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THE TEMPORAL CONATUS AND THE PROBLEM OF MOTION FROM ETERNITY

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Philosophy  
The University of Mississippi

By

David Harmon

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## ABSTRACT

Spinoza's theory of persistence is articulated through the conatus (EIp7) and the ratio of motion and rest (EIIp13). Section I explores Spinoza's usage of "motion," and illustrates that the conatus is essentially temporal. From this claim and Spinoza's conception of eternity, the problem arises. I explain this as a contradiction between *Natura naturata* and *Natura naturans*. Section II features an evaluation of the potential acosmist solution and reveals how it contradicts other Spinozistic commitments. I construct an alternative solution in Section III. Temporal passage is not an adequate idea for Spinoza. However, Spinoza considers duration to be a feature of reality that can be explicated without temporal passage. Similar reasoning can also be applied to motion. Interpreted in this way, temporal passage is ideal while motion is real. This solves the problem of motion from eternity without entailing the problems present in the acosmist interpretation.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Acosmism, the view that the diversity of individuals such as trees, dogs, people, stars, tables, etc. is not real, has been the subject of longstanding debate in Spinoza scholarship. The view arises from a *prima facie* tension in Spinoza's works between the apparent plurality of the world and its underlying unity. Substance is indivisible and unified (EIp15), but this seems incompatible with plurality, which Spinoza also endorses (EIp11d). The acosmist interpreter diffuses the tension by denying the actuality of the plurality. Perspectives on this tension fall into two camps: those who interpret Spinoza as an acosmist or idealist<sup>1</sup> about particulars and those who interpret him as a realist about particulars.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I examine an unexplored instance of this tension that occurs in Spinoza's metaphysics of persistence. For Spinoza, persistence of physical objects is reliant on the ratio of motion and rest between an object's parts. It is not clear how Spinoza understands "motion" (*motus*), so I draw on textual evidence which suggests that time is a necessary condition for motion. Understood in this way, motion is at odds with other features of Spinoza's metaphysics, particularly eternity. He thinks substance exists eternally (EIp8s2), but asserts that eternity bears no relation whatsoever to time or temporality (EId8e). Since persistence necessitates motion, and motion necessitates time, it seems that persistence is incompatible with eternal substance. I call this "the problem of motion from eternity." I propose a solution that applies

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<sup>1</sup> There are differences between acosmist and idealist interpretations of Spinoza, but for the purposes of this paper, they run together. They both lend themselves to Eleatic interpretations of Spinoza, and thus I will treat them as opposed to realism. "Acosmism" and "idealism" refer to denial of the reality of particulars (either by denying that they are actual or that they are mind-independent) and "realism" is the endorsement of the reality of particulars.

<sup>2</sup> Yitzhak Melamed's "Acosmism or Weak Individuals?: Hegel, Spinoza, and the Reality of the Finite" features a survey of some acosmist commentators and provides a general argument in favor of the opposing view.

idealist thinking to temporal passage while maintaining realist commitments to the existence of finite modes.

Spinoza's theory of persistence is articulated through the *conatus* (EIp7) and its relationship to the ratio of motion and rest (EIIp13). Section I of this paper explores Spinoza's usage of "motion," and illustrates that the *conatus* is essentially temporal. From this claim and Spinoza's conception of eternity, the problem arises. I explain this as a contradiction between *Natura naturata* and *Natura naturans*. Section II features an evaluation of the potential acosmist solution and reveals how it contradicts Spinoza's commitment to parallelism between the attributes and degrees of reality. Through an interpretation of Spinoza's epistemology and passages from his "Letter on the Infinite," I construct an alternative solution in Section III. Temporal passage is not an adequate idea for Spinoza, and can thus be understood as ideal. However, Spinoza considers duration to be a feature of reality that can be explicated without temporal passage. Similar reasoning can also be applied to motion. Interpreted in this way, temporal passage is ideal while motion is real. This solves the problem of motion from eternity without entailing the problems present in the acosmist interpretation.

## II. MOTION AND THE CONATUS

A theory of persistence sets out to explain how any given object maintains its existence. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza presents two accounts of persistence. I call these “the *conatus* account” and “the *ratio* account,” and derive their structures from EIIIp6 and the Physical Interlude, respectively. The demonstration following EIIIp6 explains the metaphysics of persistence:

For singular things are modes by which God’s attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (by EIp25c), i.e. (by EIp34), things that express, in a certain and determinate way, God’s power, by which God is and acts. And no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away (by EIIIp4). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away (by EIIIp5). Therefore, as far as it can, and it lies in itself, it strives to persevere in its being, Q.E.D. (EIIIp6d).<sup>3</sup>

Immediately following this passage, Spinoza labels this phenomenon the “*conatus*” (EIIIp7). Thus, the *conatus* account of persistence can most simply be understood as follows: a thing has nothing in itself by which it can be destroyed and persists in virtue of its status as a mode of an active God, striving to persevere against external causes.<sup>4</sup>

The *ratio* account relies on a different scheme, applying specifically to physical bodies, and can be found in the Physical Interlude:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> All references to Spinoza’s works are to Edwin Curley’s translations. Curley translates “*conatus*” as “striving.”

