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Source: *Ethics*, Vol. 104, No. 1 (Oct., 1993), pp. 114-134

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2381696>

Accessed: 20-04-2020 17:12 UTC

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Donagan's Spinoza

Edwin Curley

In an unpublished paper on "The History of Philosophy as a Discipline," which Barbara Donagan kindly sent me recently, Alan Donagan commented on the habit philosophers have of speaking of their predecessors in the present tense: "Hume says that . . ." "Hume's reasons for saying that are. . ." Alan was commenting on J. G. A. Pocock's view that this shows a lack of real historical interest in your subject, that if you were thinking about your subject historically, you would, as historians do, use the past tense. What philosophers do betrays a desire to treat the great figures of philosophy's past as if they were our contemporaries. This may produce good philosophy; it does not produce good history.

For all his historical sensitivity, Alan himself stands resolutely with the philosophers on the matter of what tense to use. He typically speaks of Spinoza's exposition of his views in the present tense. And I think he is right to do so. Some years ago I wrote a piece which I, borrowing from Lucian, called, "Dialogues with the Dead." The central theme of this piece was that if we are interested not just in what the philosophers of the past said but in what they meant by what they said, we have to constantly ask ourselves: Why does this person say this? Might he have had reasons for saying it which he did not make explicit? And what are the implications of his saying this? How would this person have responded to certain objections which occur to us, but don't seem to have occurred to any of his contemporaries, or at any rate, don't seem to have occurred to them in quite the same way? Doing history of philosophy, which for me essentially involves conducting a dialogue with dead philosophers, requires you to try to achieve a kind of identification with them, to try to imagine what they would say if they were present and able to answer your questions about their text. Any such exercise must, of course, be highly speculative, but it does have some constraints placed on it by the fact that the philosophers of the past left a record of what they did say in response to questions their contemporaries did ask. A good interpretation of a dead philosopher will respect that record and be guided by it.

Ethics 104 (October 1993): 114–134

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From this perspective it's perfectly reasonable to speak of dead philosophers in the present tense. But I have to say that in writing this paper it felt a bit strange. I do speak of Alan in this paper in the present tense, as I speak of Spinoza in the present tense. But it feels uncomfortable in the case of Alan, whereas it does not feel uncomfortable in the case of Spinoza. If it feels uncomfortable to you, too, I hope you will understand that I do it for a specific methodological reason.

I've had one other stylistic quandary in writing this paper, and that is a problem of reference. I started out these remarks referring to Alan Donagan by his full name, and then switched to his first name. There is a printed version of part of the paper circulating which starts out referring to him by his full name, and then switches to his last name. That's the way we normally proceed in writing about other philosophers, unless the philosopher happens to be so famous that any use of the first name would be superfluous. But in this case it again feels slightly uncomfortable. If Alan Donagan were present among us, as I would like to imagine him to be, I would address him by his first name. So in reading the paper, where the written text reads "Donagan," I shall say "Alan," much in the way that pious Jews, in reading the Hebrew Bible, say *adonai* when they encounter the Tetragrammaton, rather than *yahweh*. I hope it will not be thought irreverent to suggest this comparison between Alan Donagan and the Lord, but to some of us he was rather like a god. Often he seemed to know just about everything.

Alan Donagan's *Spinoza* is a remarkable book in many ways, but perhaps its most remarkable feature is the great sympathy Alan Donagan displayed for his subject.¹ People who work seriously on Spinoza often feel a certain affinity for his philosophy; it is difficult to imagine investing the time and energy required to come to some understanding of Spinoza without first feeling that Spinoza had something to say which was both true and important. In one fundamental respect, at any rate, Alan Donagan did not bring that sense of affinity to his subject. He interprets Spinoza as a naturalist, that is as someone who believes "that nature exists in its own right, and needs no supernatural being to create or to sustain it" (p. xi), and he acknowledges candidly that he himself accepts "the supernaturalist [philosophy] presupposed by the Jewish and Christian faiths Spinoza repudiated" (p. xiv). Yet his approach to Spinoza is unfailingly sympathetic, in the best sense of that term. He refuses to take it for granted that we understand what Spinoza's texts mean, constantly questioning common readings of those texts, especially where a common reading might provide grounds for an easy dismissal of what Spinoza is saying. He is not

1. Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Page references will be given in the text in parentheses.

uncritically sympathetic. If he thinks Spinoza has failed to prove his point, or has proved a point different from the one he set out to prove, he will not hesitate to say so. But he is always looking for a way of understanding the text which will enable us to see it as one which a reasonable, indeed, acute philosopher might have written.

It is not unusual for contemporary writers on Spinoza to maintain a discreet silence about their disagreements with Spinoza's views or arguments. But it is very striking that someone who makes plain his disagreement with Spinoza about a fundamental point should take as his primary object helping "philosophers who aspire to work out an adequate naturalism to learn from the greatest of their naturalist predecessors" (p. xiv). Donagan reports that he had spent thirty-seven years studying Spinoza and that he had been studying Spinoza intensively during the last three of those years. He reports also that during that period he had often changed his mind about what Spinoza's teaching was, that "each change confirmed by later study" had led him to abandon some objection to Spinoza's teaching, and that he expected future study to lead him to an understanding of Spinoza's thought which would find it more acceptable than he then found it. This is remarkable testimony not only to Spinoza's capacity to fascinate us but also to Alan Donagan's commitment to following the argument where it leads. "I disagree with what I think you're saying," he tells Spinoza, "but I will devote a great part of my life to trying to understand you, since I have great respect for your philosophical intelligence and I think that your austere and tragic view of human life represents one of the few philosophies which might be true and which there is some reason to believe." (That's not a real quote, but it seems to capture Donagan's attitude.)

