitly acknowledges the deterministic worldview in *Part I* proposition 33, writing, "Things could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case" (Spinoza 236). If anything was to behave differently it would imply that God's nature, which is

the necessarily perfect efficient cause of all things, could have been different and, therefore, imperfect, which is logically absurd.

While this may seem like a cursory overview of Spinoza's very complex cosmology, it is sufficient for our purposes insofar as it illuminates what is meant when we speak of determinism. It also sufficiently demonstrates why colloquial conceptions of human freedom don't work for Spinoza. If we are determined to act in a definite way, and cannot act in any other way, how can we be said to be free? A free will demands that the individual agent have complete autonomy over his actions, which the nature of the aforementioned system renders impossible. This is not to say that Spinoza denies the existence of "will," but only that Spinoza's conception of "will" is, like everything else, under the thumb of God's determinism. Nevertheless, Spinoza does not lament the loss of free will. Instead he embraces an entirely different conception of freedom which stems from intellect's ability to possess knowledge of the divine nature and to act only in accordance with this knowledge. It is in this way that man may lead a rational life which, for Spinoza, "the highest happiness and blessedness for mankind consists in alone." (Spinoza 358). Through the rational power of the intellect man may free himself, to a greater or lesser degree, from the influence of external things and, instead, condition himself to act in accordance with the divine nature itself as understood through the mind. This freedom, which the scholar Eva Piirimäe identifies as "positive freedom," or "freedom from" as opposed to "freedom to," will henceforth be the subject of my investigation (Piirimäe 355).

Freedom, for Spinoza, is realized in the act of liberating oneself from the bondage of the passions, which can only be effected through the forming of what he calls clear and distinct ideas of the nature of God. Understanding that we are determined to act by the necessity of God (or Nature), Spinoza argues, "and that we share in the divine nature... our actions become more

perfect as we understand God more and more” (Spinoza 276). The belief that man is slave to the passions is deeply entrenched in the philosophic tradition and Spinoza, consistent with many of his predecessors, argues that it is in the best interest of man’s continued well-being and self-preservation to liberate himself from these oppressive emotions, especially the sad emotions. In the Preface to *Part III* of the *Ethics* Spinoza considers the mistaken manner in which some men regard human emotions. “Most of those who have written about the emotions,” he writes, “and human conduct seem to be dealing not with natural phenomena that follow the common laws of Nature but with phenomena outside Nature” (Spinoza 277). These men erroneously assume that negative emotions (hatred, envy, anger, etc...) are the product of some flaw in the nature of things. Spinoza, on the other hand, contends that “in Nature nothing happens which can be attributed to its defectiveness,” so it follows that “the emotions of hatred, anger, envy etc... follow from the same necessity and force of Nature as all other particular things... these emotions are assignable to definite causes through which they can be understood” (Spinoza 278). “Understanding” is the key take-away here, as it is through understanding the passions, that is, forming adequate or clear and distinct ideas concerning the causes of the passions, that we may eventually control the degree to which negative emotions, such as pain and its derivations, inhibit our body’s power of activity. In this manner (which will be explained more succinctly below), we thereby make ourselves more free.

Spinoza considers active and passive states of the mind thusly: the former being the state at which we recognize ourselves as the adequate cause of something, that is, when something is understood through our nature alone, and the latter being that state at we are constituted in relation to something external to ourselves. The emotions, insofar as they are the product of our being affected by external bodies, are necessarily passive. It must be noted, however, that not all