<sup>4</sup> It is not clear exactly what it means for an object to have nothing in itself by which it can be destroyed. Don Garrett’s “Spinoza’s Conatus Argument” argues that this means none of an object’s essential features (as opposed to accidental features) can cause its destruction. John Carriero’s “Conatus” maintains that the *conatus* can be taken as a conditional statement: if a certain thing leads to an object’s destruction, then that thing was never “in” the object in the first place. Both of these readings are consistent with the arguments made in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Peterman, in her article, “The ‘Physical’ Interlude,” expresses doubt that Spinoza uses physical concepts *qua* physical in the *Ethics* at all. Peterman asserts that the use of physical concepts in the *Ethics* is intentionally construed metaphysically by the author, and thus should not be read as contributing to a greater physics. While I am sympathetic to this view, I think the definitions of the terms at play (such as “motion”), whether they are construed physically or metaphysically, have relevant physical consequences. Thus, I will be reading physical terms like motion as physical, though I do not mean to suggest they should be read as only physical.

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or Individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies (EIIp13d).

Spinoza goes on to explain that an object will persist even if its parts are replaced by others (EIIp13l4), become greater or smaller (EIIp13l5), or change direction and speed (EIIp13l6), assuming these happen without changing the ratio of motion and rest. This reveals the *ratio* account: as long as the parts of a physical object maintain a consistent ratio of motion and rest, even given substantial change to other variables, the object persists.

Thus, Spinoza lays out two accounts of persistence, one pertaining to things in general and the other specifically to physical bodies.

The *conatus* account: a thing persists in virtue of its status as a mode of an active God, striving to persevere against external causes.

The *ratio* account: a physical body persists insofar as it maintains a consistent ratio of motion and rest among its constituent parts.

The *conatus* is the essence of a thing (EIIIp7). A physical object cannot be conceived separate from its ratio of motion and rest, so this ratio constitutes its essence (EIIId2).<sup>6</sup> Thus, the ratio must constitute the *conatus* (perhaps in an incomplete sense). The ratio of motion and rest among a thing's constituent (physical) parts is an aspect of that thing's *conatus*.<sup>7</sup> In other words, maintaining a consistent ratio of motion and rest may be the way a physical object strives to persevere in its being.

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<sup>6</sup> "I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing" (EIIId2).

<sup>7</sup> For two different arguments to this conclusion, see "Conatus and Perfection in Spinoza" by John Carriero and *Persistence through Time in Spinoza* by Jason Waller. Even Sean Winkler's "The Conatus of the Body in Spinoza's Physics," which argues that the ratio and *conatus* are entirely distinct, treats these as intimately connected to one another.

However, the ratio of motion and rest (and thus the *conatus*) depends entirely on what Spinoza means by “motion” (*motus*). Through examination of Spinoza’s use of the term, I argue that motion necessarily involves temporality, and thus that persistence in virtue of the *conatus* necessarily involves temporality. It is worth mentioning that Spinoza’s contemporaries were frustrated by the fact that he never properly discussed the nature of motion, even though it plays a key role in his physics and metaphysics.<sup>8</sup> In a letter to Spinoza, von Tschirnhaus directly addresses this: “If you have the time and the opportunity, I humbly ask you for the true definition of motion and its explanation...” (Ep. 59). Spinoza, however, declines to answer: “As for the other things, concerning motion and method, because they aren’t yet written out in an orderly fashion, I reserve them for another occasion” (Ep. 60). It is strange how Spinoza treats motion, in that it is integral to his metaphysics and (sparse) physics, but is never explained.<sup>9</sup> Present commentators are therefore left to tease out a definition of motion merely from his use of the term.<sup>10</sup> It is outside the scope of this paper to examine every instance of the word throughout Spinoza’s works, so I will attend to an illuminating few that are sufficient for the task at hand. These instances are from “On God’s Immensity” in the *Metaphysical Thoughts* and from EIIp44s. Given his use of the terms “slowly” (*tardius*), “quickly” (*celerius*), “speed” (*celeriter*), “time” (*tempus*), and “move” (*moveri*), the text suggests Spinoza essentially considers motion to be a change in position over time.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Schliesser outlines a few of these frustrations, particularly as they apply to More, Clarke, Maclaurin, and Newton in his paper, “Newton and Spinoza: On Motion and Matter (and God, of Course).”

<sup>9</sup> The notable exception is the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*. However, given that this work is more representative of how Spinoza read Descartes than it is of Spinoza himself (and that it is one of Spinoza’s earlier works), it is unsafe to assume the discussion therein is illuminating about Spinoza’s mature thoughts on motion.

<sup>10</sup> Alison Peterman reviews this method for understanding motion in Spinoza briefly in “Spinoza on Extension” and “Spinoza on Physical Science.”

<sup>11</sup> To avoid committing Spinoza to an absolutist conception of space (and therefore motion), it may be best to conceive of “spaces” as positional orientations relative to other objects. In fact, if Spinoza’s conception of motion follows Descartes’ in any direct sense, then this type of interpretation is probably more accurate. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes defines motion as “the transfer of one piece of matter or of one body, from the neighborhood

It is important to first address an ambiguity in the term itself. “Motion” can refer to two different things, which John Toland explains well in his criticism of Spinoza’s reliance on the term:

We agree on every side that the perpetual changes in matter are the effects of motion, which produces an infinity of different figures, mixtures, and sensible qualities.<sup>12</sup> But we must distinguish between local motion and the moving force or action: for local motion is only a change of situation, or the successive application of the same body to the respective parts of several other bodies; so that this motion is nothing different from the body itself, nor any real being in nature, but a mere mode or consideration of its situation, and the effect of some force or action without or within its body.<sup>13</sup>

Here Toland points out the ambiguity (whether in Spinoza or in general) whereby the term “motion” refers both to particular instances of motion (local motion) and to the principle by which motion occurs (moving force or action). Given that an object’s ratio of motion and rest involves a particular instance of motion (the motion in or of some object rather than motion in general), at present I am more concerned with local motion, as Toland would call it. However, I will treat with the underlying principle (the moving force or action) in Section II. On account of the fact that there is a variety of objects, a variety of ratios of motion and rest is necessary. Because of this, when Spinoza talks about an object’s ratio of motion and rest (and thus the object’s persistence in virtue of that ratio), he must be referring to a particularized ratio of motion and rest (otherwise, all things might have the same ratio and thus could not be individuated). Therefore, as I explicate Spinoza’s usage of “motion,” I will attempt to articulate his account of particularized motion.