In this article I want to explore the naturalism Donagan attributes to Spinoza, asking what its essential features are, why Donagan thought this particular form of naturalism might be true, and why he thought Spinoza was someone from whom twentieth-century naturalists might learn, why he thought that Spinoza's naturalism, unlike that of today's naturalists, was not "culturally barren," or "evasive," or "contemptible" (p. xi). I think it's only fair to acknowledge that I approach these questions as someone who, like Spinoza and unlike Alan Donagan, rejects the supernaturalism of the Judeo-Christian tradition and thinks he accepts something like the naturalism of Spinoza. I have a somewhat different view than Donagan does of what that acceptance comes to, since I have a somewhat different view than he does of what Spinoza's naturalism implies. But we also agree in many respects about the interpretation of Spinoza, and I shall be exploring both our agreements and our disagreements.

Let us begin with the concept of naturalized theology, a notion Donagan uses to highlight the peculiar nature of Spinoza's naturalism.

In part what “naturalized theology” means is something negative: that as a naturalist, Spinoza rejects the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, that is, that Spinoza believes that nature, in order to exist, did not need to be created by a supernatural being and, indeed, that no supernatural being exists.² In part what “naturalized theology” means is something positive: that, in some sense of the term ‘nature’, it is appropriate to regard nature as God. Spinoza’s brand of naturalism does not give up the notion of God but seeks to show that nature has sufficiently many of the characteristics traditionally ascribed to God to make it reasonable to identify nature with God. In particular, Spinoza’s brand of naturalism seeks to show that nature exists necessarily, is in a positive sense its own cause, is also the cause of everything other than itself, is absolutely infinite, and yet, though its essence is constituted by infinite attributes, is one being. If Spinoza can show that nature has these various characteristics, that will be sufficient to justify the use of religious language in connection with nature.³

This way of posing the problem assumes that there are things other than nature, which nature causes to exist, and hence, that nature, in the sense in which it is to be identified with God, is not to be identified with the totality of finite things. Since people commonly use the term ‘pantheism’ to refer to the view that God is properly identified with the totality of finite things, this interpretation of Spinoza must reject the notion that Spinoza is, in that sense, a pantheist. Donagan does reject the propriety of calling Spinoza a pantheist (p. 90), and I believe he is right to do so. This is one of the points of agreement between us. If it seems to you a radical reading of Spinoza, I might mention that this is also a point of agreement between the two of us and the great French commentator Martial Gueroult. I don’t mean to argue from authority here; I mention this only in the hope that people who find it unthinkable that Spinoza is not a pantheist will pause to consider what reason they have for this view.⁴

2. So far as I can discover, Donagan does not define the term ‘supernatural being’, but by a supernatural being I shall mean a personal being, with knowledge of and a will concerning finite things, which has created all finite things and which has infinite power to carry out his will regarding the things he has created.

3. So I take it to be the project of chaps. 4–6 of Donagan’s book to reconstruct Spinoza’s arguments for these claims about nature; I also take it that he thinks Spinoza will have made a strong case for his naturalized theology if he can provide good reasons for accepting them and that Spinoza in fact does give us arguments for these claims which provide some reason for accepting them. That is why Spinoza’s is “one of the few philosophies . . . there is some reason to believe” (p. xiv). Particularly relevant to this project are chaps. 4.1 (nature’s necessary existence), 4.2 (nature’s self-causation), 5.2 (nature’s absolute infinity), 5.3–5.4 (nature’s unity), and 6.1–6.2 (nature’s causation of finite things).

4. Of course, if you treat Spinoza’s metaphysics as the very paradigm of pantheism, so that ‘pantheism’ just means “whatever view Spinoza held about the relation between God and nature, and any view sufficiently like it,” Spinoza will be a pantheist by defini-

What, then, do we mean by 'nature', when we say that nature is a necessary existent, a self-caused cause of all other things, etc.? Although I find Donagan clear in rejecting the idea that 'nature' here refers to the totality of finite things, I do not find him clear about what he does mean. Sometimes his positive statements suggest that he does, after all, think of nature, in the relevant sense, as the totality of finite things.

Consider his account (in chap. 4, secs. 1–2) of the Spinozistic notion that nature is its own cause. One of the things Donagan and I agree about is that unraveling Spinoza's concept of causation is absolutely fundamental to understanding his philosophy. The fundamental antithesis in Spinoza is between substance and its modes. Substance is defined as what exists in itself and is conceived through itself; modes are defined as things which exist in something else and are conceived through what they exist in. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza does not explain what he means by the phrase "exist in," so the reader who knows only the text of the *Ethics* must work out the meaning of that phrase as best he can. There are various theories about this in the literature. For some thirty years now I have been arguing that for x to "exist in" y , for Spinoza, is for x to be caused by y . Not everyone has accepted that analysis, but Donagan does, with one minor qualification which need not concern us now.⁵

So the question then becomes, What does Spinoza mean by the term 'cause'? This is again a term not defined in the *Ethics* itself, presumably because verbal definitions must always begin by taking the meaning of some terms for granted, and because Spinoza mistakenly thought that his readers would understand the term 'cause' well enough without a formal definition, just as he mistakenly thought they would understand the phrase 'exists in' without a formal definition.

tion. I believe some histories of pantheism do take that approach, and it may be the right approach, if careful scrutiny of the philosophers usually labeled as pantheists suggests that on the more conventional definition of pantheism no one was a pantheist.

5. See Donagan, chap. 4.4, on "the fundamental disjunctions." The minor qualification is that Donagan analyzes *Ethics*, pt. 1, axiom 1 ("Whatever is, is either in itself or in another") in terms of the notion of immanent causation and not of causation *simpliciter*. I consider the qualification minor for present purposes because Donagan does not need the distinction between immanent and transient causation to give his explanation of why nature is its own cause. I note also that, although Spinoza does not give us much help with "exists in" in the *Ethics*, he does gloss this phrase in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, sec. 92 (trans. in vol. 1 of the *Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. Edwin Curley [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985]): "If the thing is in itself, or, as is commonly said, is the cause of itself, then it must be understood through its essence alone; but if it is not in itself, but requires a cause in order to exist, then it must be understood through its proximate cause". This explanation, note, does not make any use of the distinction between immanent and transient causation. I have to say that I think this is a good thing, because I don't find the distinction a clear one, either in Donagan or in Spinoza.

