Structural Causality in Spinoza’s *Ethics*

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I argue that Spinoza’s claim at E1P15 that ‘Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God’ remains exegetically troubling. Briefly noting some unresolved difficulties with the two dominant interpretations of Spinoza’s account of the relationship between finite modes and God (these being the inherence and causal dependence readings), I move to claim that there is a third, neglected reading available which deserves consideration. I argue that, perhaps surprisingly, Althusser’s notion of ‘structural causality’, putatively derived from Spinoza himself, can be used to construct this reading. Althusser’s original notion of ‘structural causality’ is explained and clarified further, its advantages outlined over competing readings of Spinoza, and exegetical evidence for its applicability to Spinoza is then produced.

**1. Introduction**

At E1P15, Spinoza claims that ‘Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God’.[[1]](#endnote-1)[[2]](#endnote-2) Of the two main competing interpretations of this passage, the more radical– and, when viewed from a certain angle, more modern[[3]](#endnote-3) – has in fact the greater historical pedigree. This reading – most often known as inherentism – takes Spinoza’s language at face value. Pointing to Spinoza’s claim that finite particulars exist as modifications to God’s attributes[[4]](#endnote-4), and laying stress on the apparent continuity between Descartes’ use of these terms and Spinoza’s, the claim is advanced that for Spinoza particulars exist ‘in’ God in precisely the same sense in which, for the Cartesian, properties inhere in substances (Bennett 1996: 69). This reading, assuredly, lay behind the venom with which one of Spinoza’s earliest and fiercest critics attacked his *Ethics.* Pierre Bayle, writing his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* in 1697, claimed of Spinoza –

There is only one being, and only one nature; and this nature produces in itself by an immanent action all that we call creatures […] [Spinoza’s *Ethics*] is the most absurd and monstrous hypothesis that can be imagined, and the most contrary to the most evident notions of our mind. (Bayle 1826: 287)

Following from his inherentist reading, Bayle launched a number of arguments – that inherentism caused God to be responsible for, and so itself be derivatively, evil (Bayle 1826: 287 - 288); that it caused God to simultaneously bear contradictory properties (Bayle 1826: 290 – 291); that it was inconsistent with the immutability Spinoza allotted to God’s attributes (Bayle 1826: 291 – 294). Some of these criticisms were echoed as late as Edwin Curley’s *Behind the Geometrical Method* (Curley 1988: 33 – 36), but all have found convincing responses.[[5]](#endnote-5)

However, in *Spinoza’s Metaphysics* Curley identified what he took to be a deeper problem with the inherentist reading. Namely, that it founders when it attempts to reconcile inherence with the structural demands of particularity itself –

Spinoza’s modes are, prima facie, of the wrong logical type to be related to substance in the same way Descartes’ modes are related to substance, for they are particular things (EIP25C), not qualities. And it is difficult to know what it would mean to say that particular things inhere in substance. When qualities are said to inhere in substance, this may be viewed as a way of saying that they are predicated of it. What it would mean to say that one thing is predicated of another is a mystery that needs solving. (Curley 1969: 18)

Curley, then, denies that finite particulars inhere in God in a like fashion to the inherence of properties in substances. This denial is predicated on a putative lack of sense (a ‘mystery’) in the claim that particulars might be able to evince the same kind of ontological features as properties. For contemporary defenders of inherentism, the ‘mystery’ of the inherence of particulars is solved by a reinterpretation of what particularity consists in. Curley is right to see a logical problem in the notion of particulars *as conventionally understood* inhering in other objects; but incorrect in his suppressed claim that this conventional notion of particularity is obligatory.

The solution is to revise what we take particulars to be, and it is Jonathan Bennett who provides this revision.[[6]](#endnote-6) The language of particularity, for Bennett, is a substitutional language, which refers to ostensively identifiable adjectival modifications to God’s attributes. Just as a blush exists on a face by virtue of adjectivally modifying its colour, so finite particulars (under their mental or physical aspect) exist as adjectival modifications to God’s attributes of thought and extension. The consequence of this defence is a loss of quantifiable individuals, as Bennett concedes (Bennet 1984: 95 – 96). However, the literal sense of E1P15’s claim that particulars exist ‘in’ God is preserved.