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of those bodies immediately contiguous to it and considered at rest, into the neighborhood of others” (Pr II 25). This definition relativizes motion to the bodies around it, rather to an absolute space – and Spinoza would have certainly been familiar with this thought.

<sup>12</sup> I take Toland’s use of “we” in this sentence to be referring to Toland and Spinoza or to Toland and a Spinozist, as he claims that his interlocutor is a person who admires Spinoza (though he could be making a more sweeping claim about philosophers in general). I take this to mean that the remainder of the passage is meant to entertain Spinozistic thought, rather than Toland’s understanding of motion (though he may agree with the Spinozist). The latter half of this sentence opens the door to some exploration of how diversity follows from unity in Spinoza, and I will address this further in Section II.

<sup>13</sup> John Toland, *Letters to Serena*, Letter IV: “To a gentleman in Holland, showing Spinoza’s system of philosophy to be without any principle of foundation.”

Spinoza makes an argument in his *Metaphysical Thoughts* where motion plays an important role. “If God, they say, is pure act, as indeed he is, he must be everywhere and infinite. For if he were not everywhere, either he would not be able to be wherever he wishes to be, or he would necessarily – note this – have to move” (CM II 3). This argument is meant to illustrate that a given way of thinking about God is incorrect, but this is no reason to think the conception of motion presented therein is incorrect. The usage of “move” describes a situation wherein an object occupies a certain area of extended space, but not a different area of extended space. As such, there are two relevant areas: one area that the object occupies and another that it does not. The transition of status regarding the unoccupied space is also relevant to motion. The space that is unoccupied by the object must become occupied by the object. In other words, the orientation of one object toward other objects must become a different orientation. From Spinoza’s usage of the term here, it is clear that motion occurs when an object occupying a particular space comes to occupy a different particular space.<sup>14</sup> Put simply, (local) motion is a change in position.

Returning to the *Ethics*, another feature of motion can be gathered from EIIp44s. “Moreover, no one doubts but what we also imagine time, viz. from the fact that we imagine some bodies to move more slowly, or more quickly, or with the same speed” (EIIp44s). These notions of quickness and slowness are particularly revealing. Quickness and slowness necessarily involve speed, which is confirmed by Spinoza’s presentation of “at the same speed” in opposition to these terms. If each body moves with a certain speed (EIIp13a2), then motion must occur at a certain speed. Speed can only be measured by the amount of time it takes an object to travel a certain distance. The conclusion from this is direct: if motion necessitates speed and speed necessitates temporality, then motion must necessitate temporality. This, coupled with the passage from the

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<sup>14</sup> Or when an object’s position relative to others comes to be a different position relative to others.

*Metaphysical Thoughts*, fleshes out the concept of motion in Spinoza. This may not be an exhaustive or complete definition, but the text suggests that whenever Spinoza says “motion,” he is referring to an object’s change in position over time. From EIIp44s, it is clear that Spinoza thinks we perceive time as passing – we see that objects move more slowly or more quickly by recognizing a change over consecutive, sequential moments. Thus, I take “time” here to mean temporal passage.

It should be noted here that Spinoza disparages appeals to the imagination when reasoning about the world, and instead prefers appeals to the intellect. These refer to aspects of Spinoza’s epistemology and are discussed in the appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*. “For when things are so disposed that, when they are presented to us through the senses, we can easily imagine them...” (EIApp). This ties the imagination to perception. For Spinoza, all knowledge obtained through the senses is apprehended by the imagination, while all knowledge obtained through reason is apprehended by the intellect. From the appendix to Part I, it is clear that the intellect provides reliable knowledge and the imagination does not: “And because those who do not understand the nature of things, but only imagine them, affirm nothing concerning things, and take the imagination for the intellect, they firmly believe, in their ignorance of things and of their own nature, that there is an order in things” (EIApp). Spinoza thinks the imagination provides information only about things as they affect the senses, while the intellect apprehends things as they are in themselves. This will be an important distinction moving forward and I will return to it in greater detail.

What is important to recognize here is that this discussion of motion and persistence criteria relies solely on the intellect and makes no appeals to the imagination. Although Spinoza mentions sense-data in EIIp44s, the connection between speed and time as temporal passage (and therefore

between motion and temporal passage) is established *a priori*. I will discuss the relation of time to the imagination in due course. For now, I turn to the involvement of temporal passage in motion (and persistence in virtue of the *conatus*) and the problem arising therefrom.

### III. THE PROBLEM OF MOTION FROM ETERNITY AND THE ACOSMIST SOLUTION

It appears Spinoza's theory of persistence relies heavily on the notion of temporal passage.<sup>15</sup> However, when measured against other commitments made throughout the *Ethics*, this may be an untenable position. To illustrate why, there are two terms that must be addressed: "time" (*tempus*) and "eternity" (*aeternitatem*). With reference to Spinoza's usage of these two terms and in light of the apparent association of motion with temporal passage, I demonstrate that persistence is impossible in Spinoza's philosophy, by his own lights.

