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A Perspectival Reading of Spinoza's Essence-Existence Distinction

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Abstract

This article examines the essence-existence distinction in Spinoza's theory of modes. This distinction is commonly made in two ways. First, essence and existence are separated by cause. Essences are understood to follow vertically from the essence of God, while existence follows horizontally from other modes. I present textual and systematic arguments against such a causal bifurcation. Second, essence and existence are distinguished by their temporal nature. Essence is eternal. Existence is durational. However, in several passages, Spinoza writes that eternity and duration constitute two ways of understanding nature rather than two really distinct aspects of nature.

Résumé

Cet article examine la distinction essence-existence dans la théorie des modes de Spinoza. Cette distinction est généralement faite de deux manières. Premièrement, l'essence et l'existence sont séparées par leur cause. Les essences découlent verticalement de l'essence de Dieu, tandis que l'existence découle horizontalement d'autres modes. Je présente des arguments textuels et systématiques contre une telle bifurcation causale. Deuxièmement, l'essence et l'existence se distinguent par leur nature temporelle. L'essence est éternelle. L'existence dure. Cependant, dans plusieurs passages, Spinoza écrit que l'éternité et la durée constituent deux manières de comprendre la nature plutôt que deux aspects réellement distincts de la nature.

Keywords: Spinoza; essence; existence; causality; eternity; duration

1. Introduction

Spinoza's metaphysics is usually held to contain a strict distinction between the essence and existence of finite modes (henceforth, just "essence" and "existence").¹

¹ For references to Spinoza, I use the following abbreviations: "E" for *Ethica*, followed by "D" for Definition, "A" for Axiom, "P" for Proposition, "D" for Demonstration (when it appears after the number of a proposition), "C" for Corollary, "S" for Scholium, "L" for Lemma, "PD" for the Physical digression following E2P13; "TIE" for *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, followed by the Paragraph; "KV" for *Korte Verhandeling van God, de mensch, en deszelvs welstand*, followed by Part and Chapter; "Ep." for

Generally understood, such a distinction is part of a much larger dichotomy in Spinoza's metaphysics separating the eternal from the durational, and vertical causation (by God's absolute nature) from horizontal causation (by other modes). As essences are directly or immanently caused by God's essence, they are eternal.² Existence, on the contrary, is transitively caused by the other durational modes and is thus itself durational.³ Yitzhak Melamed calls this Spinoza's "dualism" (Melamed, 2013, pp. 105–111). I wish to challenge this widespread dualistic reading.

I am not the first to oppose the dualistic interpretation. Several authors have suggested that, for Spinoza, essence and existence are one and the same thing.⁴ However, the most straightforward and extensive argumentation for this specific view can be found in the work of Mogens Lærke. He criticizes the Platonizing interpretation of the essence-existence distinction in terms of two separate ontological levels and argues that this distinction is only "aspectual" (Lærke, 2016, 2017). However, he thereby distances himself from a "perspectival" reading that has been suggested by people such as François Zourabichvili (2002, pp. 178–183) and Julie Klein (2014, p. 183). Both interpretations take essence and existence to be one and the same thing. However, the *aspectual* reading argues that essence and existence are aspects of a mode that *really* are different from each other. In other words, the difference between these aspects is independent of how the thing is conceived. On the contrary, the *perspectival* reading takes the distinction between essence and existence to be

Spinoza's correspondence, followed by the number of the letter. For references to specific passages in letters and longer scholia, I add the specific page number of the Gebhart edition (abbreviated as "G," followed by volume and page) and the Curley translation (abbreviated as "C," followed by volume and page). Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of Spinoza are Curley's.

² Some scholars distinguish *formal* from *actual* essences, and argue that only the former are eternal (Garrett, 2018b, 2018c; Martin, 2008; Ward, 2011). I do not follow such a distinction. Mogens Lærke (2017, pp. 24–27) makes a strong case against such an equivocal interpretation of Spinoza's notion of essence. He shows that, when Spinoza uses the notion of "formal essence," it is either to construct a *reductio* (as in E1P17S), or to emphasize that essences are not "objective," that is, they are not representational ideas in God's intellect (as in E2P8). In this sense, *all* essences are formal. Furthermore, when Spinoza uses the notion of "actual essence," he does not refer to another kind of essence, but merely wishes to emphasize that essences are actual (Lærke, 2017, p. 33). However, *all* essences are actual, for Spinoza. As we will see in Section 3, Spinoza's discussion of an "eternal" form of actuality in E5P29S refers to formal essences. In other words, he there ascribes actuality to formal essences. Therefore, "formal" and "actual" do not constitute two categories of essences, but rather refer to two aspects that *all* essences have.

³ In this article, I will take "existence" to refer to durational existence. Spinoza seems to regard these as equivalent. For example, he writes: "determinate existence, or [*sive*] duration" (E1P21D) and "existence through which they are said to have duration" (E2P8C). Therefore, following most scholars, I will understand the essence-existence distinction in terms of the eternity-duration distinction.

⁴ Martial Gueroult (1968, p. 325) takes the "universe of essences" and the "universe of existences" to be two aspects of the same thing. Gilles Deleuze (1968, pp. 47–49) argues, that, for Spinoza, being is univocal, that is, being "speaks in the same voice" throughout all of reality. In other words, there is no transcendent ontological realm of essences. However, Deleuze himself only briefly comments on the essence-existence distinction. He argues that it is not a real distinction (Deleuze, 1968, pp. 194–195), and understands it in terms of two ways of expressing God: *intensively* or *extensively* (Deleuze, 1968, pp. 173–196). One could read this as an "aspectual" reading of the essence-existence distinction. However, Deleuze does not further discuss this. More recently, the reality of the essence-existence distinction has been questioned by François Zourabichvili (2002, pp. 178–83), Julie Klein (2014, p. 183), and Chantal Jaquet (2015, pp. 182, 229–232).

merely a difference in ways of conceiving the same thing. While the non-dualist approach has, in general, gained some popularity in recent years, no one, after Lærke, has really addressed the question of whether the essence-existence distinction is aspectual or perspectival.⁵ I want to return to this question. Through a close examination of the grounds on which this distinction is made, I argue that it cannot be a real distinction.