Curley, motivated jointly by common-sense and exegetical motivations, rejects Bennett’s proposed solution in favour of preserving quantifiable individuals. This requires Curley to find a different sense in E1P15’s claim that particulars exist ‘in’ God. For Curley, properties are ‘in’ God by virtue of depending on him. In Curley’s hands, then, the claim of persisting ‘in’ God is analogical. This dependence on God is compatible with (what I will call) ontological diversity. Finite particulars do not inhere in God, but have a non-inherent existence; and so the world is furnished with a set of individuals which can be quantified over.

The question now arises of what the dependence between these quantifiable individuals and God consists in. What few interpreters of Spinoza currently dispute is that each of God’s attributes generates fundamental explanatory and causal laws – these being identical for a rationalist like Spinoza – which govern that attribute. These are known as immediate infinite modes, as they follow immediately from the fundamental nature of each attribute, and they apply infinitely to all modes derivative on those attributes. Spinoza writes in the *Short Treatise* –

Now, as regards the *general Natura naturata*, or the modes, or creations which depend on, or have been created by, God immediately, of these we know no more than two, namely, *motion* in matter, and the *understanding* in the thinking thing. These, then, we say, have been from all eternity, and to all eternity will remain immutable. (Spinoza 1910: 57)

These immediate infinite modes are more precisely a set of laws, which all finite modes in the relevant attributes must abide by. Curley understands these immediate infinite modes to provide a means of reconciling ontological diversity with E1P15; quantifiable individuals persist just due to the causal connections between themselves and other particulars, and between each of their own causal states. The immediate infinite modes determine the nomological framework which sustains these causal connections. Consequently, Curley (1988: 47 – 48) claims, finite particulars *depend* on God, as they cannot exist without the nomological frameworks God creates in each attribute. The nomological frameworks which the immediate infinite modes construct are a precondition for the persistence of the finite particular modes. Let us call this the ‘causal dependence’ reading.

Curley’s reading of Spinoza is evidently more modern, in historical terms, but traces its lineage in part to a supposedly implicit divergence in Spinoza from Descartes’ use of the terms ‘substance’ and ‘predicate’ (Curley 1988: 37 – 40). This reading’s reliance on implicature is no weakness; the contrary view equally relies on an opposed implicit continuity with Descartes’ use of these terms, bolstered by equally inconclusive evidence.[[7]](#endnote-7) Curley could (but does not) also appeal to certain structural analogues with the Neo-Platonism which very likely had an influence on Spinoza, either via the medium of the Jewish theology with which he was well acquainted, or more plausibly through his contemporaries and their idiosyncratic revisions of this theology.[[8]](#endnote-8) Taking Proclus as an example (whose influence on the Kabbalah seems clear[[9]](#endnote-9); although the influence of the latter on Spinoza is far from beyond doubt), we find an infinite, generative principle producing ontologically distinct, lower orders of existence, which depend upon, without inhering in, God by virtue of drawing their essential and nomological character from the participatable substances he produces.[[10]](#endnote-10) I should stress that I am not trying to draw a strong analogy between Spinoza and Proclus’ metaphysical systems, which are radically different, only to point out that Proclus’ allowance of both ontological diversity, and some (non-linearly) causal interaction with God (or, in Proclus’ case, with the substances which derive from God), can arguably be seen as a historical pedigree on which Spinoza, and non-inherentist readings of Spinoza, might plausibly be drawing. I regrettably, however, cannot explore this further in this paper.