Eternity is one of the first terms defined in the *Ethics*: "By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing" (EId8). Spinoza continues later in Part I, saying that "in eternity, there is neither when, nor before, nor after" (EIp33s2) and in Part V that "eternity can neither be defined by time nor have any relation to time" (EVp23s). These definitions make an important point: eternity is tenseless. If an object exists in the past, it exists tenselessly from eternity, as does an object in the present or the future. All time is ontologically similar in relation to eternity – that is, all things, past, present, or future, occupy the same ontological category, and thus there is no temporal passage understood from eternity.

This separation of temporal passage and eternity is clear in Spinoza's dichotomous approach to God. From Part I: "...by *Natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence"

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<sup>15</sup> Additionally, since Spinoza insists that individuation happens due to the ratio of motion and rest (EIIp1311), his theory of individuation relies on temporality as well.

(EIp29s) and “by *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, or from any of God’s attributes, i.e., all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God” (EIp29s).

These concepts as relevant to this discussion are:

*Natura naturans*: Nature from eternity (Nature in, of, and through itself).

*Natura naturata*: Nature as modes, which (insofar as they are considered in extension) exist in spatiotemporal relations to one another.<sup>16</sup>

Because *Natura naturans* is substance understood as eternal and *Natura naturata* allows substance to be understood as spatiotemporal modes, a problem arises from this distinction: *Natura naturata* allows for the *conatus* as temporal and *Natura naturans* does not. This means that Spinoza’s persistence theory is consistent with *Natura naturata*, but not *Natura naturans*. The very existence of a perspective from eternity casts doubt on the notion that things can persist at all. Persistence in virtue of the *conatus* necessarily involves temporal passage – thus, if there is no temporal passage, then there is no persistence. From the fact that *Natura naturata* allows for time and *Natura naturans* does not, reality must be fundamentally different from these two perspectives. From one (*Natura naturata*), things temporally persist. From the other (*Natura naturans*), nothing can persist at all. This is the problem of motion from eternity.

Since this problem arises from the persistence of modes, simply denying the existence of modes might be attractive, yet radical. Many have interpreted Spinoza as believing the plurality of the world is nonexistent (acosmism).<sup>17</sup> Although this reading is compelling in light of the problem discussed thus far, it is ultimately mistaken. The problem boils down to a simple contradiction:

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<sup>16</sup> *Natura naturata* involves spatiotemporal relations due to the fact that modes in extension exhibit a ratio of motion and rest, and the definition of motion I have established involves both space and time.

<sup>17</sup> See Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* for an early interpretation and Michael Della Rocca’s “Rationalism, Idealism, Monism, and Beyond” for a more recent interpretation.

persistence is both possible and impossible in Spinoza's philosophy, depending on perspective. To overcome this contradiction, either the perspective associated with *Natura naturata* must be affirmed while the perspective associated with *Natura naturans* is denied, or vice versa. To deny the perspective associated with *Natura naturans* would be to deny the eternity and indivisibility of substance. This is certainly not a fair interpretation of Spinoza, as he is very explicit in the beginning of the *Ethics* that substance is absolutely unified and indivisible. Additionally, Spinoza's use of the phrase "*sub specie aeternitatis*" becomes confused, as this refers to a perspective from eternity, which is impossible if Nature is only *Natura naturata*.

Denying *Natura naturata* holds more promise, and I take this to be the acosmist approach. If understanding anything through the modes is understanding Nature as *Natura naturata*, then denying *Natura naturata* is to deny the reality of the modes. This solves the problem of motion from eternity by denying that motion actually happens. If no modes exist, there is nothing with a ratio of motion and rest or a *conatus*. Persistence of modes depends on motion, but motion is impossible from eternity – therefore, modes do not persist (and I take this to be a weaker version of the claim that modes do not exist).

This solution is elegant in its simplicity and solves some enduring issues in Spinoza. For instance, acosmism puts to rest the tension between Spinoza's apparent commitment to Nature's plurality and his commitment to Nature's unity by denying the former. Additionally, acosmism makes sense of the claim that Spinoza makes at EId4: that attributes are conceptually tied to the intellect. If attributes are tied to the intellect, then it seems thought has priority over the other attributes. This lends itself to the notion that all attributes reduce to thought and are thus ideal. Finally, acosmism helps make sense of Spinoza's adamant commitment to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (EIa2 and EIa3). So, it seems that there is quite a bit of extraneous motivation

for accepting the acosmist solution.<sup>18</sup> However, there is some reason to believe that Spinoza himself would have rejected it. In his paper, “Why Spinoza is not an Eleatic Monist (Or Why Diversity Exists),” Yitzhak Melamed provides six textual arguments against the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza. While all of what he presents on this issue is persuasive, I will only here reconstruct two of his arguments.

Melamed invokes the parallelism doctrine. Spinoza says that “the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that. So also a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways” (EIIp7s). Whatever there is in extension there must also be in thought, and vice versa. Melamed thinks that this parallelism cannot be made sense of on the acosmist reading. The parallelism doctrine outright contradicts acosmism “insofar as it clearly asserts the existence of a plurality of entities.”<sup>19</sup> If Spinoza did not believe in the existence of modes, he would not have had any reason to write about the “order” among modes being congruent across attributes. Not only would this be irrelevant and unnecessary, but it would be outright false to claim that any such order exists.