My overall argument goes as follows: there are three options concerning the reality of the essence-existence distinction. The first is that the distinction is simply “real,” in the sense that essence and existence are two kinds of beings (I refer to this as the “dualist” reading). The second option is that the distinction is “aspectual.” This means that the distinction between essence and existence is still real, that is, it corresponds to something in reality, but it only concerns two distinct aspects of one being. The third option, which I defend, is that the distinction does not correspond to anything in reality but merely concerns two different ways to perceive (or conceive) of one and the same being. The first two options posit a real distinction. However, this raises the question of what distinguishes essence and existence. What differentiates those two *kinds of beings*, which the dualist interpretation posits, or those *two aspects of one being*, which the aspectual reading posits? If there is real difference, it needs to be accounted for. As I will show, there are two important ways in which essence and existence have been differentiated: by cause and by temporal nature. As I have already said, essences are traditionally understood to be eternal effects of a “vertical” causation by God. Existence, on the contrary, is understood to be a durational effect of a “horizontal” causation by other modes. In other words, the reality of the essence-existence distinction has been grounded in a bifurcation of causal processes and in a distinction of duration from eternity. In the following two sections, I closely examine and problematize those two grounds. In Section 2, I examine the dualist interpretation of causation. I argue that there are some important textual and systematic reasons to doubt this reading. This takes away the foundation for distinguishing essence and existence by cause. Then, in Section 3, I analyze the temporal distinction of essence and existence. I present some important textual evidence for the perspectival nature of the eternity-duration distinction. This leads to the conclusion that both the distinction by cause and the distinction by temporal nature fail. This eliminates the grounds for a real distinction of essence and existence. Therefore, the distinction should be understood as involving two ways of conceiving of one and the same thing. In Section 4, I reply to a possible objection to such a reading.

2. Do Essences Result from Another Causal Mechanism?

In the literature on Spinoza, essences are almost always understood to follow “vertically” from the absolute nature of God’s attributes. This causal process is found to be described in E1P21–23. The existence of modes, on the contrary, is taken to follow

⁵ For example, Noa Shein (2018, 2020) argues that all modes have both an infinite and finite aspect. Kristin Primus (2019, 2021a, 2021b) argues that all modes are actually infinite modes and that they are only inadequately understood as finite. Lastly, Raphael Krut-Landau (2021) argues that eternity and duration (and the transition from one to the other) constitute three perspectives on nature.

“horizontally” from other modes. It only follows from God insofar as he is modified by the series of modes that constitute the horizontal cause of the mode. The existence of modes is, therefore, durational. Modes only exist when the conditions are right. This causal mechanism is found to be described in E1P28. So, for example, while my essence follows directly from God’s absolute nature, my existence only follows from God under the right circumstances, that is, when God has been modified as my parents and all of my ancestors.

Before we examine the problems with this bifurcation, let us look at some prominent examples of such a reading. In large part, this reading goes back to Edwin Curley’s influential interpretation of Spinoza. In a more recent essay co-authored with Gregory Walski, they express it succinctly: “abstract types [i.e., formal essences] follow unconditionally from the necessity of divine nature, whereas existing singular things follow only conditionally from the necessity of divine nature, that is, given an accommodating prior series of finite causes” (Curley & Walski, 1999, p. 251). Although there are some important differences, which we will come to soon, we find a very similar causal bifurcation in Don Garrett’s account. He distinguishes “following absolutely” and “following as determined” (Garrett, 2018d, pp. 127–128). Melamed takes a slightly different angle. He grasps this bifurcation of causation in terms of the distinction between *immanent* and *transitive* causation (Melamed, 2013, pp. 105–111). The essence of modes is caused through immanent causation, where the effect inheres in the cause, and where there is no temporal differentiation between cause and effect. This explains why essences are eternal and contained in the attributes (see E2P8). The existence of modes is caused by other modes through transitive causation, where the cause and the effect remain external and temporally differentiated from each other. These are just some prominent examples of an idea that can be found in most Spinoza interpretations.

Explicit textual evidence for this causal distinction of essence and existence is often found in a passage from E1P17S: “a man is the cause of the existence of another man, but not of his essence, for the latter is an eternal truth” (G II. 63/C I.427). Melamed, for example, concludes from this that “the *causes* of the essence and existence of finite things are distinct” (Melamed, 2013, p. 107). However, as several scholars have argued, Spinoza develops a *reductio* argument in this passage (Alquié, 1981, pp. 152–156; Gueroult, 1968, pp. 272–295; Koyré, 1950; Lærke, 2017, p. 17). Therefore, in order to assess whether the quotation reflects Spinoza’s own opinion, we must understand its broader context. This will require a short examination of the structure of this scholium.

In the first part of the scholium, Spinoza criticizes those who attribute free will to God. Spinoza explains that this traditional view implies that God understands everything in advance and then selects by will what he creates. In a first argument against such a view, Spinoza shows that it contradicts the omnipotence of God.⁶ In a second argument, he criticizes the idea that both intellect and will pertain to God’s nature, which is what divine free will amounts to. Referring to the second part of the scholium, he writes, “I will show later [...] that neither intellect nor will pertain to God’s

⁶ “For they are forced to confess that God understands infinitely many creatable things, which nevertheless he will never be able to create” (G II.62/C I. 426).

nature" (G II.62/C I.426). More specifically, the second part argues that "If the intellect pertains to divine nature," this would lead to absurdity, and ends with stating that "The proof proceeds in the same way concerning the will" (G II.63/ C I.428). The *reductio* argument can be reconstructed as follows: the idea the God has free will results from (a) ascribing to God what we find in ourselves.⁷ Furthermore, divine free will implies that (b) intellect and will pertain to God's nature. In the case of intellect, this implies (c) the doctrine of *divine prescience*; that is, the belief that God's intellect, pertaining to his essence, precedes the creation of the world.⁸ Note that divine prescience is also already implied in the idea of divine free will. For God needs to *know* in advance in order to *choose*. However, divine prescience implies that (d) God's intellect radically differs from ours. According to Spinoza, this conclusion is absurd. For the human intellect is part of God's intellect (E2P11C). However, it also contradicts (a), that is, the initially assumed analogy between God and man. Hence the absurdity.⁹

Spinoza derives (d) in two different ways from (b) and (c). First, he argues that a prescient intellect would radically differ from ours because our intellect is either posterior or (as some have it) simultaneous to its object.¹⁰ Second, he argues that if intellect pertains to divine nature, it pertains to the cause of both the essence and existence of things. He then introduces an additional premise: "what is caused differs from its cause precisely in what it has from the cause" (G II. 63/C I.427). Spinoza thus arrives at (d): "God's intellect, insofar as it is conceived to constitute the divine essence, differs from our intellect both as to its essence and as to its existence" (G II. 63/C I.427). Now, to illustrate this additional premise, he uses the cited example of a man causing the existence, but not the essence, of another man.

