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Why Essences: Spinoza

The notion of essence (*essentia*) figures prominently in Spinoza's philosophy. Indeed, a notable amount of recent literature either revolves around or directly focuses on the notion.[1] However, there is still a relatively thin consensus about its meaning and role, and especially about the two seemingly different types of essence Spinoza's system contains, namely the actual essence (*essentia actualis*) and the formal essence (*essentia formalis*). In this essay, I want to take a step back from these rather technical issues and instead attempt to answer a simple elemental question seldom if ever directly discussed, namely *why* Spinoza endorses essences to begin with. I believe that this also offers us an instructive perspective to the overall nature of Spinoza's philosophical enterprise.

That an early modern thinker impressed by the advances of the mechanical sciences would feel the need for a robust notion of essence is not altogether obvious. Is not any such notion *prima facie* dubious, smacking of Aristotelianism and its ridiculed substantial form? Is Spinoza's universe not just a mechanical plenum in constant lawlike motion, with the attribute of thought somehow paralleling what takes place in the plenum? Would it not be enough for his purposes to focus on geometrically shaped material bodies in motion, interacting with each other according to laws of nature, and on our minds as collections of ideas that obey certain laws of connection?[2] But, from early on, this is not enough for Spinoza; he is asking questions that cannot be adequately answered at this level. What Spinoza wants is a framework within which he

[1] See e.g. Martin 2008; Garrett 2009; Ward 2011; Lærke 2017; Bender 2022.

[2] For an interpretation that proceeds along these lines, see Thiel 1998, 229–31.

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can solve the most fundamental puzzles concerning the very nature of existence and beings in it. This pursuit leads one inevitably to a domain in which it is simply not satisfactory to say that, for instance, perceivable entities just happen to be the kind of lumps of matter they are, obeying a set of laws, and that is all there is to them.

From the dawn of the Western field of inquiry called philosophy, the arguably most fundamental question has concerned the being of things. What is the nature of a thing's being? What constitutes the being of a thing? Or, to put it slightly differently, what makes the thing what it is?[3] This can be called the problem of metaphysical individuation,[4] which formed the point of departure for much of traditionally dominant Aristotelian philosophizing. Perhaps only one other problem can compete with its prominence, namely the problem of change. There is virtually constant change in the world, alterations of different magnitudes. But what is change and how does it take place? These two problems lead to a third. Many if not most of the alterations are such that things do not lose their individuality; they are not changed into something else. How is it that an individual can remain the same despite all the variations? This is the problem of persistence.[5]

[3] Vasilis Politis (2004, 2–3) helpfully explains Aristotle's famous question as follows: "'What is being?' [...] is about what it is for something to be[.] [...] [W]e are asking of a being, something that is, what it is for that thing to be. [...] [The question] asks for an explanation of why something that is is, or in virtue of what something that is is." As Jani Hakkarainen (2025, 177) puts it: "Metaphysics considers being [...] in so far as it is being: from the point of view that everything that is is."

[4] Here is how the issue has been put in contemporary metaphysics: "[W]hat 'individuates' an object [...] is whatever it is that makes it the single object that it is – whatever it is that makes it *one* object, distinct from others, and the very object that it is as opposed to any other thing" (Lowe 2003, 75).

[5] Although the problem of identity is nowadays often thought to be no problem at all given that it is difficult to see how anything could *not* be identical to itself (for a classic statement of this point, see Lewis 1986, 192–3), the problem of identity *over time* is quite another matter: it has given rise to one of the liveliest debates in contemporary metaphysics. Here a central question concerns persistence through change: "how can one thing have incompatible properties and yet remain the same thing?" (Mortensen 2020)