Another of Melamed’s arguments stems from Spinoza’s commitment to the view that reality exists in degrees. Spinoza says that “it is far from absurd to attribute many attributes to one substance. Indeed, nothing in nature is clearer than that each being must be conceived under some attribute, and the more reality, or being it has, the more it has attributes which express necessity, or eternity, and infinity” (EIp10s). This is closely followed by: “since the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes, each of which also expresses an essence infinite in its own kind, from

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<sup>18</sup> Samuel Newlands goes over some of the reasons acosmism has been a historically popular interpretation of Spinoza (at least from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until now) in his paper, “More Recent Idealist Readings of Spinoza.”

<sup>19</sup> Yitzhak Y. Melamed, “Why Spinoza is Not an Eleatic Monist (Or Why Diversity Exists).”

its necessity there must follow infinitely many things in infinite modes” (EIp16d). From these two statements, God is real and has properties. According to Melamed, this “provides some motivation for the existence of modes,” because the modes are these properties.<sup>20</sup> Acosmism does not allow for that which follows necessarily from God’s essence to exist, and thus should be rejected.

There still remains a problem: Melamed’s arguments may illustrate that acosmism is not compatible with other aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy, but it is entirely possible that some of Spinoza’s commitments might entail theses he never considered. In other words, Spinoza might have stumbled into acosmism, whether he wanted to or not. In order to save him from this mistake, it is not enough to show that acosmism clashes with certain of Spinoza’s commitments. What is required is to explain how Spinoza’s claims can be clarified such that they do not imply acosmism. To that end, I refer again to a statement from John Toland: “We agree on every side that the perpetual changes in matter are the effects of motion, which produces an infinity of different figures, mixtures, and sensible qualities.”<sup>21</sup> Here Toland explicates and agrees with a Spinozistic principle. The variety of things – that is, the differences in shape, color, hardness, heat, smell, etc. of objects (the things that differentiate them from one another) – is the effect of motion. Motion is what gives rise to the plurality of objects. How might this be?

Section I of this paper included an interpretive account of particularized (or “local”) motion. Here, it is necessary to discuss the motive force – the underlying commonality shared by all instances of particularized motion. It is difficult to differentiate between the different uses of “motion” in Spinoza, but there is a certain context in which it is clear that Spinoza refers to the generalized motive force, rather than local motion. This is in his discussion of infinite modes. Though he invokes the notion of infinite modes slightly earlier in the *Ethics*, Spinoza’s clearest

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>21</sup> Toland, *Letters to Serena*, Letter IV.

statement on them in the work is at EIp28s: "...certain things had to be produced by God immediately, viz. those which follow necessarily from his absolute nature, and others, (which nevertheless can neither be nor be conceived without God) had to be produced by the mediation of those first things..." (EIp28s). Coupled with EIp22 and EIp23, it is clear that Spinoza is here establishing the order of modes as they follow from substance. All of the finite things in the universe follow from a necessarily infinite (EIp22 and EIp23) mode which is necessarily entailed by the essence of substance. Unfortunately, Spinoza does not offer any explanation about what these infinite modes might be. All we know from this passage is that the most fundamental thing in existence is substance, which necessitates the existence of some infinite mode, and it is from this infinite mode that finite things follow.

The *Ethics* does not provide any specifics about this transition from infinite substance to finite modes – but Spinoza's contemporaries were clever enough to ask. In a letter to Schuller, Spinoza responds to questions about these infinite modes. Schuller asks what the immediate infinite mode (the mode that follows directly from the nature of God) is, and also asks for an example of the particular modes (the mediate infinite modes, as they would later be called) which follow from the immediate infinite mode. Spinoza responds:

...the examples [of infinite modes] you ask for: examples of the first kind [i.e., of things produced immediately by God] are, in Thought, absolutely infinite intellect, and in Extension, motion and rest; an example of the second kind [i.e., of those produced by the mediation of some infinite modification] is the face of the whole universe, which, however much it may vary in infinite ways, nevertheless always remains the same (Ep. 64).

According to this letter, Spinoza thinks that "motion and rest" is an immediate infinite mode and that the face of the whole universe (which I take to mean the totality of all modes under a given attribute; constituted by finite modes) is a mediate infinite mode. Thus, motion and rest follow

necessarily from the essence of God, and it is motion and rest (where motion is motive force) that causes the existence of the face of the whole universe.

This explains the metaphysical mechanics behind Spinoza's insistence that the modes follow necessarily from the essence of substance, or rather how the plurality and diversity of things can follow necessarily from the unified nature of substance. Extension follows necessarily from substance – as the attributes of God are essential to his nature (EIp4d) – and it appears that a necessary feature of this attribute is motion (motive force). Given that Spinoza thinks extension without body is incoherent, it seems he has built into his system all that is necessary for plurality. Motion and rest in extension is motion and rest of bodies (motive force), and thus bodies can be differentiated from one another in respect of motion and rest (local motion) (EIIp13L1'). I take this to be sufficient as an explanation for the existence of plurality in Spinoza's metaphysics, at least generally.<sup>22</sup> Though Spinoza may still have issues to face (possibly other motivations for the acosmist interpretation), I think these passages illustrate that he maintains the necessary conceptual tools to derive plurality from his unified substance.