One of the points on which Donagan and I agree is that the best place to look for illumination about Spinoza's concept of causation is the *Theological-Political Treatise*, where Spinoza is trying to convey some of his fundamental metaphysical principles to a more general audience as a way of warming them up for the more rigorous but also more forbidding presentation of his philosophy which awaited them in the *Ethics*.⁶

Donagan and I also agree that for Spinoza the crucial notion for understanding Spinoza's concept of causation is that of a law of nature. Here's an interesting passage from the *Theological-Political Treatise* which illustrates the connection: "Since nothing is necessarily true except by the divine decree alone, it follows quite clearly from this that the universal laws of nature are nothing but decrees of God, which follow from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature"⁷ Donagan invokes this passage as one from which we can gather "the generic sense" in which Spinoza uses the term 'cause', and he argues from it to a definition in the following way: "Since what comes about through the will of God and what is caused by God are the same, it follows that the open sentence 'God causes x ' is equivalent to 'God is such that it is a law of nature that if God exists then x exists or occurs, or will do so'" (p. 62). Donagan goes on to comment that, although this definition might seem to make the sentence "God is cause of himself" senseless, it does not really do so, that there is a way of understanding it in terms of the mechanical conception of nature. According to that conception,

the things in the physical universe that come into being and pass away are not ultimate, but come to be and pass away in something that neither comes to be nor passes away. The atomists conceived this ultimate thing as a collection of atoms in an infinite void, and the things that come to be and pass away as configurations in the motions of those atoms. Spinoza preferred an alternative proposed by Descartes: that *the ultimate thing* is an infinite extended plenum, in which various motions occur; and that the finite things that come to be and pass away are either simple bodies or persisting configurations of bodies distinguishable within that ultimate plenum by their states of motion and rest relative to one another. According to both versions of the mechanical conception, it is a law of nature that *what is ultimate* neither came into being nor will cease to be. It can, therefore, be truly described as 'cause of itself', as Spinoza understood the word 'cause'. [P. 62; my emphasis]

6. See my article, "The TTP as a Prolegomenon to the *Ethics*," in *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. J. A. Cover and Mark Kulstad (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990).

7. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, in *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1925), pp. 82–83.

This is one of the passages in Donagan's book which makes me think he has not completely freed himself from the idea that nature, in the sense in which nature is said to be its own cause, is the totality of finite things. "The ultimate thing" Donagan refers to here sounds suspiciously like the totality of finite things.⁸

Other passages seem to confirm this impression. For example, a few pages later Donagan writes: "Since Spinoza nowhere claims that there is any self-contradiction in the idea of a perishable universe, consisting solely of things that merely happen to be, and are not immanently caused at all, he does not offer it as a logical truth. He expected his chosen readers, those who embraced the new mechanical conception of nature, to accept it as presupposed by that conception; and he confined his attention to them" (pp. 65–66). I take this to mean something like the following: if we understand the universe to be an entity consisting of all and only those things which merely happen to be, finite things which come into being and pass away, then Spinoza does not claim that it is (as we would say) logically necessary that the universe exists; but he does say (and would have expected those who embraced the new mechanical conception of nature to agree) that the universe is a necessary existent in another sense; for it is part of the new mechanical conception of nature that things which come into being and pass away do so because there is some law of nature which specifies the conditions under which they will come into being; the conditions we refer to here are always themselves things which come into being and pass away; in the language of *Ethics*, part 1, proposition 28, they are things which are finite and have a determinate existence; no law of nature could specify the conditions under which the universe will come into being; anything referred to in the specification of those conditions would have to be included in the totality whose existence we were trying to explain; similarly, no law of nature could specify the conditions under which the universe will pass away, for precisely the same reason. So it is, in that sense, a law of nature that the universe, the ultimate thing, exists. That is the sense in which nature is a necessary, self-caused existent. And we can come to see this by analyzing our concepts of the universe and of a law of nature. The only substantive

8. Surprisingly, in my view, Donagan will later identify the infinite Cartesian plenum with (a) the absolutely infinite substance, (b) the immediate infinite mode under the attribute of extension (motion and rest), and (c) the mediate infinite mode under the attribute of extension (the *facies totius universi*), regarding all of these definite descriptions as different ways of referring to the same thing, the first of which is fundamental, the other two being derivable from it "by linkage" (pp. 104–6). I do not see how this can be right, since the absolutely infinite substance is supposed to exist in itself and be conceived through itself, whereas the infinite modes, as modes, must exist in something else, through which they are conceived. I'm assuming that if a definite description of *a* refers to something which is *F*, and a definite description of *b* refers to something which is not *F*, then *a* is not identical with *b*.

assumption here is that whatever comes into being or passes away does so in virtue of a law of nature which specifies the conditions under which those events will happen.

I put this interpretation of Donagan forward very tentatively. I am not at all confident that I have understood him. One reason for that lack of confidence is a passage later in the book, where he is denying that Spinoza is a pantheist, where he writes: "Since finite modes are not self-caused, their totality cannot be self-caused either" (p. 90). Still, the view I've attributed to him sounds close enough to what he explicitly says, and close enough to things I think Spinoza would agree to, that I'll work with this interpretation of him until someone shows me a better one. Would that he were still around to help me out of my perplexities!