emotions are the product of an external constitution. Pain, pleasure, and desire, he argues, are the three primary emotions which are part of our fundamental nature (Spinoza 284). We can form clear and distinct perceptions of these three emotions because we can have adequate ideas of our own nature, but we cannot, according to Spinoza, form adequate ideas of things external to ourselves. All other emotions, Spinoza claim in proposition 56 of Part III, manifest insofar as “we are affected in a way that involves both the nature of our own body and the nature of an external body” (Spinoza 307). In short, there are innumerable kinds of pleasure and pain, which are the product of one of the aforementioned emotions being bound up in the idea of an external body. Because Spinoza has already noted in proposition 3 of Part III that “active states of the mind arise only from adequate ideas” and “passive states depend solely on inadequate ideas,” we understand that the emotions which are inexorably linked to the idea of external bodies, which we can form only inadequate ideas of, necessarily must render the mind passive (Spinoza 282). This is problematic because it is in the essence of the mind’s *conatus*, or the inherent and natural desire to “persist in one’s own being,” to “endeavor to think only of the things that affirm its power of activity” (Spinoza 306). This is where Spinoza allows for some wiggle room in his otherwise determinate universe.

The *conatus* is the fundamental property of the human essence, and that which increases the body’s capacity to act, which is consistent with the drive of the *conatus*, is what Spinoza considers to be good. The opposite is also true, for whatever inhibits the body’s capacity for action Spinoza regards as evil. It follows, then, that the emotions of pleasure and pain affect the *conatus* in a profound way. “Pleasure,” writes Spinoza in proposition 41 of Part IV, “is not in itself bad, but good. On the other hand, pain is in itself bad” (Spinoza 343). This is because “pleasure is an emotion whereby the body’s power of activity is increased” and “pain is an

emotion whereby the body's power of activity is diminished" (Spinoza 343). The free man, then, is he who, insofar as it is possible, enjoys feelings of pleasure and minimizes feelings of pain. Spinoza makes this point clear in the appendix to Part IV when he writes, "Whatsoever in nature we deem evil, that is, capable of hindering us from being able to enjoy a rational life, it is permissible for us to remove... On the other hand, whatever we deem good, that is, advantageous for preserving our own being... it is permissible for us to take for our use and to use it as we please" (Spinoza 359). A free man is able to appropriate the passive emotions which produce pleasure, for these are in his interest to preserve as they render him more active, while, at the same time, diminishing those that cause him pain. This can be achieved only through the formation of adequate ideas, for it is through the mind that we may better understand the external causes of the emotions which passively act upon us. Because the mind, in forming adequate ideas, becomes active, the formation of adequate ideas regarding pain helps to diminish the pain. This point is clarified in the following analogy. Spinoza writes in proposition 48 of Part III that "Love and hatred towards Peter are destroyed if the pain involved in the latter and the pleasure involved in the former are associated with the idea of a different cause; and both emotions are diminished to the extent that we think Peter not to have been the only cause of either emotion" (Spinoza 302). When we recognize that the external body in question is not the only cause of our emotions, and that we, ourselves, are an adequate cause of them, we may diminish the power the passions have over us and our actions. In so doing we liberate ourselves from the bondage of the passions.

Early in *Part IV* Spinoza argues that "the power whereby each single thing, and consequently man, preserves its own being is the very power of God, or Nature, not insofar as it is infinite but insofar as it can be explicated through actual human essence" (Spinoza 324).

Conversely, Spinoza here suggests that human essence is synonymous with power. Man is most fit to satisfy his *conatus* when he can explain the cause of his actions and emotions by achieving an adequate understanding of the divine nature. In this manner he may also achieve the ends listed above, namely, an embrace of the positive emotions and a disregard for the negative. For Spinoza this constitutes human virtue. Spinoza illuminates this point in the 23rd and 24th propositions of *Part IV* when he writes, “Insofar as a man is determined to some action from the fact that he has inadequate ideas, he cannot be said... to be acting from virtue; he can be said to do so only insofar as he is determined from the fact that he understands,” and, “to act in absolute conformity with virtue is nothing else in us but to act, to live, to preserve one’s own being (these three mean the same) under the guidance of reason... according to the laws of one’s own nature” (Spinoza 334). This is where Spinoza brings the discussion back to emotions, writing in proposition 32 of *Part IV* that, “insofar as men are subject to passive emotions, to that extent they cannot be said to agree in nature” (Spinoza 336). In *Part IV* of the *Ethics* Spinoza finally explains how freedom is achieved. “If we remove an agitation of the mind, or emotion, from the thought of its external cause,” he writes in proposition 2, “then love and hatred towards the external cause that arise from these emotions will be destroyed” (Spinoza 365). Love and hatred are merely pleasure and pain “accompanied by the idea of an external cause,” so when the emotion is divorced from the external cause all that remains are pleasure and pain. We can form adequate ideas of these emotions, and, insofar as we may form such ideas the emotions cease to be passive and instead become active. Now because we lack the capacity to form adequate ideas about emotions constituted in relation to external things, such emotions hinder our mind from understanding, which is bad and contrary to our nature. Nonetheless, “as long as we are not assailed by emotions contrary to our nature, the power of the mind whereby it endeavors to