These problems – deeply ingrained but by no means concealed – structure much of Spinoza's system-building. Let us begin with the question of individuation. The very first footnote of his early metaphysical work, *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, explicates what underpins its author's most fundamental theses: "Understand the definite nature [*natuur*], by which the thing is what it is, and which cannot in any way be taken from it without destroying it, as it belongs to the essence [*wezen*][6] of a mountain to have a valley, or the essence of a mountain is that it has a valley" (I.1).[7] The young Spinoza's expedition to epistemology, the unfinished *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, follows suit by giving pride of place to the cognition of essence: "[T]he best conclusion will have to be drawn from some particular affirmative essence, *or*, from a true and legitimate definition" (§ 93).[8] Roughly fifteen years later, the definitive definition of essence combines these two aspects as follows:

> I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is [NS: also] necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily [NS: also] taken away; or that without which the thing can

[6] Here, as so often, Spinoza uses 'essence' and 'nature' interchangeably. Perhaps 'nature' (*natura*) has a slightly more dynamic flavor; see Des Chene 1996, 231–2.

[7] I use Curley's translation in Spinoza 1985.

[8] It should be noted that as a definition conceptually expresses a certain essence, cognition of the essence of a thing must be formed through a definition.

> neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.[9] (2d2)[10]

The definition arrives rather late – in the beginning of the second part of the *Ethics* – considering that its *definiendum* already appears in the opening definition of the whole work. Why is it then not the very first thing defined? Most probably because Spinoza feels comfortable to operate with notions prevalent in the Cartesian parlance; he does not intend to change their meaning, merely to show what follows from using them with great precision. He clearly thinks that a proper definition of essence is only required before discussing human beings as finite things. Still, regardless of what one thinks about the location of the definition, it is clear that from early on and quite consistently,[11] Spinoza builds on answering the problem of individuation by a variant of essentialism. Precisely essences make things what they are.

Given Spinoza's eternalist tendencies, it might seem that he has little interest in all things changeable. This, however, is not true, for he never denies the reality of either

[9] Kit Fine (1994, 2) famously argues that there are two traditions for understanding essence: one according to which it is something akin to a definition, another in which it is understood in modal terms. Given that for Locke essence is "the being of anything, whereby it is what it is" (*Essay* III.3.15), Fine classifies him as a definitionalist; and as Mill claims that essence is "that without which the thing could neither be, nor conceived to be" (*System of Logic* I.6.2), Fine sees him as a modalist. Yet Spinoza's definition contains both locutions; he clearly considers them complementary. I fail to see why this could not be the case, or why the latter expression would commit one to modalism.

[10] I use the following method in referring to the *Ethics*: c = corollary, d = definition (when not after a proposition number), d = demonstration (when after a proposition number), defaff = definitions of the affects, exp = explication, p = proposition, pr = preface, s = scholium. For instance, 1p8s2 refers to the second scholium of the eighth proposition in the first part of the *Ethics*.

[11] For an analysis of essentialism over the course of Spinoza's philosophical career, see Viljanen 2015.

temporality or changes; in fact, much of his system is designed to give an adequately grounded account of these. First of all, there is what was traditionally called generation and corruption, things coming in and going out of existence. Spinoza treats the former quite tersely, merely stating that finite things "come to be from external causes" (1p11s). Concerning the latter, he spills much ink to convince us that no essence can destroy its bearer (3p4, 4p20s). Here the underlying idea, consistent with the individuation thesis, is that a thing is generated when a certain essence comes to exist, destroyed when (to use Spinoza's locution) the thing is "changed from one essence [...] to another" (4pr).

Yet not all changes appear this radical, also for Spinoza, who is never tempted to take anything even resembling the Heraclitean path: Spinozistic reality is not an ephemeral flux with nothing staying the same.[12] So what happens when one and the same subject goes through non-lethal change or mere alteration? Here an all-too-often overlooked passage serves as a helpful point of departure:

> But Desire is the very essence, or nature, of each [man] insofar as it is conceived to be determined, by whatever constitution he has, to do something (see p9s). Therefore, as each [man] is affected by external causes with this or that species of Joy, Sadness, Love, Hate, etc. – i.e., as his nature is constituted in one way or the other, so his Desires vary[.] (3p56d)

The discussion concerns desires, but the point applies to all of our alterations: whenever there is a non-lethal change in us, our essence is constituted differently. Spinoza explicitly states that *essences can be affected* without being destroyed: "[B]y an affection of the human essence we understand any constitution of that essence"

[12] In fairness, it is doubtful whether even Heraclitus endorsed such a strong theory of flux: the traditional Platonic reading according to which, for Heraclitus, "everything gives way and nothing stands fast" (*Cratylus* 402a), is nowadays heavily contested (see Graham 2023).