Since the passage is part of a *reductio* argument, it cannot be so easily held to reflect Spinoza's own position. Instead, I believe, Spinoza here only uses an idea that is in agreement with traditional opinions in order to disprove the traditional notion of divine prescience and, by extension, divine free will. This seems evident from the fact that, as Spinoza says, the idea that a man is the cause of another man's existence but not his essence entails that "they can agree entirely according to their essence" (G II. 63/C I.427). However, the latter is an orthodox view, which is strongly opposed by Spinoza's definition of essence as unique to each mode in E2D2 and E3P7.¹¹ For these reasons, it is problematic to hold the passage as proof for a causal bifurcation.

⁷ "Of course I know there are many who think they can demonstrate that a supreme intellect and a free will pertain to God's nature. For they say they know nothing they can ascribe to God more perfect than what is the highest perfection in us" (G II.62/C I. 426).

⁸ This doctrine is rejected by Spinoza in its own right: "From this it follows that the formal being of things which are not modes of thinking does not follow from the divine nature because [God] has first known the things; rather the objects of ideas follow and are inferred from their attributes in the same way and by the same necessity as that with which we have shown ideas to follow from the attribute of thought" (E2P6C).

⁹ For a detailed exposition of this *reductio* argument, see Alexandre Koyré (1950).

¹⁰ "If intellect pertains to the divine nature, it will not be able to be (like our intellect) by nature either posterior to (as most would have it), or simultaneous with, the things understood, since God is prior in causality to all things (by P16C1)" (G II. 63/C I.427).

¹¹ Of course, some authors explain E2D2 and E3P7 in terms of a distinction between *formal* and *actual* essence (Martin, 2008, pp. 496–497; Ward, 2011, p. 27 footnote 20). According to such a reading, Spinoza

Moreover, the affirmative first part of E1P17S, which does not constitute a *reductio*, explicitly denies a causal bifurcation and stresses the univocity of causation:

But I think I have shown clearly enough (see P16) that from God's supreme power, *or* infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things, have necessarily flowed, or always follow, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles. (G II.62/C I.426)

Instead of distinguishing two forms of necessity, Spinoza emphasizes here that everything follows from God "by the same necessity and in the same way." Moreover, he does not distinguish two distinct sources of necessity. On the contrary, he writes that, "All things, I say, are in God, and all things that happen, happen *only* through the laws of God's infinite nature and follow (as I shall show) from the necessity of his essence" (E1P15S, G II.60/C I. 424; my emphasis). It thus appears that Spinoza strongly denies any causal input in addition to God's essence. Furthermore, Spinoza does not exclude anything from the effects that flow from God's nature. Finite modes too are thus said to follow simply from divine nature: "From the necessity of divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect)" (E1P16). In short, *all* modes are said to follow, in the *same* way (E1P17S), from the *same* necessity of divine nature (E1P16) and *only* from that necessity (E1P15S).

Apart from those passages contradicting a causal bifurcation, there are deeper systematic problems with such a view. First, such a split in divine causation contradicts the doctrine of immanent causation. As Spinoza says, "God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things" (E1P18; see also KV I 3 and Ep. 73).¹² God cannot be separated from his effects. As Spinoza writes: "God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called cause of himself" (E1P25S, G II.68/C I.431). The self-causation of God (E1D1) is equal to his causation of modes, because modes are modifications of God (E1P25C). In short, God's self-causation is equal to his self-modification, that is, his creation of modes. This means that the allegedly "conditional" or "transitive" causation discussed in E1P28 is itself nothing but immanent causation, and thus, ultimately, a form of God's self-causation. One mode can only correctly be said to be the cause of another mode if each mode is itself understood as a mode of God. As Pierre Macherey says, "God is, in fact, everywhere in this chain" (Macherey, 1998, p. 91; my translation). This is evident from Spinoza's use of the grammatical conjunction "insofar as" (*quatenus*) in E1P28D: "It [a mode's determined existence] has, therefore, to follow from, or be determined to exist and

only ascribes individuality to *actual* essences, but not *formal* essences. As I have already noted, formal essences and actual essences do not constitute two categories of essences (see note 2). *All* essences are both formal and actual. Therefore, this distinction cannot be invoked to explain away E2D2 and E3P7 in favour of a second kind of essence which is common to multiple individuals. See also Lærke (2017) for an extensive argument against reading Spinoza's theory of essences in terms of common essences.

¹² For an extensive development of this kind of interpretation, see Lærke (2009, pp. 183–187, 2013, pp. 70–75). Pierre Macherey also argues that these forms of causality are "the same causality which appertains to one and the same nature" (Macherey, 1998, p. 180; my translation).

produce an effect by God or an attribute of God *insofar as* it is modified by a modification which is finite and has a determinate existence" (G II.69/C I.432; my emphasis). In other words, when we say, "*mode a* causes *mode b*," we are actually saying, "*God insofar as mode a* causes *God insofar as mode b*," and thus "*God* causes *God*." In the *Korte Verhandeling*, he puts it very straightforwardly: "He [God] is an immanent and not a transitive cause, since he does everything in himself, and not outside himself (because outside him there is nothing)" (KV I 3, G I.35/C I.80). As everything is a mode of God, there is nothing outside of God through which transitive causation could occur. Therefore, all *transitive causation* is, ultimately, *immanent causation* and, by extension, *self-causation*. I agree with the strong conclusion that Lærke draws from this: "We cannot allow for any equivocations on the notion of divine causation" (Lærke, 2013, p. 74). The bifurcation of causality merely comes down to "two ways of considering one and the same causal action" (Lærke, 2013, p. 72).