understand things is not hindered... in this case we have the ability to arrange and associate affections of the body according to the order of the intellect” (Spinoza 369). Here Spinoza references his “doctrine of parallelism” laid out in Proposition 7 of Part II of *Ethics* which reads, “The order and connection of idea is the same as the order and connection of things” (247). If we can arrange the body in accordance with the perfect working of the intellect, which understands the cause of bad emotions and, if properly emendated, reflects the divine mind, “we can bring it about that we are not easily affected by bad emotions” (Spinoza 369). In removing bad emotions and appropriating good ones, we condition ourselves to act only in accordance with those things that we have adequate ideas of, that is, things that increase our capacity for action and thus satisfy the inherent drive of the *conatus*. We achieve blessedness insofar as we act in accordance with the divine nature which we recognize in our own, human nature. Finally, we achieve freedom in divorcing the passions from their external causes, thereby attaining the ability to perceive them clearly and distinctly as an affection of the human mind alone.

Spinoza concludes his *Ethics* with a final proposition which reads, in part, “Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself” (Spinoza 382). Virtue is its own reward, for it empowers us to understand and check the negative passions which would otherwise motivate us to act in a manner contrary to our own self-preservation... our own *conatus*. Man achieves freedom insofar as he is capable of forming adequate ideas concerning the nature of the emotions which are, when divorced of their relation to external things, recognized to arise from his own essence. This is the act of an emotion becoming active and ceasing to be passive. With this I have shown what Spinoza’s conception of human freedom is. The aforementioned constitutes what Spinoza intended his deterministic universe to both look like and entail. I say intended, because there is a great deal of contemporary debate concerning whether Spinoza actually

succeeded in describing the logical system that he envisioned. In the following section I explore the two rival positions of this debate at length. In doing so I hope to establish a both illuminate the respective positions and enable my own critique in the third section.

Section II: Concerning Moderate vs. Strict Necessitarian Readings of Spinoza's *Ethics*

Now that one is familiar with Spinoza's conception of human freedom, what we have considered as a form of positive freedom, it comes time to turn our attention to another key and problematic concept in Spinoza's metaphysics that has inspired a great deal of critical, philosophic debate. I am speaking here of the debate over Spinoza's necessitarianism, or, more specifically, whether or not Spinoza was a necessitarian in the strict sense, or whether he was a moderate / conditional necessitarian. Christopher Martin makes this distinction when he writes, "strict necessitarianism is the view that whatever is actual is necessary, that there is only one possible world," while moderate necessitarianism, on the other hand, "holds that the state of the world at any moment is necessary given the past and the laws of nature, and that the laws of nature could not have been otherwise, but that the series of events that actually unfold is not the only possible series" (Martin 26). The debate over to which camp Spinoza belongs generally depends on how one understands the metaphysical relation in Spinoza's *Ethics* between "infinite" and "finite" modes, and substance. These different understandings are anchored in antithetical readings of Proposition 16 of Volume 1 of *Ethics* which reads: "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways [modis] (that is, everything that can come within the scope of infinite intellect)" (Spinoza 227). Strict necessitarians, such as Olli Koistinen, hold that the aforementioned proposition implies that both infinite and finite modes must manifest and follow necessarily exactly as they do from God's infinite nature (Koistinen 286). Moderate necessitarians, such as Martin, contend instead that "The finite

modes of substance are deterministic but not necessary, showing that Spinoza is a moderate but not strict necessitarian” (Martin 26). This section will examine and extrapolate upon both of these readings of Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