Melamed's arguments, in conjunction with this interpretation of the infinite modes of extension, suggest acosmism is an unacceptable solution to the problem of motion from eternity.<sup>23</sup> A different solution is therefore preferable. To that end, I look to Spinoza's discussions of the imagination, given its role in the perception of temporal passage. To outline this solution, I examine some of Spinoza's discussion of time and duration and outline the relationships between perception, imagination, and adequate ideas. After building a solution from these notions, I discuss

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<sup>22</sup> I follow and agree with the arguments made by Noa Shein in her paper "Not Wholly Finite: The Dual Aspect of Finite Modes in Spinoza," Tad Schmaltz in his paper "Spinoza's Mediate Infinite Mode," and Federica De Felice in her paper "On Causation and Infinite Modes in Spinoza's Philosophical System," which all rely on the general notion that plurality follows from God through the mediation of motion and rest.

<sup>23</sup> If the case built here is wanting, Melamed offers four other arguments in the same paper. Additionally, Steven Nadler's "Spinoza's Monism and the Reality of the Finite" makes a convincing argument for similar conclusions.

whether or not it is satisfactory and suggest some potential difficulties. Ultimately, I assert that this solution is more consistent than the acosmist reading, despite these potential problems.

#### IV. TIME AS AN INADEQUATE IDEA

To lay groundwork for the solution, it is important to delve into what Spinoza means by “imagine” (*imaginari* and cognates). Recall that by “imagine” Spinoza means something like perception, insofar as perception is the activity the mind engages in when it organizes data from sensory organs. “[T]he affections of the human Body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things, even if they do not reproduce the figures of things. And when the Mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines” (EIIp17s). Moreover, Spinoza thinks the imagination cannot err unless one considers perceived things to be real things:

And here, in order to begin to indicate what error is, I should like you to note that the imaginations of the Mind, considered in themselves contain no error, or that the Mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack an idea that excludes the existence of those things that it imagines to be present to it. For if the Mind, while it imagined nonexistent things as present to it, at the same time knew that those things did not exist, it would, of course, attribute this power of imagining to a virtue of its nature... (EIIp17s).

When one understands that imaginings are not representative of the world in itself, one can overcome the error and understand that imagination is related to the nature of the body.

However, this does not mean things deduced from the imagination are reliable. Spinoza makes a clear distinction in his epistemology which exemplifies the superiority of adequate ideas that do not involve the imagination over inadequate ideas that do. In *Ethics* Part II, Spinoza says that an adequate idea is “an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations of a true idea” (EIIId4). Daisie Radner offers some clarification which illustrates that ideas deduced from the senses are not ideas of objects themselves, but instead are ideas of the body affected by objects. “All that the mind

perceives it perceives by means of the ideas of the affections of its own body. For example, when the mind perceives the sun, the idea by means of which it perceives the sun is the idea of the body as affected by the sun... Thus it has inadequate ideas of these things.”<sup>24</sup> All ideas obtained through the imagination must be inadequate. Radner goes on to say that “[t]he things of which the mind has adequate knowledge or ideas include that which is common to all bodies and ‘the eternal and infinite essence of God.’”<sup>25</sup> These are the ideas related to the intellect (*intellectus*), rather than the imagination. Ideas associated with the intellect are obtained through reason alone. Furthermore, it is clear from the appendix to Part 1 of the *Ethics* that Spinoza thinks ideas obtained by the intellect are vastly more valuable than those obtained by the imagination. An adequate idea is an idea without relation to an object’s affections on the body (apprehended through the intellect) (EIIId4), while an inadequate idea is an idea of an object’s affections on the body (apprehended through the imagination). It can be deduced from this system that any idea involving perception at its conception is not an adequate idea.

Spinoza says explicitly that time is imagined: “...no one doubts but what we also imagine time...” (EIIp44s). Moreover, he is clear that our conception of time arises from specific types of things that we perceive: “...from the fact that we imagine some bodies to move more slowly, or more quickly, or with the same speed” (EIIp44s). With reference to successive change here (speed), it seems that he is referring to temporal passage. For temporal passage to be an adequate idea, it would have to be derived without reference to affections of the body. However, since Spinoza thinks the idea of temporal passage arises from perceptions of objects moving at different speeds, he must affirm that temporal passage is related to the affections of the body. Thus, Spinoza

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<sup>24</sup> Daisie Radner, “Spinoza’s Theory of Ideas.”

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

can be read as claiming temporal passage is not a real feature of the world, as it only arises when the world is understood inadequately.

This leads to odd consequences and has a significant effect on how motion should be understood. If this is truly the case, there are features of extension that must be reconsidered, namely duration and dimensionality. Even if temporal passage is ideal (this interpretation seems to suggest such an ideality, if not require it), Spinoza still uses language throughout the *Ethics* that treats “duration” (*duratio*) as something entirely its own – related to temporal passage but not itself temporal by necessity. In Part I, when offering his definition for eternity, Spinoza implicitly differentiates time and duration: “For such existence, like the essence of a thing, is conceived as an eternal truth, and on that account cannot be explained by duration or time, even if the duration is conceived to be without beginning or end” (EId8e). Spinoza writes “time *or* duration,” using the exclusive “or” (*aut*), rather than the inclusive (*sive*). This suggests a conceptual distinction: duration and time are fundamentally disparate notions for Spinoza. This means that, though temporal passage is not a real feature of the world, duration could be. Motion may also be best understood similarly.