This is problematic for those, like Melamed (2013), who directly base the dualism of essence and existence on the distinction between immanent and transitive causation. According to his reading, "the *causes* of the essence and existence of a finite thing are distinct" (Melamed, 2013, p. 107). "The essences of finite things are explained through [i.e., caused by] their attributes, whereas the existence of a finite thing is explained through [i.e., caused by] another finite thing" (Melamed, 2013, p. 107).¹³ As he explains, "The causation between finite modes is *transitive causation*" (Melamed, 2013, p. 111). The causation of modes by God's essence is immanent causation. The essence-existence distinction is thus explained in terms of "a bifurcation of causation into immanent and transitive causation" (Melamed, 2013, p. 108). Now, as I have just argued, transitive causation is, ultimately, immanent causation. This takes away the foundation for the causal distinction that Melamed makes between essence and existence.

One could try to defend the distinction between transitive and immanent causation by arguing that, although "*mode a* causes *mode b*" is equal to "*God insofar as mode a* causes *God insofar as mode b*," there is an important distinction between "*God* causing" and "*God insofar as mode a* causing." We thus arrive at the specific causal bifurcation with which Garrett and Curley understand the essence-existence distinction. They distinguish "following from the absolute nature of God" and "following from God insofar as he is modified in a certain way." For example, my essence is then caused by the absolute nature of God, while my existence is only caused by God on the condition that he is modified as my parents and ancestors. However, given the doctrine of immanent causation, such a distinction would come down to this: (i) God causes himself absolutely, and (ii) God causes himself on the condition that he is modified in a certain way. The question then is: what, besides God's essence, can condition God to be modified in a certain way?

There are two options. One is to affirm that there is additional causal input outside of God's absolute nature. Curley, for example, assumes there are singular facts outside

¹³ "Explained by" is here equivalent to "caused by," since Melamed (2013, p. 105) defends the so-called "causation-conception biconditional." As causation implies conception and conception implies causation, they are logically equivalent.

of God's essence on which his essence, in the form of laws of nature, operates. In the essay with Walski, they write, "God, insofar as he is infinite, is not an adequate cause of finite things, that he produces them only with the aid of other things, which provide, as it were, the material for his creation" (Curley & Walski, 1999, p. 257). As we have just seen, this is contradicted by Spinoza's repeated emphasis on divine necessity being the *only* source of necessity. Furthermore, as Steven Nadler (2008) argues, this interpretation ends up contradicting the immanence and all-inclusiveness of God because it assumes something outside of God.

The second option is to deny that there is any causal input besides the essence of God. This means that the specific series of modes, which constitute the horizontal cause of each finite mode, follows from God's absolute nature (for there is no other cause). But this ultimately entails that *everything* follows from God's absolute nature. The causal process that Garrett calls "following as determined" is nothing but "following absolutely" because the determination of the attribute can itself only flow from the absolute nature of the attribute. To use my example, if God's absolute nature is the cause of all of my ancestors, the causation of my existence is not in any sense "conditional." I will return to this issue shortly. In sum, given Spinoza's doctrine of immanent causation, the bifurcation of causal mechanisms ends up in a dilemma: either there is causal input besides God's essence providing the partial conditions for the existence of finite modes, or everything follows from God's absolute nature, which means that there is no "conditional" or "non-absolute" form of causation.

A second issue, which is closely related to the first, is the so-called "problem of alternative series." It was first raised by Jonathan Bennett (1984, pp. 119–124). If the existence of finite modes is always explained by the existence of other finite modes, while no finite mode directly follows from God's essence, the existence of finite modes is not *necessary* but only *determined* given previous conditions. In other words, each mode follows from the series of modes, but the series as a whole lacks necessity. Consequentially, many scholars have attributed a metaphysics of possible worlds to Spinoza (e.g., Carriero, 1991, pp. 74–83; Curley & Walski, 1999; Ward, 2011, p. 43). But this contradicts Spinoza's necessitarianism: "Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced" (E1P33).

Different answers have been given. Some scholars simply deny that Spinoza is a necessitarian (e.g., Bennett, 1984, Chapter 5; Curley, 1969, Chapter 3; Curley & Walski, 1999; Martin, 2010). This position is plagued by the strong textual evidence for necessitarianism in E1P16, E1P29, E1P33, and elsewhere.¹⁴ Furthermore, this reading stands in serious tension with the broader philosophical spirit of Spinoza's philosophy. Curley and Walski, for example, end up acknowledging that some phenomena in nature (more particularly, the totality of nature and the most general laws) simply cannot be explained.¹⁵ This seems to be in plain contradiction to

¹⁴ See Garrett (2018a, 2018d) for an extensive argument why these propositions affirm necessitarianism.

¹⁵ "The only possible kind of explanation is scientific explanation. Once we understand that scientific explanations are necessarily unavailable for such phenomena as the existence of the totality of finite things and for the existence of the most general laws governing finite things — necessarily unavailable because of

Spinoza's rationalism, his acceptance of the principle of sufficient reason (E1P11D), and his characterization of God's nature as the ultimate reason for *everything* in nature (E1P16).¹⁶

Others uphold the necessitarian reading and argue that the complete collection of finite modes does follow from God's absolute nature. This is thought to be either because of it being the most perfect series or because the necessity that follows from God's essence is simply so precise that only this world can be created.¹⁷ In an awkward attempt to save Spinoza's necessitarianism, the first option attributes to Spinoza the very same idea that Leibniz had developed to escape Spinoza's necessitarianism. The second option seems more viable. In fact, there is textual evidence for the idea that the complete series of modes follows absolutely from the nature of God.¹⁸ However — and this is crucial — this implies that there is no distinction between two causal mechanisms after all. This ties in with the point I raised earlier regarding the denial of supplemental causal input. How should we, without any supplemental cause, understand the non-absolute side of causation? Garrett argues that the whole series of modes follows absolutely from God, while an individual finite mode follows non-absolutely from God. Finite modes only follow from God “in virtue of its membership” of this series, which itself *does* follow absolutely from God (Garrett, 2018a, p. 105). Defending a similar idea, Michael Della Rocca gives an example:

Consider a complete dance with 16 steps. It may be that I can perform step 12 only in the context of performing all other steps. Nonetheless, I can be the complete cause of the performance of step 12, as well as of all other steps. Similarly, God may be the complete cause of the infinitely many modes he causes only as part of a package. (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 71)

Curley and Walski raise an important objection to this idea: “If the absolute nature of the attributes is the cause and ground of the series of finite modes, wouldn't that entail that it is also the cause and ground of each finite mode within that series?” (Curley & Walski, 1999, p. 254; for a similar argument, see Huenemann, 1999; Newlands, 2018).¹⁹ Let us use Della Rocca's example: if this dance follows in an

the nature of those phenomena — then we understand that we have as much explanation as we can reasonably desire” (Curley & Walski, 1999, p. 259).