In attempting to present an alternative to strict necessitarian readings of Spinoza Martin argues that “infinite modes are necessary features of substance that follow from its nature alone,” while “finite modes are features of substance that follow only from other finite modes; they follow [then] from the divine nature only in the sense that the finite modes that they follow from are themselves expressions of the divine nature” (Martin 27). This is important because, if finite modes are dependent upon the expression of other finite modes, it is plausible that the series of events that constitute the universe could have been constituted in another way. While God’s universe is deterministic insofar as the rules of nature (infinite modes that follow from God’s perfection) are immutable and necessary, the expression of finite modes could vary, thereby making them not necessary in the strict sense. Spinoza allows room for this argument in Proposition 28 of Volume 1 when he writes, “Every individual thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, cannot exist or be determined to act unless it be determined to exist and to act by another cause which is also finite and has a determinate existence” (Spinoza 233). In this sense, finite modes are not determined by infinite modes, but by other finite modes. The debate over whether Spinoza believed in one possible world, then, hinges on the relationship between finite modes and substance (i.e. God) in Spinoza’s work. Martin’s task becomes showing that infinite and finite modes relate to God in different ways. “EIP16,” he acknowledges, “is commonly thought to be a proposition about all modes, and if commentators are right about this... then all modes that follow from the divine nature follow necessarily, so they could not have been otherwise” (34). Nonetheless, Martin takes a different view, arguing that only infinite

modes are “*propria*” (that which follows necessarily from God’s essence or nature), while finite modes are not (34). If he can sufficiently prove this, he would flip the strict necessitarian reading that suggests that there can be only one world following from God’s perfect nature and infinite intellect.

Martin contends that finite modes should not be considered applicable to *EIP16*, an argument substantiated by his belief that “infinite intellect comprehends infinite but not finite modes” (44). To prove this he points to Spinoza’s distinction between “durational” and “eternal” modes of thinking, arguing that, given Spinoza’s claim in *EVP21* that the mind can only recollect past thoughts while the body survives, there are certain durational ideas that survive only as long as we do, while eternal ideas, which enable the understanding of eternal truths, are timeless and do not depend on the endurance of the body (Martin 45). He uses this understanding to show that finite modes must not follow directly from God’s nature, and therefore must not be considered necessary. He refers to “knowledge of the third kind,” that is, knowledge that “proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things” (Martin 46). This should be familiar to us, as it is what Spinoza believes delivers us from the bondage of the passions and, hence, constitutes human freedom. Because this type of knowledge is what “necessarily follows from the essence of a substance,” and finite modes do not follow directly from substance (God) as infinite modes do, Martin shows the third type of knowledge is that which is understood by the infinite intellect “independent of the finite modal order” (46). In so doing, Martin evidences a reading that suggests that finite modes do not follow necessarily from the essence of a substance, and, hence, should not be considered in respect to *EIP16* (the proposition that has historically been used to justify readings of Spinoza as a strict necessitarian). In short, “the infinite intellect

comprehends whatever follows from the divine nature, but does not comprehend finite modes, so finite modes do not follow [necessarily and directly] from the divine nature” (Martin 48).

Ultimately, Martin holds that his belief that *EIP16* concerns only infinite modes problematizes traditional beliefs in a “vertical order of causation that extends from the divine nature all the way down to finite modes” (48). In other words, there is a possibility for several plausible worlds because the ordering of finite modes in the world is not necessarily demanded to be one particular way by God, as they don’t follow directly from God’s nature like infinite modes. It is plausible, then, for multiple worlds, that is, multiple arrangements of finite modes, which would not satisfy strict necessitarianism. Furthermore, Martin points to *EIP28D*, paraphrased as saying “the only things capable of producing finite modes are other finite modes,” as textual evidence of his claim (49). The aforementioned proposition, he claims, “treats infinite modes and finite modes as distinct ontological orders and argues that only the latter can be responsible for the causality of finite modes” (49-50). Martin suggests that this reading is further evidenced in *EIIP9* which [paraphrased] reads, “God is the cause of singular things ‘not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is considered to be affected by other ideas of a singular thing’” (Martin 50). Here, too, we see an ontological distinction between infinite and finite modes.