If this is right about Donagan, then I think Donagan got Spinoza wrong on the necessary existence of nature, however much some of those propositions may sound like Spinoza. One reason for thinking this is that I don't believe Spinoza could have reasonably expected his contemporaries who embraced the new mechanical conception of nature to accept this rationale for holding the universe to be its own cause. The sticking point, I think, would have been the assumption that whatever comes into existence must do so because a law of nature specifies finite and determinate conditions under which it will do so. I think Spinoza believed that and affirmed his acceptance of that proposition in *Ethics*, part 1, proposition 28. But I don't think the belief was anything like universal among his fellow mechanical philosophers. For it is incompatible with theism, understood as the belief that the totality of finite things came into being through the creative act of God, who is not finite and does not have a determinate existence. Most of the mechanical philosophers of the seventeenth century thought their mechanistic philosophy was compatible with theism. At any rate, Descartes, Gassendi, Boyle, and Locke, mechanical philosophers all, were all also theists. Of the leading mechanical philosophers the only one who I think would have agreed with Spinoza in denying the creation was Hobbes.⁹ So for most of the leading mechanical philosophers, that causal principle about how things come to be was not an essential part of their mechanical philosophy, or even compatible with other views they held.

9. And Donagan would evidently not accept that interpretation of Hobbes, since he holds that "Spinoza was the first major modern philosopher to believe that nature exists in its own right, and needs no supernatural being to create or sustain it" (p. xi). I have defended my interpretation of Hobbes as an atheist in "I Durst Not Write So Boldly' or, How to Read Hobbes' Theological-Political Treatise," in *Hobbes e Spinoza: Scienza e politica*, ed. Daniela Bostrenghi (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1992), pp. 497–593. It requires a Straussian reading of Hobbes of a kind Donagan was quite hostile to.

Another reason why I find this reading of Spinoza unsatisfactory is that it seems to me to lead to a toning down of Spinoza's claims, which I think Spinoza would not have accepted. This appears when Donagan comes to interpret *Ethics*, part 1, proposition 7, which claims that "it pertains to the nature of substance to exist." Donagan notes (p. 71) that people commonly understand this as a claim that "it is necessary that there is a substance," but he contends that that is a misunderstanding of the proposition, and that all proposition 7 really entails is that "anything which is a substance is necessarily conserved." Since the notion of substance as, by definition, a self-caused being is integral to Spinoza's argument for proposition 7, this is the conclusion Donagan's theory of self-causation must lead to. But I think Spinoza would not be satisfied with this weakened interpretation of proposition 7.

If I did not think we could give a better Spinozistic explanation of the necessary existence of nature, then I might be more willing to accept Donagan's. But I think we can do better. On the reading of Spinoza I favor, the mistake is to suppose that Spinoza held the physical universe to consist only of finite, extended, transient things or combinations thereof. If we were to give a general description of the whole of the physical universe, of a kind acceptable to Spinoza, I believe we would have to acknowledge the existence of things other than finite, extended things which come into being and pass away. I also believe that, although Spinoza would insist that the totality of finite, extended things is not itself a finite thing, he would not think our description of the physical universe was complete until we had mentioned another very important kind of thing.

I am not sure how best to characterize this other kind of thing. In *Spinoza's Metaphysics* I referred to them as "nomological facts."¹⁰ In subsequent writings on Spinoza I have avoided that terminology, partly because my intervening exposure to Collingwood has made me want to avoid sounding so anachronistic. The essential point can be stated in language which is not particularly anachronistic. I agree with Donagan that one of the key features of the new mechanistic philosophy of the seventeenth century was the idea of explanation in terms of laws of nature which specify the conditions under which certain changes will occur. It is clear, both from the *Ethics* and from the *Theological-Political Treatise*, that Spinoza thought nothing could happen in the physical universe which was not explicable in terms of laws of physical nature and that he conceived of those laws as having the kind of logical form we nowadays think of laws as having, that is, as generalizations which

10. Edwin Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

state the conditions under which change occurs in nature.¹¹ I believe that Spinoza took a "realistic" view of those laws of nature, in the sense that he thought that, just as it was appropriate to describe statements about singular things as true, so it was appropriate to describe the laws of nature as true and that, just as the truth of a singular statement ascribing a property to an object required the existence of a singular thing having the property the statement ascribed to it, so the truth of a law of nature required the existence of something corresponding to the generalization.

I find this to be indicated most clearly in a passage in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* in which Spinoza contrasts the series of singular changeable things with the series of fixed and eternal things.¹² It seems inevitable, and I believe it is correct, to identify the series of singular, changeable things with the totality of things which come into being and pass away, the things the *Ethics* will call finite modes. One of the things this passage seems to tell us pretty clearly is that the totality of finite things does not exhaust reality, that there are in the world things which are not finite and do not come into being and pass away. What might they be? In this passage Spinoza says three things about the series of fixed and eternal things which I find particularly significant: (1) that they have laws inscribed in them, "as in their true codes"; (2) that, though singular, they "will be to us like universals, because of their presence everywhere and most extensive power"; and (3) that if we really want to understand the series of singular changeable things, we must attend to the series of fixed and eternal things. I assert on this basis that the fixed and eternal things of the *Treatise on the Intellect* are whatever it is in reality which corresponds to the laws of nature. 'Nomological facts' seems a convenient

11. If evidence is needed here, see particularly the preface to pt. 3 of the *Ethics*, and in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Karl Bruder (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1843–46), chap. 4, secs. 1–3, and chap. 6, secs. 1–15. I would not have thought this worth mentioning had I not recently come across two articles in which it seems to be denied. See R. V. Mason, "Spinoza on Modality," *Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1986): 313–42, with particular reference to a sentence on p. 321: "The notion of general and particular truths is out of line with [Spinoza's] mature position in the *Ethics* and Curley is only able to cite a passage from the early *Short Treatise* to help his interpretation." See also R. V. Mason, "Spinoza on the Causality of Individuals," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24 (1986): 197–210, particularly pp. 202–3. I thought I had made rather heavy use of the *Theological-Political Treatise* in the book Mason is discussing. There is more talk about the laws of nature in the *Treatise* than in the *Ethics*, but I do not think the *Treatise* can be dismissed as an immature work, since it appears to have been written during an extended holiday Spinoza took from writing the *Ethics*, between 1665 and 1670, at a time when Spinoza had a nearly complete first draft of the *Ethics*, and a draft which does not appear to have changed much as regards the metaphysical parts of the work (i.e., pts. 1 and 2).