Duration is defined in the *Ethics* as “an indefinite continuation of existing” (EIIId5) and is later equated with existence as such (EIIp45s). While “continuation” (*continuatio*) might have temporal connotation, duration is never explicitly linked to temporal passage. This is further complicated when Spinoza explicates why adequate knowledge of the duration of the body is impossible.

Our body’s duration depends neither on its essence, nor even on God’s absolute nature. But it is determined to exist and produce an effect from such causes as are also determined by others to exist and produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner, and these again by others, and so to infinity. Therefore, the duration of our Body depends on the common order of nature and the constitution of things (EIIp30d).

This explains that an object's duration cannot be derived from its essence, but can rather only be understood through the relations it holds to other objects (this is consistent with the *conatus*, as an object cannot come to destruction by any internal features). Spinoza goes on to say that, while it is impossible regarding the body, it is possible to have adequate knowledge of the duration of other objects. It seems clear, then, that duration is a real aspect of the world. But if duration (an adequate idea) cannot be understood through temporal passage (the involvement of which necessarily entails inadequacy), how should duration be understood?

Perhaps we make sense of objects and their durations relative to one another by organizing them according to our perceptions, and the organizational tool is temporal passage. In fact, Spinoza is relatively explicit about this in his "Letter on the Infinite" to Lodewijk Meyer. Spinoza explains that "Measure" and "Time" are aids to the imagination for making sense of "Quantity" and "Duration." "Next, from the fact that when we conceive Quantity abstracted from Substance and separate Duration from the way it flows from eternal things, we can determine them as we please, there arise Time and Measure – Time to determine Duration and Measure to determine Quantity in such a way that, so far as possible, we imagine them easily" (Ep. 12). Spinoza thinks time is a tool for making sense of what is real (in the same way that measure is not real, but represents quantity).<sup>26</sup>

Spinoza is usually taken to think that objects are extended in length, width, and height.<sup>27</sup> However, given this understanding of time and the way Spinoza talks about duration, duration is also a basic feature of extended modes. Potentially, extension can be understood

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<sup>26</sup> I take Spinoza here to be treating temporal passage as a feature of time in general. Otherwise, this account makes little sense. Time only helps make sense of objects' relations to one another if it is taken as changing from moment to moment. See the thought experiment at EIIp44s, which I discuss further in footnote 30.

<sup>27</sup> Waller, 83-96.

four-dimensionally: length, width, height, duration.<sup>28</sup> Be that as it may, the essential takeaway is that Spinoza suggests time is ideal, but that duration (a notion generally associated with time) is real.

What does all of this mean for the problem of motion from eternity? My solution requires one final step. There are two ways of interpreting the concepts from the “Letter on the Infinite” (measure, quantity, time, duration, and motion). First, Spinoza can be read as thinking that motion belongs in the same category as measure and temporal passage. Measure and temporal passage are inadequate ideas which assist in ordering real aspects of the world (quantity and duration). On this reading, motion is also an inadequate idea which fulfills a similar role, such as organizing causal relationships between bodies. However, this way of reading Spinoza lends itself to acosmism: motion is required for persistence, but if motion is taken in the same way as measure and temporal passage, then persistence must be denied. The foregoing discussion of acosmism illustrates why this is unacceptable.

The second reading of the passage from the “Letter on the Infinite” is more palatable. Temporal passage is not real but is a tool for making sense of what is real. Just as duration is ontologically prior to the passage of time, the same can be said for motion. Instead of grouping motion with measure and temporal passage, it should be grouped with quantity and duration. On this reading, quantity, duration, and motion all exist, but the inadequate ideas through which they are understood are ideal (measure and time). As Spinoza says, time and measure are aids to the imagination, making it easier to organize data from the affections of the body. It is, however, unclear what the world is like without reference to ideas from the imagination. Perhaps common

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<sup>28</sup> This might also introduce another theory of persistence for Spinoza – that is, a four-dimensional theory of persistence. Objects persist because they are extended through the medium over which they persist, in addition to their height, length, and width. Of course, I do not want to commit Spinoza to a view using a metaphysical toolbox that he would not have had access to (as Spinoza predates four-dimensionalism by roughly 300 years).

temporal structures can be replaced by logical or causal structures. In this interpretation, temporality is given up in favor of something more basic. If the essential structure of reality can be fully explained without temporal passage (and the explanation of temporal passage as an inadequate idea holds), then it would seem prudent not to complicate the picture unnecessarily. However, if temporal passage is an inadequate idea, then it would seem likely that there is a real thing or an adequate idea which the inadequate idea aims to apprehend. In other words, what is the real feature of reality that the inadequate idea most captures?

There are surely many possible answers to this question, but here I will only suggest two. First, there have been some commentators who think Spinoza's *Ethics* is oddly ambivalent toward time,<sup>29</sup> so maybe he would have been happier to supplant all of its explanatory power and transfer that power to something like a pure causal nexus. Rather than engaging with the notion that certain things precede or follow others in transitional sequence, perhaps Spinoza would more gladly suggest that certain things simply cause or affect other things. Temporal passage might merely be a way of managing that nexus, insofar as it relates to perception.<sup>30</sup> Another possibility, briefly mentioned above, is that objects are arranged into a four-dimensionally extended space.<sup>31</sup> In this scenario, the inadequate idea (time) is the result of an attempt to make sense of a dimension of spatiotemporal extension (duration) that is not as readily accessible as the others. So instead of a causal structure, temporal passage makes sense of a spatiotemporal structure. It is unclear if either of these two possibilities (or another undiscussed explanation) captures the feature of the world that temporal passage inadequately addresses, but a closer examination of textual evidence might

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<sup>29</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.