This is particularly where our other scholar, Olli Koistinen, in his “Spinoza’s Proof of Necessitarianism,” differs. “I interpret Spinoza as a substance-property ontologist,” writes Koistinen, “which means that he holds that besides substances and properties there is nothing” (284). Koistinen also lays out the basic metaphysical distinction Spinoza makes between infinite and finite modes (which are acknowledged and accepted by Martin), writing that “finite modes are particular things having spatio-temporal limits to their existence,” while infinite modes are,

on the contrary, eternal and limitless. The key argument that distances Koistinen from Martin and other moderate necessitarians, however, comes when he argues that, “according to Spinoza, the relation between the nature of God and anything that exists is that of logical entailment... because Spinoza thought that God’s nature is necessarily instantiated, it follows that everything necessarily follows from something that necessarily exists” (Koistinen 286). This would, of course, include finite modes, so Koistinen differs from Martin in the sense that he believes finite modes are absolutely necessary and, consequently, there could be necessarily only one world. This is a strict necessitarian reading. Koistinen is, however, aware of the problem presented by Spinoza’s notion of finite modes and the possible readings of *EIP16* and *EIP28* presented at length above. He refers to this problem as a “problem of causal determinism, writing, “causal determinism between finite things does not show that the world must have the complete history it has” (288). In other words, Spinoza’s ambiguous relation between finite modes and substance leaves room for a reading like Martin’s, which justifiably allows for an “apparently possible alternative series of modes [alternative worlds] which Spinoza seems to overlook” (Koistinen 289). Koistinen’s job now becomes proving that, despite Spinoza’s misstep, there remains sufficient textual evidence to substantiate a strict necessitarian reading of *Ethics*.

Like many of his strict necessitarian comrades, Koistinen bases his reading on *EIP16*. Nonetheless, he endeavors to “interpret the proof of that central proposition in such a way that it can be seen how necessitarianism follows from the preceding material in *Ethics*” (295). When Koistinen here refers to “preceding material” he is referencing Spinoza’s Monism, which is given in *EIP5*. In this way, Koistinen hopes to “offer a satisfying solution to the problem of apparently possible alternative series of modes” (295). Among the arguments he entertains for this purpose concerns the absolute infinity of God and his perfection. *EIP16* seems to say, writes

Koistinen, that from the absolute infinity of God, i.e. from the fact that God has infinite attributes each of which express an essence infinite in its own kind, it follows that everything possibly true of God must be true of him (295). Piggybacking off of the philosophical arguments of Diane Steinberg¹, Koistinen claims that “the actualization of everything that is conceivable, or possible, follows from God’s being perfect” (296). This seems logical enough, and, if accepted, it would support a reading of *Ethics* that suggests that the keystone proposition (*EIP16*) applies to both finite and infinite modes (the position rejected by Martin). Steinberg’s point, writes Koistinen, “is that it is a conceptual truth that each of God’s attributes is perfect... Thus, if all possible modes [including finite modes] were not realized, God would not exist... [and] the infinity of God’s attributes requires that every possible mode of any attribute must gain actuality” (Koistinen 296). This is an absolutely crucial point, for, logically, there cannot be two perfect worlds just as there could not be two perfect substances. They would necessarily be the same and, thus, be one. Now, if this reading of *EIP16* is correct, Spinoza’s system would seemingly not allow the emergence of alternative series of modes, as the alternative systems would necessarily have to gain actuality and, because there cannot be simultaneously two or more conflicting worlds, the one actual and perfect world would necessarily follow from the one substance (God). “In Spinoza’s system,” writes Koistinen, “the infinity of attributes guarantees their perfection which explains why Spinoza sees *EIP16D* as entailing necessitarianism. There cannot be any conceivable alternative systems of finite modes: if there were, each such system would require its own necessarily existing substance” (299-300).