(defaff1exp).[13] Unfortunately, he is reticent about how this takes place, so we must pay attention to passages discussing specific issues in a way that rely on a more general idea. Here is a particularly noteworthy epistemological comment:

> I say expressly that the Mind has [...] only a confused [NS: and mutilated] knowledge, of itself, of its own Body, and of external bodies, [...] so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things [...], and not so long as it is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once [...]. For so often as it is disposed internally, in this or another way, then it regards things clearly and distinctly[.] (2p29s)

Alteration thus results from being determined in a new fashion, and this may take place either internally or externally.

But what is determination? In this context, it is a causal notion,[14] and Spinoza tells us most about external determination: "Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, [...] and so on" (1p28). So finite things form an infinite causal network in which they determine each other and seem to be for the most part although not only externally determined. This is certainly informative but leaves open the question, where does causal efficacy to determine, either oneself or others, come from in the first place?

[13] Spinoza indicates that there is nothing mysterious about this: for instance, a hungry body is constituted differently from a replete one, with correspondingly differing properties (first desire for food, then weariness) (3p59s). For my previous analyses of the constitution theory, see Viljanen 2011, 149–57; 2019, 167–71. See also n16.

[14] As Andrea Sangiacomo (2025, 122) observes, the other context is that of (especially spatial) limitation.

Now it is not only that essences are, for Spinoza, the loci of causal efficacy ("[n]othing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow" [1p36]), they are its *only* loci ("things are able [to produce] nothing but what follows necessarily from their determinate nature" [3p7d]). This much is certain, and widely acknowledged. But this only pushes the question one step back: why are things causally efficacious by their essence? To cut a longish story short, the proofs for this have their bedrock in 1p16, the master proposition of Spinoza's oeuvre:

> From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect.) (1p16)

This sounds, to say the very least, important – and it is. But we should nevertheless focus on the engine of the demonstration, and of so much of what is to follow:

> [T]he intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it (i.e., from the very essence of the thing)[.] (1p16d)

What we have here is an unequivocal yet never explicitly defined understanding and endorsement of essence–property ontology that reveals the inner structure of things. But how come a rationalist so notoriously fond of Euclid never defines it? Arguably because what pertains to geometrical objects is evident to a degree beyond philosophical elucidation. And we know, in the strongest possible sense of the word, that an object formed by three intersecting lines – this is the definition of its essence – necessarily has the property of having internal angles summing to two right angles. By

Spinoza's time, Western thought was ripe with examples evincing essence–property ontology in natural things. To name some of the most famous, a being rational by nature necessarily has a sense of humor; whatever the essence of fire and of gold, from the former follows the property to heat, from the latter malleability. Spinoza was knowledgeable of the chemistry of his time, and he would no doubt have understood and welcomed the discovery that the essence of water is H_2O from it which follows, among other properties, being a solvent for living organisms. The important point is this: things are intrinsically causally efficacious – or powerful – because from any essence properties follow as effects.[15]

All determination is thus about things interacting in virtue of their essences. That, in turn, brings about new constitutions with new properties,[16] which, then, further affects the way in which things determine each other, and the chain of determination goes on *ad infinitum*. The extent to which any given constitution is internally and externally determined varies considerably; at times the degree of internal determination may be great (for instance when contemplating philosophical truths), at times it may be minute (for instance when in depression). Non-lethal change thus equals alteration in the way in which an essence is constituted; the new constitution is brought about by determination; all determination results from essences and is variably internal and external, with corresponding properties. Whatever one thinks about this framework, it would be difficult to deny that it is a deeply essentialist one.

[15] "[E]ffect, *or* property" (defaff22exp).