12. Bruder, ed., secs. 99–101.

modern way of expressing that idea, though it is not, of course, a terminology Spinoza would have found immediately intelligible. (I think we could have explained to him what we mean by it in less than five minutes.)

If it should be suggested that the *Treatise on the Intellect* is an early, immature work, much of which the mature Spinoza would have disavowed, I would agree. If it should be suggested that Spinoza abandoned this aspect of the teaching of the *Treatise on the Intellect*,¹³ I disagree. I contend that the fixed and eternal things of the *Treatise on the Intellect* survive in the *Ethics* as the attributes and infinite modes. We do not properly understand Spinoza's ontology unless we understand him to hold that there is in the world something which does not come into being or pass away, and which is not to be identified with any combination of things which do come into being and pass away. One name Spinoza gives this eternal element in things is "the order of nature."¹⁴

I've just characterized the order of nature as an eternal element *in* things, and this may provoke some of you to say to yourselves, "Wait a minute. Nature, in the sense in which it is a self-caused being, is supposed to exist in itself, and other things are supposed to exist in it. How can you turn around and say that it exists in them?" For now I will just point out that Spinoza does endorse that kind of language when he takes as a motto for the *Theological-Political Treatise* the following verse from the New Testament: "By this we know that we remain in God and that God remains in us, because he has given us of his spirit" (I John 4:13; cited on the title page and discussed in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, xiv, 17). And I think that one reason he insisted on describing God as an immanent cause of things is that he wanted to emphasize the closeness of the connection between the order of nature and the things ordered.¹⁵ We should not think of the eternal things in the world as existing in a Platonic heaven, separate

13. As seems to be Mason's view in "Spinoza on the Causality of Individuals," p. 202. Mason's argument there seems to be vitiated by a failure to attend to an important qualification in the statement of *Ethics*, pt. 1, propositions 21–23. They concern what follows from the absolute nature of God's attributes, i.e., what follows from them unconditionally. The infinite modes follow unconditionally from God's attributes. Finite modes follow from God's attributes only as those attributes are affected with some other finite mode, i.e., only if certain antecedent conditions are satisfied.

14. See, e.g., the various passages listed in the glossary-index of *Collected Works of Spinoza*, s.v. *ordo naturae*.

15. The proof of pt. 1, proposition 18 emphasizes that all things are in God, when it tries to show that he is their immanent cause. This is unhelpful, insofar as we want to explain their existence in God in terms of his causality. But I find the Dutch translation of *causa immanens* suggestive. The *Nagelate schriften* render this as *inblijvende oorzaak*, which is literally "a cause which remains in its effect."

from the things which come into being and pass away. They are an order which we can discern in the things which come into being and pass away.

Suppose I'm right about this ontological point. My earlier attempts to show this do not seem to have persuaded Donagan, since the concept of an eternal order of things, distinct but not separate from the things ordered, does not play any role in his explanation of how nature could be self-caused.¹⁶ Part of what I am trying to do in this article is to restate the argument in a way which I think might have persuaded him, focusing on existing points of agreement and moving from them to points on which we had not reached agreement when he published his book on Spinoza. Suppose I have succeeded, at least to the extent that Donagan would grant me this for the sake of the argument, to see where it might lead. How does recognizing this ontological point help us to understand why Spinoza might have thought of nature as a self-caused, necessary being?

To see how, we need to think about how it is that this eternal order causes finite, changeable things. I take it as a point of agreement between Donagan and myself not only that the mechanical philosophy of the seventeenth century made the concept of a law of nature central to scientific explanation but also that, in some of its versions at least, it had the idea of the unity of the sciences, by which I mean, the idea that the laws of nature (or at least those laws dealing with the physical world) are capable of being organized into a deductive system, the axioms of which would state certain very simple and general truths about extended things *simpliciter*, and the theorems of which would state more complex truths dealing with particular kinds of extended things (projectiles, or the planets, e.g.). It certainly seems that Descartes had this idea pretty clearly, as appears in his *Principles of Philosophy*, and I think Donagan agrees with me about that.

Now since *Spinoza's Metaphysics* I've been arguing that this deductive organization of physical science had a model in Spinoza's ontology, that the attribute of extension is that fixed and eternal thing to which the most fundamental laws of physics correspond,¹⁷ and that the infinite modes under the attribute of extension are those fixed and eternal things to which the derivative laws correspond. The eternal order causes change in the physical world in the sense that, whenever change occurs in the physical world, it will instantiate a law of nature, which

16. Donagan does discuss the fixed and eternal things on p. 51, but he does not seem to attach the significance to them which I do. When he later discusses the infinite modes of the attribute of extension (pp. 102–7), he identifies them (as he does substance) with the infinite Cartesian plenum. I've given an argument against this in n. 8 above.

17. Conversations I've been having lately with Charles Huenemann would lead me to include here the fundamental assumptions of geometry as well. For Descartes and Spinoza there is not a sharp distinction between geometry and physics.

has the form of a generalization, the consequent of which describes in general terms some event involving a finite thing, and the antecedent of which describes in general terms some other, prior event involving some other finite thing. Ordinary thinking about causality identifies the event instantiating the antecedent as the cause of the effect.¹⁸ Spinoza's conception of causality regards it as only a partial cause and insists that we regard the aspect of reality which the law of nature describes as (at least) equally necessary to the occurrence of the effect and, hence (at least) equally entitled to be regarded as a cause. I say "at least" here, because I think Spinoza regarded the series of fixed and eternal things as really a more fundamental cause than the series of singular, changeable things, perhaps because every member of the series of singular changeable things came into existence because of, and so owes its existence to, the series of fixed and eternal things, whereas the converse is not true.