¹⁶ For such a criticism, see Valterri Viljanen (2011, pp. 50–51).

¹⁷ The first idea is defended by Garrett (2018a, p. 104, 2018d, pp. 140–141) and John Carriero (1991, pp. 80–81), and the second idea is presented by Garrett (2018a, pp. 103–105, 2018d, pp. 140–141).

¹⁸ As is well known, Spinoza identifies the mediate finite mode of extension as “the total face of the universe” (*facies totius universi*) and explicitly refers to his description of the totality of bodies as one individual in E2PDL7S. As the mediate infinite mode follows from God's absolute nature (via the immediate infinite mode), the most obvious conclusion seems to be that the whole system of finite modes does, in fact, follow in an absolute and vertical way from God. For an analysis of Spinoza's mediate infinite mode, see Tad Schmaltz (1997).

¹⁹ Garrett, in his extensive reply to Curley and Walski's (1999) text, does not answer this critique. In fact, he mistakenly writes that “Curley and Walski do not directly answer to the first alternative [that only one complete system of modes meets the constraints of the laws of nature following from God's nature]” (Garrett, 2018d, p. 141). However, the fact that Garrett fails to answer (or even notice) this criticism is

absolute way from God's essence, that is, if to be God entails doing this dance, each step of the dance follows absolutely from God. If there is no question at all that the complete dance is danced, the fact that step 12 only follows from God in the context of the complete dance does not mean anything, and it certainly does not form any kind of conditionality or relativity. Instead, step 12 then follows just as absolutely from God as the whole dance. This would only constitute a form of conditionality if the complete dance was uncertain. Therefore, necessitarianism, and the idea that everything follows with absolute certainty from God's nature, cannot be reconciled with a non-absolute form of causation. One must choose between, on the one hand, denying necessitarianism and upholding a distinction between two causal processes, and, on the other hand, affirming necessitarianism and rejecting non-absolute causation as a separate form of causation. It is obvious by now that I defend the second option. And, to return to my overall argument, this unity of God's causal action takes away the foundation for a distinction of essence and existence by cause.

After all these arguments against the bifurcation of causality, the question remains: what about E1P21–23 and E1P28? Are these passages not clear descriptions of two distinct causal mechanisms? I do not believe so. Recently, two scholars have separately made some interesting arguments in this regard. My critique of causal dualism ties in perfectly with their analysis. Against a long tradition of interpretation, Kristin Primus argues that E1P21–23 does not describe the causation of one special class of modes (the so-called “infinite modes”) but describes the causation of all modes (Primus, 2019, 2021a, 2021b). What Spinoza argues for in these propositions is that each and every mode of God's infinite attributes is itself infinite and eternal.²⁰ One of the strongest arguments for such a conclusion comes from the causal-explanatory barrier between, on the one hand, infinite and eternal reality and, on the other hand, non-infinite (that is, indefinite or finite) and durational reality. Traditionally understood, infinite modes function as a bridge between infinite attributes and finite modes. E1P28 is then taken to describe how finite modes result from infinite modes through a process of limitation. However, as infinite modes are then understood to be something that can be limited and cut down to finite modes, these so-called “infinite” and “eternal” modes are actually *indefinite* and *sempiternal*. However — and this is crucial — as Spinoza argues in Ep. 12, the infinite has a completely different structure than the indefinite. Infinity cannot be cut down to finite pieces. There is thus a structural difference and, therefore, an explanatory barrier between the infinite nature of the attributes and these indefinite and sempiternal things that scholars have called “infinite modes.” Hence, the finite cannot follow from the infinite via these indefinite modes. Only the infinite can follow from infinity (E1P21). Hence, every effect of the infinite attributes is itself infinite and eternal.

telling of the fact that it strikes the weakest aspect of his position. More in general, Curley and Walski's critique shows that, as long as Garrett holds on to the double causal mechanism, necessitarianism cannot be saved. They see this as an argument for the non-necessitarian reading of Spinoza. I see it as an argument for reading Spinoza's theory of causation in terms of one causal process.

²⁰ Primus argues that these propositions constitute a critique of Descartes' idea that some effects of God are eternal and necessary, and some are non-eternal and non-necessary. Against this idea, Spinoza argues in E1P21–23 that *all* effects of God are eternal and necessary.

But what should we then make of the Spinoza's description of how singular things are determined to have a finite and determinate existence in E1P28? This is where Noa Shein's recent analysis proves elucidating. She argues that E1P28 does not describe a linear process of efficient causation but a network of inter-determination constitutive of individuation (Shein, 2015; see also Shein 2018, 2020). In other words, this proposition does not describe how singular things are *caused*. Instead, it describes how their individuality is determined by the totality of other modes. E1P28 merely describes how modes, once they are created together with all other modes, have individuality through relations with those other modes. But this is not a separate causal process. Furthermore, it is not a durational linear process. Instead, it is an eternal structure of nature. In sum, the traditional reading of E1P21–23 and E1P28 as descriptions of two separate causal mechanisms has been challenged in recent literature.

To conclude this section, there is no solid textual foundation for a dualism of causal mechanisms. More importantly, such a causal dualism conflicts with key elements of Spinoza's metaphysics, that is, his necessitarianism and his doctrine of immanent causation. This takes away the support for a causal distinction between essence and existence.

Before we move to the next section, let us also consider Lærke's somewhat singular position. His real but aspectual distinction between essence and existence is also based on the distinction between how things either follow from God's essence or from other modes:

When we consider a thing's *essence*, we conceive the aspect of that thing that relates it directly to the *natura naturans*, or the essence of God. [...] By contrast, when we consider the *existence* of a thing, we conceive the aspect of the thing that relates it to the *natura naturata*, that is to say, we consider it as the mode related to other modes, that either exists or does not exist following whether those other modes cause the first mode's existence or non-existence. (Lærke, 2017, p. 42)

His emphasis on the fact that this aspectual distinction between essence and existence is a *real* distinction (Lærke, 2016, p. 271), thus implies that there is a real distinction between the aspect of a mode that follows directly from God's essence and the aspect of a mode that follows from other modes. Nevertheless, as we have seen, he argues elsewhere that the distinction between two causal mechanisms comes down to "two ways of considering one and the same causal action" (Lærke, 2013, p. 72). He says, "We cannot allow for any equivocations on the notion of divine causation" (Lærke, 2013, p. 74). Furthermore, he argues that "the *natura* which is considered either as *naturans* or as *naturata*, is one and the same *natura*, considered either as unmodified or as modified" (Lærke, 2013, p. 73). Therefore, as "following from other modes" does not constitute a distinct causal process but is merely another way to understand God's action, the aspect of a mode that follows from other modes cannot be really different from the aspects that follow from the essence of God. Hence, the distinction between essence and existence, as he makes it, cannot be real but is merely perspectival. In short, I believe that Lærke's commitment to

univocal divine causation entails a *perspectival* reading contrary to his *aspectual* reading. As the following sections show, there are some other strong textual and systematic reasons for a specifically perspectival reading of the essence-existence distinction.