[16] Here we should note Spinoza's *prima facie* puzzling definition of passivity: "[W]e are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause" (3d2). This means that we are only a partial cause, and hence passive, when an external cause determines the way in which our essence is constituted; but once the new constitution is in place, specific properties necessarily follow from our essence. For Spinoza, there are no "free-floating" properties: they must always follow from the essence of their bearer.

We have thus established that a thing stays numerically the same as long as there is an essence in one constitution or another. This, however, does little to *guarantee* that such non-lethal changes occur, let alone often or for the most part: could not all changes be cases of generation and corruption? As already noted, this does not seem to be the case; but what explains things' tendency to stay, in many cases seemingly for eons, the same?

Of course, some may consider persistence even through innumerable changes a brute fact, but not Spinoza. He famously states, in the main proposition of the so-called *conatus* doctrine, that "[t]he striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (3p7). The derivation and meaning of the doctrine are a matter of debate; but it is *not* debatable that Spinozistic things are not indifferent to their being but by their very essence strive to persevere in it. Thus, to explain the fact that there is definite, albeit limited, stability in the world, Spinoza once again invokes essences. He consistently holds that in virtue of our essence, we have not only power to act – cause effects on ourselves and others – but also power to exist. Ultimately, this is because we are finite expressions of "God's power, by which God is and acts" (3p6d).[17] In fact, our power is first and foremost that to exist, for the simple reason that to act one must exist: "No one can desire [...] to act well and live well, unless at the same time he desires [...] to actually exist" (4p21).

I hope to have shown that there are reasons stemming from the deepest metaphysical questions why essences are so central for Spinoza: they individuate things; they are the basis of change; they explain persistence. Indeed, I believe that this is the framework in

[17] For my take on the expression relation, see Viljanen 2011, 98–100.

which Spinoza builds his ethics proper to teach us what happiness is and how to achieve it.

But here a contemporary metaphysician is bound to protest: what about essences and modality? And indeed, we have recently seen a strong tendency to attempt to elucidate the concept of essence in modal terms. At the simplest form, the modal account "takes an object to have a property essentially just in case it is necessary that the object has that property."[18] This gives rise to the question, how does Spinoza's essentialism relate to modality, and to necessity in particular? Is not giving an account of modality a major reason why Spinoza introduces essences?

Spinoza is almost unanimously considered a necessitarian;[19] after all, he boldly proclaims:

> In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way. (1p29)

> Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced. (1p33)

Thus, nothing whatsoever could have been otherwise. How does this mesh with Spinoza's essentialism?

Kit Fine influentially argues against modal accounts, for things have innumerable necessary properties that are hardly essential. For instance, it is necessary that Socrates

[18] Fine 1994, 3.

[19] For an influential classic study, see Garrett 1991.

is distinct from the Eiffel Tower, but this is surely not something essential to him.[20] As Sebastian Bender has argued, it is for similar reasons clear that a straightforward modal account of essence is not something Spinoza could endorse: given necessitarianism, *all* of a thing's properties or features are necessary and thereby of no use in picking out what is essential.[21] In fact, Spinoza makes a traditional distinction that signals this. Recall the already quoted 1p16d: "[T]he intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it (i.e., from the very essence of the thing)." In passages such as this Spinoza builds on the distinction between essence and properties – the latter, despite their necessity and as we have seen, do not belong to the essence.[22] It would thus seem that given his necessitarianism, Spinoza has little to say about essences and modality.

However and fortunately, this is not the case; in fact, he emerges as a notable precursor to a contemporary essentialist line of thought. To see this, we can simply examine the way in which Spinoza argues for the necessitarianist position. Here is how he demonstrates that there is nothing contingent:

> Whatever is, is in God (by p15); but God cannot be called a contingent thing. For (by p11) he exists necessarily, not contingently. Next, the modes of the divine nature have also followed from it necessarily and not contingently (by p16) – either insofar as the divine nature is considered absolutely (by p21) or insofar as it is considered to be determined to act in a certain way (by p28). Further, God is the cause of these modes not only insofar as they simply exist (by p24c), but also (by p26) insofar as they are considered to be determined to produce an effect. For if they have not been determined by

[20] Fine 1994, 5.