One attraction of this way of understanding causation in Spinoza, apart from the fact that it seems a possibly acceptable conception of causation, is that it permits us to see how the causation of the finite is like, and how it is unlike, the causation of the infinite. There will, on this interpretation, be causation within the series of fixed and eternal things, reflected by the fact that the lower level laws of the unified science are deducible from the higher level laws. And in this respect the common claim about Spinoza, that he identified causation with logical necessitation, will be correct, though it will not be an obvious mistake for him to have done so. But although the finite will, in a sense, be deducible from the infinite, it will not be deducible from it in precisely the same sense in which one infinite and eternal thing is deducible from another. Particular events in nature will be deducible from the eternal order of nature only if we add to our description of the eternal order descriptions of prior particular events.

Donagan seems to accept a good deal of this picture, including some of its more controversial aspects. So, for example, in discussing the sense in which Spinoza is a causal rationalist, he writes: "Like Descartes before him and all physicists after him, Spinoza believed that, *given a law of nature*, a statement of an effect worded in terms of that law will logically follow from a similarly worded statement of its cause. If he is a causal rationalist, it is in a sense that will offend few philosophers of science" (p. 75). This implies that finite modes of extension do not follow directly from the nature of the attribute of extension alone; nor do they follow from the nature of extension

18. This is a simplification, of course. Ordinary thinking about causality is surely more complicated than that. I suppose that the theory John Mackie presented in *The Cement of the Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) gives a good account of it. But for our purposes I think the simplification will do.

indirectly, by way of a chain of infinite modes of extension whose first member does follow directly from the nature of extension alone. Donagan accepts this consequence (p. 91). He also accepts that this implies a surprising element of contingency in Spinoza. In spite of *Ethics*, part 1, proposition 29 ("In nature there is nothing contingent . . ."), there will be a sense in which finite things are contingent. Spinoza's necessitarianism, according to Donagan, "implies neither that all a finite body's properties are essential to it, nor that none of its properties can change, but only that the series of its actual changes constitutes its only possible biography" (p. 115). In Leibnizian terms, Spinoza does not believe that the actual world is the only possible world (cf. pp. 73–74). Any given finite mode will be necessary in relation to, because deducible from, the eternal order taken in conjunction with the prior history of the world. But it will not be necessary in relation to the eternal order alone. Many readers of Spinoza are highly resistant to this conclusion because they are apt to interpret the necessitarian propositions in part 1 of the *Ethics* in an overstrong sense. Donagan recognizes that if we interpret those propositions in a way consistent with *Ethics*, part 2, axiom 1 ("From the order of nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist, or that he does not exist"), we must admit the presence of a kind of contingency in the system.¹⁹

What Donagan does not accept, it seems, is the ontological aspect of my interpretation. That is to say, he does not seem disposed to identify substance, or its attributes, with those fixed and eternal things described by the fundamental laws of nature, or the infinite modes of an attribute with the fixed and eternal things described by derivative laws of nature. And I can understand why he might resist that move, since my initial exposition of my interpretation was couched in such flagrantly anachronistic terms. It must have deeply offended his Collingwoodian sensibilities. So let me try to justify that aspect of my interpretation in terms which are not so anachronistic.

It is a striking feature of Spinoza's ontology that his infinite modes seem to have no analogue in Cartesian ontology. Although Descartes uses the same fundamental metaphysical concepts of substance, attribute, and mode, he makes no distinction between infinite and finite modes. Presumably that is because all of his modes are finite. But the relationship between substance, or its attributes, and the infinite modes does have an analogue in the metaphysics of Plotinus. In certain respects the infinite modes stand to the attribute of which they are a

19. I think I am right in stressing those passages in Donagan where he seems to be agreeing with my position on contingency. But I must admit there are some passages where I wonder, e.g., on p. 70, where he seems to explain the proof of *Ethics*, pt. 1, proposition 5, in a way which presupposes the deducibility of finite modes from the attributes of substance alone.

mode in a relation like that in which Nous and Soul stand to the One. They proceed from it necessarily and timelessly. And the infinite modes of the attribute of extension constitute a kind of connecting link between the first principle and the constantly changing material world. The proximate causes of changes in the physical world are the lowest level elements in the eternal order, and the first principle is only a remote cause.

There are disanalogies, of course. The One of Plotinus is supposed to be beyond the reach of human thought, whereas Spinoza claims that the human mind has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence. The One of Plotinus is supposed to be beyond description in human language, because perfectly simple, whereas Spinoza postulates a first principle which is not simple, but constituted by infinitely many really distinct attributes, at least two of which we can describe in human language. Still, the analogies may be more interesting for our purposes than the disanalogies.

Spinoza may not have known much about Plotinus directly, but he did get a heavy dose of Neoplatonic thought in the synagogue as he was growing up. That is true, at least, if we can take the work of his teacher, Manasseh ben Israel, as representative of what Spinoza was taught in the synagogue. For some time now I have been recommending that students of Spinoza read Manasseh's *Conciliator* for the light it would shed on Spinoza's biblical criticism in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. One of the principal criticisms Spinoza makes of traditional biblical interpretation in the *Treatise* is that it tends to import Platonic and Aristotelian ideas into scripture. If you read Manasseh, you will see that he is particularly prone to interpret scripture in terms of Neoplatonic ideas.²⁰

Imagine, then, the young Spinoza, schooled in a heavily Neoplatonic version of theism, rebelling against it for a variety of reasons, and in his rebellion coming upon the philosophy of Descartes, which charms him because unlike the philosophy on which he was brought up, its central ideas are clear and distinct. Given this background, he

20. In "The History of Philosophy as a Discipline" (1988) Donagan concludes that neither what he calls "historians' history" nor what he calls "philosophers' history" are defensible by themselves: "No classic philosophical text will yield its content to anybody who does not read it as a philosopher would—as an attempt to solve certain problems the nature of which cannot be understood without provisionally judging its soundness. On the other hand, it will seldom yield its content except to students who read it as a response to an actual intellectual situation that is most effectively approached through texts that are not philosophical masterpieces." This seems to me sound advice and I see myself as following it here. In emphasizing Manasseh I hope to be laying the groundwork for a kind of argument which Donagan might find more persuasive than he found anything I have previously written on this subject. *The Conciliator* was first published in Spanish in 1632, but can be read in an English translation by E. H. Lindo (London: Duncan & Malcolm, 1842).

will be particularly interested in the Cartesian theory of essences and in the Cartesian claim that we have, in mathematics, knowledge of certain true and immutable natures, natures which exist eternally, independently of their instantiation in the physical world. I have the idea of a triangle, and even if no such figure exists, or ever has existed, outside my mind, the essence or form of a triangle is immutable and eternal, since I can prove various theorems about the triangle. This essence is not something I have invented, since the theorems force my assent. My thought does not impose these necessities on things; rather, the necessities in things impose themselves on my thought.