3. The Perspectival Distinction in E5P29S and E2P45S

According to most interpretations, essence and existence are not only distinguished by cause, but also by temporal nature.²¹ Essence is eternal; existence is durational. However, there is important textual evidence for the perspectival nature of the eternity-duration distinction:

We conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, *or* real, we conceive under a species of eternity [*sub specie aeternitatis*], and their ideas involve the eternal and infinite essence of God (as we have shown in IIP45 and P45S). (E5P29S)

Eternity and duration are here characterized as two ways of conceiving actuality. Does this have any implications for the essence-existence distinction? I believe it does. In fact, I think that this passage can be straightforwardly read as also talking about essence and existence. Before we further examine what this passage says, let us first establish that it does, in fact, discuss the essence-existence distinction. The main question is: does “things conceived *sub specie aeternitatis*” refer to the (formal) essences of thing? Garrett, to name a prominent example, answers negatively.²² His main argument is that there is no reference in E5P29 and E5P29S to the discussion of formal essence in E2P8 or E2P8C (Garrett, 2018d, pp. 137–138). But there is a deeper reason for his negative answer. Garrett is aware that he needs to drive a wedge between, on the one hand, the distinction between formal essence and durational existence in E2P8 and E2P8C, and, on the other hand, the perspectival distinction between two forms of actuality in E5P29S. This is necessary to uphold, as he does, a strong ontological difference between eternal essence and durational existence. Removing this wedge will thus provide extra evidence for the perspectival reading. Let us go over the evidence of why E5P29S can be held to refer to formal essences.

Spinoza’s characterization of *scientia intuitiva* is the easiest way to link “formal essences” to “things *sub specie aeternitatis*.” From E5P31D, it is clear that knowing things by the third kind of knowledge implies knowing things *sub specie aeternitatis*. In E2P40S2, intuitive knowledge is clearly described as knowledge of the formal essences of things. The obvious conclusion thus seems to be that the eternity of things, referred to in E5P29S and the surrounding propositions, is the eternal

²¹ Take, for example, Melamed. As we have seen, he argues that the essence and existence of a mode is caused in a different way. However, he argues that this bifurcation of causation is ultimately grounded in a distinction between eternity and duration (Melamed, 2013, p. 111). Such a view is widespread. An exception can be found in Jaquet (2013, p. 375).

²² In a personal correspondence, Carriero has also expressed his doubts as to whether E5P29S talks about formal essence.

existence of things as formal essences comprised in the attributes. For they are both the object of intuitive knowledge.

Furthermore, both the eternal existence and the formal essence of things are consistently described by Spinoza as the manner in which things are contained in God and follow from divine necessity. Things are *sub specie aeternitatis*, Spinoza tells us, insofar as they are “contained in God and follow from the necessity of divine nature” (E5P29S), or “insofar as through God’s essence they involve existence” (E5P30D), or “the very existence of singular things insofar as they are in God” (E2P45S). In a very similar way, formal essences are described as modes “insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes” (E2P8C) and “contained in God’s attributes” (E2P8). Furthermore, mirroring how things are eternal insofar as they follow from God, Spinoza says, “what is conceived with a certain eternal necessity, through God’s essence itself [...] pertains to the essence of the human mind” (E5P23D). Hence, the eternal aspect of things and their formal essence are characterized in the exact same way. Another example of this can be found in Spinoza’s description of the third kind of knowledge. Intuition is explained as “to conceive things under a species of eternity [*sub specie aeternitatis*],” and, therefore, “to conceive things insofar as they are conceived through God’s essence” (E5P30D). But “conceiving things through God’s essence” is also what leads intuition to formal essences: “this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [NS: formal] essence of things” (E2P40S2). This, again, strongly suggests that to conceive of things *sub specie aeternitatis* is to know their formal essence.

Finally, in passages such as E5P23D, E5P23S, and E5P30D, Spinoza states that when the mind knows things *sub specie aeternitatis*, it also knows *itself* to be eternal. In E5P23D, this eternity of the mind is described in terms of being an idea in God, which “pertains to the essence of the human mind.” Not only does this fit the description in E2P8 and E2P8C of how ideas are “comprehended in God’s infinite idea *in the same way as the formal essences of singular things, or modes, are contained in God’s attributes*” (E2P8; my emphasis), but E5P23D also explicitly refers to E2P8C in this regard. This, again, leads to the conclusion that things conceived of *sub specie aeternitatis* refers to knowing things as formal essences contained in God’s attributes.²³

Now that we have settled that E5P29S talks about the distinction between formal essence and durational existence, let us examine *what* the scholium says. First, the passage does not distinguish different things (for example, finite and infinite modes), but merely distinguishes two forms of actuality of the same thing. This is clear from the fact that the preceding demonstration, to which the passage brings clarification, talks about how the mind can know its human body — that is, one and the same thing — either in relation to time or *sub specie aeternitatis*. Hence, it seems, the straightforward dualist interpretation of eternal essence and durational existence can be dismissed. Second, these two forms of actuality are described as

²³ As E5P29S deals with formal essences, this means that formal essences too are actual. This disproves the interpretation according to which formal and actual essence constitute two categories of essences (e.g., Garrett, 2018b, 2018c; Martin, 2008; Ward, 2011). As I have argued, *all* essences are both formal and actual (see note 2 and 11).

two ways to *conceive* of this human body. As we have seen, Lærke understands the distinction between essence and existence as a distinction between two different *aspects* of the same thing. However, the continual use of the verb “conceive” (*concipio*) in this scholium suggests that, for Spinoza, the relevant difference does not lie in different aspects of the human body but in different ways that it can be *conceived*. However, in itself, this does not necessarily mean that conception accounts for the difference. This conceptual difference might be backed by a real difference between aspects. Therefore, more conclusive evidence must follow from elsewhere.