[21] "[A]nalyzing Spinozistic essences in modal terms is futile, simply because there is too much necessity in Spinoza's system" (Bender 2022, 292).

[22] See also Bender 2022, 293–4.

> God, then (by p26) it is impossible, not contingent, that they should determine themselves. Conversely (by p27) if they have been determined by God, it is not contingent, but impossible, that they should render themselves undetermined. So all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature, not only to exist, but to exist in a certain way, and to produce effects in a certain way. (1p29d)

The proof may appear convoluted, but the main idea is easy to discern. Everything follows necessarily from God's essence, including all of the ways in which finite things are determined. Essence is the source of all modality, and since things follow from it in geometrical fashion, everything happens necessarily. Indeed, as Spinoza slightly later argues, only if God's essence "could have been other than it is now" (1p33d), could something have been otherwise; but this is impossible. All this shows that necessitarianism is a corollary of Spinoza's essence–property ontology; all of us, as well as everything we do and feel, are God's necessary properties.

This connects Spinoza to very influential contemporary views. Although Fine discards the modal account, he still sees a close connection between essence and modality: "[F]ar from viewing essence as a special case of metaphysical necessity, we should view metaphysical necessity as a special case of essence."[23] More precisely:

> For each class of objects, be they concepts or individuals or entities of some other kind, will give rise to its own domain of necessary truths, the truths which flow from the nature of the objects in question. The metaphysically

[23] Fine 1994, 9. Cf.: "*Essentialism* makes sense of our philosophical concern with modality: many philosophical questions are questions about essence, and since essence gives rise to necessity, it is often sensible to phrase those questions in terms of necessity" (Vetter 2021, 834).

> necessary truths can then be identified with the propositions which are true in virtue of the nature of all objects whatever.[24]

Spinoza could not but agree, with the proviso that ultimately there is only *one* object, God-or-Nature, from whose essence everything necessarily flows,[25] whereby all truths are necessary truths.[26] E.J. Lowe, in turn, holds: "[*E*]*ssences are the ground of all metaphysical necessity and possibility*. [...] One reason it can be the case that *X* is *necessarily F* is that it is part of the essence of *X* that *X* is *F*."[27] Again, Spinoza could not but agree, only to add that there cannot be unactualized possibilities, or merely possible; everything possible is necessarily realized.[28] Perhaps we should thus not be surprised that also present-day essentialists, at least according to Barbara Vetter, "have had very little to say about [...] how things might have developed otherwise."[29]

Given the aforesaid, is it not obvious that Spinoza endorses essences in order to give an account of modality? I do not think so. By the first half of the opening part of his masterpiece, Spinoza thinks to have proven that there is only one substance. He then builds his case on essence–property ontology and argues that from the essence of the unique substance absolutely infinitely many things – the world as a whole – follow with

[24] Fine 1994, 9.

[25] Strikingly enough, both Spinoza and Fine talk about how things *flow from an essence*, which matches traditional emanative language. Here is a particularly telling passage from the *Ethics*: "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 [*effluxisse*], 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" (1p17s).

[26] Despite certain differences, Fine (1994, n1) designates Husserl as the notable precursor; however, given the aforesaid and the fact that, as they are for Fine but not for Husserl, Spinoza's essences are – at the very least first and foremost – individual and not universal, Fine seems to be considerably closer to Spinoza than to Husserl.

[27] Lowe 2018, 26. For a helpful concise overview of Lowe's neo-Aristotelian essentialism, see Hakkarainen and Keinänen 2023, 24–5.

[28] For Spinoza's actualism, see Viljanen 2009.

[29] Vetter 2021, 834–5.

the kind of necessity that pertains to unaffected things such as geometrical objects. This is the basic explanation for why things are what and the way they are; necessitarianism is merely a concomitant doctrine, a by-product if one wills. An account of modality is not on Spinoza's agenda; he merely ends up giving one while building his system motivated by other concerns.

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