This is the teaching of the Fifth Meditation, and it is, of course, a very platonic sounding doctrine. But any good student of Descartes's writings knows that this element of platonism in Descartes's thought creates problems when it is combined with theism. What is the ontological status of these essences? In Plotinus, where God, or the One, is not, strictly speaking, to be thought of as a mind, the forms or essences of things are contained in Nous, the eternal intellect which is the first emanation from the One. This is not something which is independent of the One, since it follows from it necessarily. In more traditional theistic philosophies influenced by Neoplatonism, such as the thomistic philosophy, God is a mind, and the essences of things are ideas in that mind. I believe that if Descartes ever gave any serious consideration to the Plotinian theory, he would have rejected it, because the God of Plotinus is not really a personal being. I believe he did consider and reject the thomistic conception of the status of essences, because he thought that ideas in the divine mind, as representations of an object, would require an object to represent. And since the ideas might be ideas of essences which are not ever instantiated, those essences could not be thought of as existing in objects which come into being and pass away. So if they were objects external to the divine mind, they would be something eternal and existing independently of God. The Fifth Meditation's talk of true and immutable natures raises the specter of an eternal realm independent of God, and prompted Gassendi to ask, in his objections to the *Meditations*, how there could be something eternal and immutable which is independent of God, compatibly with God's omnipotence.²¹ Descartes's answer was that the essences of things, though eternal and immutable, were not independent of God, because God had willed them, as a king might will the laws in his kingdom.²² The laws of a king do not require the existence of acts of the kind they speak of, in order to be valid. All they require is that they be the edicts of the appropriate authority. Descartes ex-

21. Descartes, *Oeuvres*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1974–86), 7:319.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 380.

plains their immutability and eternity by pointing out that the will of God, unlike that of human kings, is itself immutable and eternal.²³

Spinoza, I think, had some sympathy with the Cartesian critique of the thomistic solution. I think he believed that if we conceive of the ideas of essences as existing in a divine mind, then if they are to be true ideas, there must be an object distinct from that mind which they accurately represent. Which is to say that I think he was a realist about truth. On the other hand, I think he had very little sympathy with the Cartesian doctrine that the eternal "truths" which articulate the content of these immutable natures are merely expressions of God's will. Descartes understands the will as an ability to do or not do. To conceive the so-called eternal truths as expressions of the divine will is to say that they might have been other than they are. That, I believe Spinoza thought, is incompatible with regarding them as eternal truths, and that is destructive of science, which is knowledge of eternal truths.

But I think Spinoza did not fear, as Descartes did, the postulation of an eternal order distinct from the divine mind. For though it might be distinct from the divine mind, it need not be external to God. Spinoza regards it as a prejudice to say that God cannot be an extended thing. For him extension is one of the attributes constituting the divine essence. So there can be eternal truths about the nature of extension in the divine mind, and they can have an eternal object external to that mind, without their being external to God, or in any way compromising the power of God. The divine mind I speak of, which Spinoza calls the infinite intellect of God, is an infinite mode in the attribute of thought.²⁴

The immediate purpose of this excursion into the background of Spinoza's doctrine of the fixed and eternal things has been to make it plausible that Spinoza should have thought of the eternal truths of science and mathematics as descriptive of an eternal realm which in some sense is part of what there is. But I believe this line of thought also helps to explain why Spinoza conceived of nature as a necessarily existing, self-caused thing. In the sense of the term 'nature' in which nature is *causa sui*, that term refers to this eternal order. And the entities which constitute this eternal order are entities which the philosophical tradition before Spinoza would have recognized as being, in some sense, necessary beings. The problem, for them, was how to

23. See my article "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 569–97.

24. Although thought is an attribute of God, and God is a thinking thing (*Ethics*, pt. 2, proposition 1), even the infinite intellect must be regarded as a mode of God, and not as something pertaining to his essence (*Ethics*, pt. 1, proposition 31). I do not understand this, unless you count it as evidence of understanding to say that it appears to be a Plotinian element in Spinoza's thought.

reconcile their recognition of these necessary beings with the sovereignty of a personal god. If we reject the idea of a personal god, then we are left simply with a realm of necessary beings, whose necessary being does not need to be reconciled with anything.

I've spoken of these necessary beings both as forms or essences and as nomological facts. I take it that this is legitimate. For Spinoza (as for Descartes) the essence of a thing involves a proposition stating what its essential nature is, and it involves whatever other propositions follow from the essential nature of the thing. Spinoza thinks good definitions should be causal. So, for example, the proper definition of a circle is that it is a figure produced by the motion of a line, one end of which is fixed, the other end of which is moving. Whatever other truths follow from that definition tell you what is involved in the nature of a circle. In the case of natural kinds, we might now illustrate this view by thinking of a chemical element as being defined by a formula giving its atomic structure. That nature would entail (in conjunction with the other laws of chemistry) certain laws about how samples of that element would interact with other elements. In proportion as we find it plausible to think of those laws of nature as necessary truths, and also take a realistic view of truth, we should find it plausible to think of nature as containing a necessary order of the kind Spinoza is affirming when he asks us to acknowledge a realm of fixed and eternal things. So I think my way of reading Spinoza makes his philosophy more attractive both for his contemporaries and for ours.