In the passage just cited, E5P29S, Spinoza explicitly refers back to E2P45 and its scholium. In the latter, we find another confirmation of the perspectival difference between duration and eternity:

By existence here I do not understand duration, i.e., existence insofar as it is conceived abstractly, and as a certain species of quantity. For I am speaking of the very nature of existence, which is attributed to singular things because infinitely many things follow from the eternal necessity of God’s nature in infinitely many modes (see IP16). I am speaking, I say, of the very existence of singular things insofar as they are in God.

This passage comes after E2P45D, in which Spinoza explains that “singular things cannot be conceived without God,” and that their ideas “must involve an eternal and infinite essence of God.” It is quite clear that this, just like in E5P29S, corresponds to how singular things, as formal essences, are “comprehended in God’s attributes” (E2P8C). In fact, E2P45D explicitly refers to E2P8C in this regard. Note that this is additional proof that E5P29S also refers (via its reference to E2P45D) to Spinoza’s discussion of formal essence in E2P8C.

Now, what does Spinoza say in the just cited scholium? The difference between a thing’s eternity and its duration is again described as a difference between how things are *conceived*, rather than a difference in *kinds* of things or *aspects* of things. Furthermore — and this is important — Spinoza here emphasizes that conceiving of modes in duration is conceiving them *abstractly*. In other words, the *concrete* reality of things is non-durational. The scholium characterizes non-durational eternity as “the very nature of existence” and “the very existence of singular things insofar as they are in God.” This follows in several different ways from his theory. Spinoza emphasizes, again and again, that we conceive of things *sub specie aeternitatis* insofar as we “conceive them to be contained in God” (E5P29S; see also E2P45S and E2P44C2D). Given Spinoza’s key doctrine that everything is, in fact, in God (E1P15), this seems to entail that everything in nature is, in fact, eternal. Furthermore, this also follows from Spinoza’s necessitarianism. If everything is necessary and eternity and necessity are equivalent,²⁴ everything is eternal. Another way to come to this conclusion is by the fact that adequate knowledge knows things *sub specie aeternitatis*. As adequate

²⁴ Spinoza explicitly states that conceiving of something as necessary implies conceiving of them as eternal (E2P44C2D) and that conceiving of something as eternal implies conceiving of them as necessary (E5P29S). As each notion implies the other; they are logically equivalent. Moreover, this equivalence is also indicated by his use of the conjunction *sive*: “eternity or [*sive*] necessity” (E1P10S; E4P62D).

knowledge is necessarily true, it corresponds to reality.²⁵ We can thus conclude that things really are eternal. Finally, such a conclusion also follows from the infinite-finite causal barrier we discussed earlier. Duration is either finite or indefinite, but never infinite. Therefore, durational existence cannot follow from the infinite attributes. Every mode of God is thereby eternal.

This is, I believe, the strongest reason to doubt there is any *real* difference between eternal essence and durational existence. If duration is abstract, it cannot be a legitimately separate form of existence or a distinct aspect of modes.²⁶ This also impedes understanding the essence-existence distinction in terms of how attributes really are distinct aspects of one substance. This comparison does not work, as none of the attributes are abstract. In sum, the abstract nature of durational existence means that it cannot really be a distinct aspect of reality. Instead, it must be a way of conceiving of reality. In other words, the distinction between essence and existence is a distinction between ways of conceiving reality rather than a distinction between distinct kinds of beings or aspects of reality.

To round off this section, I want to point out that the perspectival reading is also more in tune with Spinoza's language. The famous phrase "*sub specie aeternitatis*" is usually translated into English as "under a species (or form) of eternity." As Lærke says, this encourages the Platonizing reading (Lærke, 2016, p. 278 footnote 20). Other translations encourage different readings. The French translations of Bernard Pautrat and Pierre-François Moreau read "sous l'aspect de l'éternité" ("under the aspect of eternity"). This fits the aspectual reading. The Dutch translation of Nico van Suchtelen ("onder het gezichtspunt der eeuwigheid"), the German translation of Jakob Stern ("unter dem Gesichtspunkt der Ewigkeit"), and the Spanish translation of Vidal Peña ("desde la perspectiva de la eternidad") all translate to "under (or from) the viewpoint (or perspective) of eternity." In these translations, the distinction between eternity and duration is more clearly perspectival. These latter translations are also more in accordance with how the phrase is used. Spinoza always speaks of "conceiving" of *sub specie aeternitatis*, or "expressing" *sub specie aeternitatis*, or "knowing" *sub specie aeternitatis*.

²⁵ E2P34 states that adequacy implies truth. In Ep. 60, Spinoza states that truth is the agreement of an idea with its object (G IV.270/C II.432).

²⁶ In a follow-up article (Vermeiren, 2022), I further examine this abstract nature of duration. I show that it does not lead to Eleatic monism or acosmism. As I argue, the fact that reality is, properly understood, eternal, does not make reality in any way poorer. Eternity is just more complete than duration. I argue this can be best understood in terms of Spinoza's critique of finite quantity. In Ep. 12, Spinoza argues that conceiving of things in terms of finite quantity entails abstracting them from their divine cause. Our conception of things in terms of finite quantities, such as duration, results from understanding them by their inadequate cause. Adequately understood, however, nature is eternal. But this does not entail acosmism or Eleatic monism. Acosmism only follows from the eternity of nature if we regard eternity as lacking something in comparison to durational reality. According to such a conception, eternity is less differentiated, less particularized, or simply less rich than durational reality that we experience. Although this is how eternity is traditionally conceived, it does not correspond to Spinoza's conception. For Spinoza, eternity is not a transcendent reality over and above concrete reality. Instead, eternity is concrete reality itself. In fact, I argue, eternity is more individualized, more particularized, and more differentiated than durational reality. Invoking Spinoza's critique of privation, I show that understanding things in terms of limited duration implies measuring them of against each other using an abstract concept of homogeneous existence. I thereby further develop Zourabichvili's interpretation of the essence-existence distinction in terms of complete and partial perspective (Zourabichvili, 2002, pp. 178–183).