If we accept Koistinen’s argument then he has succeeded in validating a strictly necessitarian reading of *Ethics* on the grounds that, “If besides the actual system of modes

¹ Steinberg, D. 1981. “Spinoza’s Theory of the Eternity of the Mind’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 11, 35-68.

another alternative system were possible or conceivable, there should be, in addition to the actual substance, another substance. But Spinoza's monism excludes such a possibility" (305).

Because Spinoza has clearly stated in *EIP5* that, "In the universe there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute," such a situation becomes impossible given Spinoza's established metaphysics. Ultimately, Koistinen attempts to show that, despite ambiguous verbiage in *EIP16* and *EIP28* relating to the causal relationship between substance and finite modes, there can only be one possible world insofar as the actualization or manifestation of all possible modes [both finite and infinite] are necessarily implied by God's perfect nature. Were they not to be actualized, God would be imperfect, which is absurd, so, thus, the actual world represents the one, true, and deterministic world that strict necessitarianism advocates.

Furthermore, were several possible worlds [or several possible expressions of finite modes] to exist, there would have to be several substances which, given Spinoza's metaphysics, is equally absurd.

It seems that there is evidence to suggest that both readings (Martin's and Koistinen's) of *EIP16* could be justified. The question now becomes, how these different readings correspond with our understanding of human freedom as positive freedom outlined earlier in section one? Martin's reading, that finite modes do not necessarily follow from the essence of the infinite intellect (God) and, therefore, are deterministic but not necessary, seems to offer more in the way of conventionally understood notions of freedom. This is because finite modes could, arguably, express themselves in different ways under Martin's metaphysics. Considering that our bodies are finite modes of being, Martin's reading affords us a metaphysical determinism that is less strict. Nonetheless, Koistinen's strict necessitarianism seems to be more in line with the unique understanding of human freedom (freedom as forming clear and distinct ideas about the essence

of things, i.e. infinite modes of thought, i.e. God and Nature) we outlined earlier. In the final section of this paper I will make my own contribution to the debate outlined in this section, arguing that *Ethics* should be read with a moderate necessitarian eye. Furthermore, I suggest that the implications of such a reading may offer room for an argument that contends that Spinoza's freedom is, in actuality, an example of negative liberty.

Section III: A Defense of Moderate Necessitarianism and an Asylum for Negative Liberty

Having to this point discussed Spinoza's unique notion of freedom as intellectual emancipation from the bondage of the passions which is achieved through the formation of clear and distinct ideas concerning the divine nature, as well as the scholarly debate concerning the degree to which we may push Spinoza's necessitarianism, it finally comes time to consider the latter in light of the former. Does Spinoza's conception of human freedom as outlined in *Ethics* and considered in Part I of this exercise represent a commitment to strict or moderate necessitarianism? As we have already seen different readings of the *Ethics* support both arguments. Ultimately, it seems as though Spinoza would have intended that his *Ethics* suggest a strict necessitarianism: that is, a system in which there can be only one single world. Nonetheless, I tend to side with Martin when he argues that, whether or not Spinoza intended to allow for such an understanding, a scrupulous consideration of the implications of *EIP16* and *EIP28* (which illuminate the causal relationship, or lack thereof, between infinite and finite modes) certainly suggests the possibility of multiple potential worlds. In this section I will argue that Martin's moderate necessitarian reading is the most appropriate way to understand the *Ethics* and Spinoza's determinism. To this end, I will consider critical responses to the argument grounding a strict necessitarian reading of *Ethics* on the "principle of perfection" outlined in the second section of this paper. In demonstrating where this argument fails, I will show how a

multiplicity of plausible constitutions of finite modes is not counterintuitive to the perfection Spinoza demands. Finally, I will show why Spinoza's freedom can be construed as a type of "negative liberty." While the freedom Spinoza ostensibly argues for (freedom from the passions through the emendation of the intellect) is certainly an example of positive freedom, the freedom that he inadvertently allows for (that is, the freedom of finite modes to affect each other in a variety of different ways), actually represents a form of negative liberty.