Why, then, does Donagan not find this reading acceptable? I conjecture that it is not just a matter of my having stated my interpretation originally in anachronistic terms, that he feels constrained to identify the infinite modes with the totality of finite things by a passage in Spinoza's correspondence. Tschirnhaus had asked for examples of infinite modes. Spinoza replied by giving two examples of infinite modes of extension: an immediate infinite mode, which Spinoza calls "motion and rest," and a mediate infinite mode, which Spinoza calls "the face of the whole universe."²⁵ This latter phrase is quite mysterious, but Spinoza does give us a clue to its interpretation, when in that letter he refers us to the Scholium to lemma 7 in *Ethics*, part 2, where he had explained how we can come to conceive the whole of nature as one individual, whose parts vary in infinite ways, without the individual as a whole losing its identity.²⁶ The assumption seems to be that the face of the whole universe must be this immensely complex individual thing, "the ultimate thing," as Donagan calls it.

But I think we are not obliged to interpret this reference that way and that there are good reasons not to. First, the phrase "the face

25. Letter 64, in *Opera*, 4:278.

26. *Opera*, 2:102, lines 9–13.

of the whole universe" need not refer to that individual but to those features of that individual which enable it to retain its identity through change, that is, the constant relationships between its parts. Second, if we do interpret "the face of the whole universe" as referring to that individual, the ultimate thing, then we make trouble for ourselves elsewhere. The mediate infinite mode of the attribute of extension is supposed to follow from the absolute nature of the attribute of extension, timelessly, logically, and without the need for any other cause. (That's what it means to say that the infinite modes follow from the *absolute* nature of a divine attribute [compare *Ethics*, pt. 1, proposition 21].) If the mediate infinite mode of extension follows in that way from the attribute of extension, and if we identify the mediate infinite mode of extension with the totality of finite things, then the totality of finite things follows from the attribute of extension. I do not see how the totality of finite things can follow from the attribute of extension without its being the case that individual finite things also follow from the attribute of extension. But Donagan denies that Spinoza held individual finite things to be deducible from the infinite. I think he is right to deny that. Unless he is prepared to attribute a grand inconsistency to Spinoza, he ought not to identify the mediate infinite mode with the totality of finite things.

In this article, I have concentrated on Spinoza's naturalized theology, and in particular on the notion that there is a sense of the term 'nature' in which nature is its own cause, a necessary existent, and the cause of all other things. These are the aspects of Spinoza's theory of nature which make it plausible for Spinoza to identify nature with God. I think one of the things which attracted Alan Donagan to Spinoza's brand of naturalism was the fact that it was a kind of naturalism which still allowed us to talk meaningfully about God as a necessary being. Whatever differences we may have about the precise interpretation of Spinoza's naturalism, I agree with Donagan that Spinoza's naturalism does this and that this is an attractive feature of his naturalism.

I believe Donagan was also attracted by other features of Spinoza's naturalism: the fact that, on his reading, it offered a nonmaterialistic theory of human beings and that, on his reading, it offered a nonegoistic theory of how human beings ought to conduct their lives. There is not the space here to explore these issues adequately; but I would be remiss if I did not say something about them, briefly.

In *Behind the Geometrical Method*, I presented Spinoza's philosophy of mind as a materialistic one, emphasizing such features of his system as the following: that the essence of the human mind, for Spinoza, is to be the idea of an actually existing human body; that the human mind, though conceptually distinct from the body of which it is the idea (in the sense that the concepts in terms of which it is understood do not involve the concept of extension), is not really distinct from it

(i.e., cannot exist without it); and that the mind's capacities for action and its limitations are to be understood as a reflection of the capacities and limitations of the body of which it is the idea.²⁷ So far as I can see, Donagan does not disagree with me about any of these features of Spinoza's theory, and the issue between us is whether a theory with those features is properly thought to be materialistic. It's true that Spinoza does not propose to analyze thinking in terms of concepts of the physical sciences or to replace the concept of thinking with concepts that can be so analyzed (cf. p. xi). But the question is whether that is enough to qualify his doctrine as nonmaterialistic. It seems to me that the features of Spinoza's system we agree about give the materialist all he ought to want. But perhaps that's because I don't attach, to Spinoza's talk of the eternity of the mind, quite the significance Donagan does. His way of explaining that talk may make sense of it, may capture what Spinoza thought was salvageable from traditional religious theories of the afterlife. But so far as I can see, it still remains the case on Donagan's interpretation that the portion of the mind which remains after the death of the body is not the same person as existed before that death (cf. pp. 197–200).

As for the issue of egoism, Donagan quotes a key passage from the scholium to *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 18: "Reason . . . demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him, want all that will really lead man to greater perfection, and absolutely, that everyone should strive as far as he can to conserve his own being." Donagan's comment is that, "if [this principle] is egoist at all," it cannot be egoist in the usual sense: "For it asserts that you cannot will your own advantage without willing what will lead *man* (not just yourself) to a greater perfection" (p. 164; my emphasis). I would make one small, but I think important, amendment to Donagan's paraphrase of that principle: "It asserts that you cannot *rationaly* will your own advantage without willing what will lead man to a greater perfection." People can, and in Spinoza's view frequently do, will their own individual advantage without willing what will lead people in general to perfection. The Dutch preachers who, to increase their power over their fellow citizens, tried to suppress Spinoza's writings would have been a salient example in his eyes. They were irrational in doing so, because they promoted ignorance and social discord, which are to everyone's disadvantage. Spinoza's fundamental criticism of them is that they were not pursuing their own advantage very intelligently, and this seems to me to reflect a basically egoistic point of view.²⁸

27. Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

28. I have discussed this topic in a bit more detail in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 65 (1991–92): 38–39.

If Alan Donagan was right about the possibility of personal immortality, we may some day have a chance to talk out our remaining differences of opinion about Spinoza. That would be very pleasant. But if the Church is right, that there is no salvation outside the Church, we may not have that chance, since he and I will presumably be in different places after death. Mark Twain said that we should prefer heaven for climate, and hell for company. Mark Twain did not know Alan Donagan.