4. Possible Objection

Before I wrap up this article, let us consider a very likely objection to this perspectival interpretation of the essence-existence distinction. One could argue that abolishing a real distinction between essence and existence contradicts a key characteristic of modes, namely, that their essence does not involve existence (E1P24). As Spinoza says, a mode “is not in itself, but requires a cause to exist” (TIE §92). How can modes have this distinguishing trait if their essence and existence are one and the same thing?

Well, we should note that this characteristic of modes is only true insofar as we abstract modes from substance. Characterizing modes, Spinoza writes that “Their definition, *insofar as it is not the very definition of Substance*, cannot involve any existence” (Ep. 12, G IV. 54/C I.202; my emphasis). However, we *should not* separate the definition of modes from substance. This is because even the nature or essence of a mode is not *in se* but *in alio*.²⁷ For Spinoza, God efficiently causes both the essence and the existence of modes (E1P25). Therefore, essences are not pure logical possibilities independent of God’s creative act. On the contrary, God *creates* essences. Therefore, we cannot abstract those essences from God. To talk about the essence of a mode as *in se* not entailing the existence of that mode involves an abstraction. A complete definition of those essences already involves substance as their cause. But once God is involved, the existence of the mode follows necessarily. In other words, once God causes the essence of a mode, he necessarily causes the mode’s existence because there are no unrealized possibilities in Spinoza’s necessitarian metaphysics. In this way, the essence of a thing, being inseparable from God, already involves the existence of that mode. As Spinoza himself says, *through God’s essence* the essence of a mode *does* involve existence. He writes that, “To conceive things under a species of eternity, therefore, is to conceive things insofar as they are conceived through God’s essence, as real being, or [*sive*] *insofar as through God’s essence they involve existence*” (E5P30D; my emphasis). However, since essences *must* be conceived of through God’s essence because they *are* caused by God, essences *always* involve existence through God’s essence.²⁸ As Spinoza says, a mode’s definition does not involve its existence *only* “insofar as it is not the very definition of Substance,” that is, *only* when we abstract the mode from its divine cause.

In Section 2, I argued, in the same vein, that the ideas of transitive causation and conditional causation and their distinction from immanent and absolute causation are only meaningful when we consider modes as separate from substance. I have argued that, since modes are modes of God, every form of transitive causation between modes is, ultimately, immanent causation. Additionally, I have shown that the existence of other modes only forms a condition for divine causation when we ignore that they themselves have been caused by God. As God’s nature is the sole source of causation, there is only absolute causation. In sum, the bifurcation of

²⁷ This is a deep philosophical consequence of the abolishment a real distinction between essence and existence: without such a distinction, modes are not *in any sense* “in themselves.” They do not have an inner nature apart from their existence. They are *in alio* through and through. I believe that is precisely what it means to be a mode.

²⁸ For a similar argument, see Jaquet (2015, p. 182).

causation on the grounds of which essence and existence are distinguished is based upon an abstraction of modes from substance. Similarly, in my follow-up article (Vermeiren, 2022), I argue that the conception of modes in terms of a finite duration results from an abstract viewpoint in which, as Spinoza says, “we separate them from Substance, and from the way they flow from eternity, without which, however, they cannot be rightly understood” (Ep. 12, G IV.58/C I.203). In sum, the very distinction of essence and existence is only meaningful when we abstract modes from substance. The fact that we — this includes Spinoza — speak about things as independent of substance and speak about essence and existence as distinct, expresses, I believe, the necessities of language and finite intellect, rather than the reality of things.²⁹

5. Conclusion

I have here examined the reality of the dichotomy between essence and existence. I have considered two principal ways to make this distinction:

The first is a distinction by cause. Essence and existence are thus understood to be caused by a distinct causal mechanism. Melamed, for example, understands essence as caused by immanent causation and existence to be caused by transitive causation. However, I have argued that transitive causation is an empty category for Spinoza because, as he says, God “does everything in himself, and not outside himself (because outside him there is nothing)” (KV I 3, G I.35/C I.80). In other words, as every mode is God insofar as he is modified as that mode, every form of causation is, ultimately, immanent causation. Every effect inheres in its cause because the cause is always, ultimately, God. A possible objection is that “horizontal” causation between modes is still a separate causal mechanism not because modes are separate from God, but because modes constitute a form of condition under which God causes. This amounts to the distinction between “conditional causation” and “absolute causation,” found in the work of authors such as Curley, Garrett, and Della Rocca. However, this leaves us with the question: where does this condition come from? Two options open up: first, we could affirm the existence of some causal input in addition to God’s nature, as Curley does. However, as I have argued, this solution contradicts the all-inclusive nature of God, which is a high price to pay. Second, we could, as Garrett does, deny any additional causal source. However, if God is the sole causal source, it becomes hard to understand in what sense his causation can be conditional. Closely associated with this issue, is the problem of alternative series of modes. If the existence of a mode is only caused by a series of other modes, this leaves open the question of whether there could have been an alternative series of modes. To answer positively is to contradict Spinoza’s necessitarianism, for then modes are only *determined* but not *necessary*. To answer negatively implies that the series of modes as a whole follows from the absolute nature of God. However, this entails, I have argued, that each mode in that series itself follows from the absolute nature of God. Hence, the “horizontal” and “conditional” causal process is, in the end, indistinguishable from “vertical” and

²⁹ These necessities also force Spinoza to speak, for example, about generalities (despite his nominalism), or of simple bodies (despite his rejection of atomism).

“absolute” causation. In sum, the distinction between these causal mechanisms amounts to two ways of understanding God’s unitary causal action.

The second way to distinguish essence from existence is by their temporal nature. Essence is thus understood to be eternal, while existence is durational. However, strong textual evidence can be found for the perspectival nature of the latter distinction. A close reading of Spinoza’s texts shows that this perspectival distinction between eternity and duration should also be read as a perspectival distinction between essence and existence. Moreover, Spinoza’s characterization of duration as “abstract” proves that durational existence cannot be a separate kind of being or a distinct aspect of things but must correspond to a way of understanding them.

Therefore, the essence–existence dichotomy involves a distinction in conception or perception rather than a real distinction. Even Lærke’s *aspectual* reading is too strong. As long as we assume the reality of this distinction, even if it is a distinction between different aspects of one thing, we need to explain their differentiation. Without any real bifurcation between causal mechanisms or between eternity and duration, there is no foundation left for the reality of the essence–existence distinction, even if we consider it to be aspectual.

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