Early in the first section of this paper I described Spinoza's determinism as set out in *Ethics* Part I. Quoting *EIP25*, I included Spinoza's argument that "Particular things are nothing but affections of the modes wherein the attributes of God find expression in a definite and determinate way" (Spinoza 232). From this I deduced that, since human beings are particular things (bodies being only particular expressions of finite modes), we are therefore determined to exist and express ourselves in determinate ways. Nonetheless, taking into account Martin's argument that there is nothing in *Ethics* that suggests a direct causal relationship between the infinite and the finite expressions of modes (as outlined in section two), one may argue that the way in which human beings alter the expressions of other finite modes isn't strictly determined. This is, of course, problematic insofar as it contradicts Spinoza's explicit claim in *EIP33* which reads, "Things could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case" (Spinoza 236). Spinoza justifies the aforementioned claim, in part, on the basis of God's absolute perfection, which suggests that any world other than the actual (any other constitution of finite modes) would be necessarily less perfect. Nonetheless, if finite modes do not follow directly from God's perfect nature (as infinite modes do), and if the only thing holding Spinoza's system together is the "perfection principle," then by showing where the "perfection principle" fails to logically demand the existence of a single, determined world, I will

consequently be able to show why one ought to read *Ethics* with the eye of a moderate necessitarian.

To summarize the key points of the argument based on the “perfection principle,” first we must understand that God is a being consisting of infinite attributes. These attributes each express themselves in their own ways. Consequently, God’s being perfect necessitates that every attribute express itself perfectly, a condition of perfection being existence. “If all possible modes weren’t realized,” writes Koistinen, “then God would not exist” (296). The argument seems extremely simple, and it is perhaps for this reason that some scholars find it to be unsatisfying. Just as infinite modes do not have any direct bearing on finite modes, finite modes, contend critics such as Martin, have no bearing on infinite modes or God. Because infinite modes and finite modes are not directly related, which is argued by Spinoza in *EIP28*, it can be said that the finite modes that manifest in the actual world are actually contingent properties that are dependent upon other finite modes.

Koistinen mentions the argument for contingency in his article and, while he doesn’t believe it to be valid, his discussion of it will help illuminate what I mean to say. “The belief in contingent properties,” he writes, “is founded on the assumption that the properties of substances can be divided to those that somehow follow from the nature of the substance and to those that somehow depend on their interaction with other things” (303). Under such conditions, infinite modes would necessarily follow from the one Substance (God) and, consequently, be strictly determined to exist as is. Insofar as God is perfect, every mode following directly from his essence would, as Koistinen argues, necessarily exist. In short, there could not be other possible worlds where the infinite modes are expressed in other ways. This is not to say, however, that

the finite modes which, by their nature, are conditional and contingent, must exist in one fixed way, because they don't follow directly from a perfect Substance.

To further my aforementioned argument against the “principle of perfection” and, hence, strict necessitarianism, I suggest that the mutability of finite modes does not necessarily undermine the perfection of the Divine. Martin makes such an argument, quoting the Scholium of Lemma 7 of *EIIP13* where Spinoza writes, “We thus see how a composite individual can be affected in many ways and yet preserve its nature... for since each one of its [the composite being (God)] is composed of several bodies, each single part can therefore, without any change in its nature, move with varying degrees of speed and consequently communicate its own motion to other parts with varying degrees of speed” (Spinoza 255). What this long but necessary excerpt suggests is that finite modes can express themselves in a multiplicity of ways without compromising the infinite nature of God. We must imagine a world of particular things (bodies, buildings, trees, animals, etc...) all of which influence each other in an assortment of means. Now, divorcing ourselves from a strictly deterministic Spinozist universe where God mandates exactly how these particular things influence each other, we can imagine, knowing what we now know about Martin's original argument for moderate necessitarianism, the aforesaid argument for contingent properties, and the implications of *L7S EIIP13*, a world in which the aforementioned particular things could act on each other in infinitely many ways without any one resultant constitution of the finite modes being imperfect. In his article Koistinen discredits the argument of contingent properties on the basis of the fact that the contingent properties (the finite modes) are “causally isolated.” “Because Spinoza adhered to the principle of sufficient reason,” he writes, “[the statement] x could be different requires a specification of the circumstances in which x would have been different” (303). In this sense, one would have to include the