<sup>30</sup> Spinoza introduces a thought experiment at EIIP44s which makes time look like a logical construction. This may remind one of McTaggart, in that there seem to be two ways of understanding time. In the thought experiment, time seems like a B-series until incompatible circumstances obtain, and thus time must be imagined as an A-series.

<sup>31</sup> Eric T. Olson, "Temporal Parts," In *What Are We? A Study in Personal Ontology*.

provide an answer. However, before this discussion can take place, temporal passage must be understood as an inadequate idea in Spinoza, which I have argued for here. This seems to solve the problem of motion from eternity without sacrificing basic Spinozistic principles which are thrown to the wayside by acosmism.

If motion is understood similarly to duration – that is, as a real feature of the world – while temporal passage is understood as ideal, then the problem never arises. The problem is that time, understood as involving temporal passage from the fact that imaginations of time involve temporal passage, is necessary for persistence (because time is necessary for motion) and therefore persistence is not possible from eternity. However, if the idea that motion depends on temporal passage comes from an inadequate understanding of the world wherein temporal passage is considered to be a fundamental aspect of reality, then it seems there is no problem at all. This is a psychological issue rather than a metaphysical one. It is not that motion cannot exist without temporal passage, but rather that we may be incapable of understanding how motion can exist without temporal passage. If motion is taken as an aspect of reality, while temporal passage is taken as ideal, then the problem is entirely dissolved. So a more precise definition for motion in Spinoza would be: a change in position which we are only capable of understanding as happening across the passage of time. However, while this is a successful solution, it comes with some hefty baggage. These issues are not of great enough strength to warrant total denial, but they might raise a few eyebrows.

The biggest issue is that this might come across as quasi-Kantian. There is good evidence to suggest that Kant thought of space and time (as we experience them) as mind-dependent concepts, and it is clear that Kant thought time (as we experience it) existed only in the realm of

phenomena.<sup>32</sup> This interpretation is similar in that, for Spinoza, temporal passage exists only as a product of the imagination and certainly cannot be made sense of if Nature is understood as *Natura naturans*. While there are some implicit connections between Kant's phenomena/noumena distinction and Spinoza's *Natura naturata/Natura naturans* distinction, the solution here presented may treat these distinctions too similarly. Kant probably would not have been terribly comfortable knowing he might be interpreted in the same way as Spinoza,<sup>33</sup> and thus this interpretation may be limited. This is not necessarily a problem, but interpreting Spinoza as a Kantian in any sense (or vice versa) should give one pause, at the very least.

Additionally, the set of unanswered questions that this solution generates might be bothersome. What does this mean for the attribute of extension? Should it be understood as three-dimensional or four-dimensional? If three-dimensional, how do we make sense of duration? If four-dimensional, how do we make sense of the persistence conditions presented by Spinoza? Is motion meant to be understood as a basic feature of extension itself or is it possible to conceive of extension without conceiving of motion? Can duration be conceived without extension, and vice versa? Can this solution be reconciled with recent theories about space-time? Knowing that we do not currently have an adequate idea of motion, is an adequate idea of it even possible? These are all questions with answers beyond the scope of this paper, but which must necessarily be asked if the solution here presented is employed.

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<sup>32</sup> See the Metaphysical Exposition of Space and Time in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

<sup>33</sup> Omri Boehm's work on this topic provides an interesting reconstruction of the often-ignored relationship between Kant and Spinoza.

## V. CONCLUSION

Despite these issues, this solution is less problematic than acosmism. The acosmist solution requires an outright denial of certain of Spinoza's claims from the *Ethics* (namely EIp10s, EIp16d, and EIIp7), while the solution presented in this paper requires only a reinterpretation of certain concepts (namely, time and motion). Because of this, there seems to be little reason to prefer the acosmist solution over my alternative. Instead, while it might require some flexibility, the solution which involves denying temporal passage is certainly more successful in the interest of saving Spinoza from the problem without denying his philosophy. This problem arises initially from the fact that the persistence theory that Spinoza presents in the *Ethics* is dependent on time, if time is taken to involve temporal passage. This is because an object persists in virtue of its *conatus*, of which its ratio of motion and rest is a fundamental aspect. Speed is involved in the essence of motion, and temporal passage seems to be involved in the essence of speed. Thus, it seems that the *conatus* account and the *ratio* account of persistence rely on time understood as temporal passage. This is problematic because eternity cannot be related to temporal passage whatsoever. Considering that Spinoza's dual-conception of Nature includes a perspective from eternity (*Natura naturans*), it seems that two incompatible pictures arise. If temporal passage is understood as ideal, the problem can be resolved.

However, in denying temporal passage, motion must still be possible. In order for this to be the case, adequate ideas must be invoked: motion and duration are fundamental aspects of the world of modes (specifically of the attribute of extension) and are prior to temporal passage. Temporal passage only arises as a way that the imagination orders the data presented to it by the

affections of the body. Thus, it seems that motion is possible from eternity, insofar as motion is uninvolved with temporal passage in the same sense that duration and eternity are uninvolved with time. By solving the problem this way, the perspectives of *Natura naturata* and *Natura naturans* are maintained, while the discrepancy between eternity and motion is reconciled in Spinozistic terms. The conclusions, while somewhat odd, lead to a picture where temporal passage is ideal for Spinoza, but motion and duration are parts of reality. Therefore, persistence remains possible in the Spinozistic picture.

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