conditional: “x would have been different, if ____” (303). “However,” writes Koistinen, “it seems that when x is a causally isolated individual, there is no way to fill the blank in the antecedent” (303). It is in this manner that he discredits the entire argument for contingent properties. Here I contend that Koistinen’s dismissal is unjustified, for while x is causally isolated from the infinite modes and attributes of God, at least insofar as God has no direct causal bearing on its constitution (owing to *EIP28*), it is not necessarily causally isolated from other finite modes. This is what Martin has been arguing all along. There are many different ways in which finite modes can causally affect each other, thereby producing multiple plausible worlds. For example, a tree (x) could be cut down by a woodsman (y). At the same time, applying Koistinen’s causal conditional: the tree (x) would have been different if the woodsman (y) breaks his axe. There is nothing that logically suggests that the woodsman must cut down the tree, for Spinoza has unwittingly allowed in *EIP28* for the disruption in the causal chain between finite modes and the divine nature. Strictly speaking, men as particular things, acting solely on other particular things, could logically affect them in a variety of ways resulting in a variety of plausible worlds. The resultant system is one of moderate necessitarianism.

Throughout all of this discussion I have not compromised Spinoza’s notion of human freedom as liberation from the passions, as I don’t think that notion is fundamentally incompatible with a moderate necessitarian reading. We can still render the emotions active from a passive state while acknowledging the potential of finite modes to constitute themselves in different ways. What I do believe has been compromised, however, is our understanding of Spinoza’s freedom as a purely positive freedom. Recalling that positive freedom is “freedom to” rather than “freedom from” (negative liberty), it seemed at first that Spinoza’s system only allowed for the former insofar as one has the power to form clear and distinct perceptions, but

not freedom from the constraints of God's strict determinism. With our new conception of moderate necessitarianism in mind, I believe that we can justifiably say that the freedom Spinoza unintentionally allows for resembles negative freedom too. I don't want to go so far as to say that under such a system man has achieved free will, and if negative freedom demands a perfectly free will then I suppose I am not arguing for negative freedom in the strictest sense. Nonetheless, if particular things can influence a man to act in a variety of ways, and he can influence other particular things to act in a variety of ways, such a man is certainly free of the limitations imposed by a substance that demands that everything correspond to one single ordering. To return to our example of the woodsman and the tree, suppose the woodsman leaves his axe outside through the winter. Other finite modes, such as moisture and ice, might affect and weaken it, thereby causing it to break when the woodsman goes to fell the tree. Conversely, he could have affected the axe differently by storing it inside, which would causally result in the tree being successfully cut. When God doesn't exercise absolute dominion over finite modes in a moderate necessitarian universe, other finite modes can, wittingly or unwittingly, change the way the world of finite, particular things is constituted. Nothing logically demands that the world in which the tree is cut and the world in which the tree survives aren't each equally plausible.

Ultimately, Spinoza seems to allow for a world in which there is both a semblance of colloquially understood notions of negative freedom, as well as more unique and philosophical conceptions of freedom rooted in the power of the intellect. Perfection doesn't necessitate a single ordering of finite modes, but only that the integrity of the system as whole endure. As Martin writes, "Spinoza's [reference to] 'the face of the whole universe' must [be understood] to

refer only to the continuous order of nature, not the totality of its ever-changing parts” (Martin 64). Finite modes can change, and the divine can still be perfect.

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