**2. Problems**

As has been said, the inherentist bluntly accepts the loss of quantifiable individuals on their reading of Spinoza. But the inherentist regularly underrates the enormity of this loss. Quite apart from the fact that Spinoza at points strongly implies that his talk of individuals is non-substitutional, a substitution of unquantifiable adjectival areas for quantifiable individuals introduces difficulties in comprehending the causal connection between God and finite particulars. At E1P25Dem, Spinoza writes –

God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself.

On Curley’s reading, E1P25Dem can be understood in terms of the production of causal chains. The immediate infinite modes provide a statement of the governing laws from which finite particulars may proceed. As Curley puts it –

The previously existing singular facts [particulars] give us the infinite series of finite causes. The general facts [immediate infinite modes] give us the finite series of infinite causes, terminating in God. (Curley 1969: 66)

God’s being responsible for finite particulars ‘in the same way as he is responsible for his own existence’ makes perfect sense just in case his own existence entails the derivative existence of these finite particulars. And Curley’s account gives us a readily comprehensible gloss of such a state of affairs, as the infinite series of finite particulars are occasioned by and dependent on the finite series of the immediate infinite modes.[[11]](#endnote-11) Accordingly, both God and finite particulars are caused in the same way; they both result from the necessary working out of God’s nature.

However, on Bennett’s reading, finite particulars are *not* causally produced (marginally) distinct existences derivative on a set of causal laws. Rather, finite particulars are modifications to God’s attributes, which are for Bennett unbounded regions of space and thought. In this case, God is not producing particulars by virtue of producing his own existence, from which they derive, but is rather producing unbounded regions and – via the essence of his own existence- particular adjectival modifications to these regions.

This account is sustainable, just in case the existence of these unbounded regions could be causally linked to the existence of the adjectival modifications to them. But for this to be the case, either these regions should be responsible – per modification – for these modifications, or there would need to be causal chains set up between these modifications.

The first of these options is unworkable. For God to ceaselessly produce adjectival variation *directly* via its essence– being responsible per modification – would introduce temporal activity into what is (per E1P20C) an essentially atemporal, unchanging being.[[12]](#endnote-12) What we need instead, then, is for these adjectival modifications to entertain causal chains between themselves. But, by virtue of being merely adjectival modifications, they are precisely the wrong sort of ontological existent to maintain any such causal chains. For Bennett, each particular is a one-place relation between an adjectival state and an (ostensively identifiable) region of a single unbounded domain. In other words – and per Bennett’s own claims – particulars are properties. Moreover, as their properties are purely *adjectival* – rather than material, causal, or nomological – modifications to the underlying single substance, they are ineligible for bearing causal relations. So, we see that Bennett problematizes our understanding of how God could be responsible for his existence and the existence of adjectival modifications of his regions in the same way, given that these particulars do not flow immediately from his essence, and yet cannot be meaningfully seen as derivatively produced by mediate causal chains relating to his mediate modes either. This threatens to be a *reductio* for Bennett’s account, so long as the plain sense of E1P25Dem is maintained.

The problems with Curley’s reading are perhaps yet more severe. Curley’s reading’s prime benefit – for the sake of which it was first devised, I should think – is that it allows us to harmonize E1P15 with our common-sense intuitions about particulars as discrete ontological units. However, through avoiding interfering with our ideas about particularity and universality, Curley does incur some significant exegetical costs. As Steven Nadler (2008: 65 – 67) notes, the signal failure of Curley’s account is its inability to account for Spinoza’s distinctive claim that God is both a cause *esse* and acts as an immanent cause. Curley is able to convincingly accommodate Spinoza’s conviction that God is a cause *esse* – as the immediate and mediate infinite modes only persist through the continual causal action of God’s being (Curley 1988: 43). But this continual causal action, on Curley’s account, is applied only to these immediate infinite modes – which are governing sets of causal laws - and not to the finite particulars and causal occurrences which are derivatively caused by the structures of those modes. God’s production of the nomological sets is *causalitus secundum esse,* then,but the scope of this causation applies only at the head of the causal chain – namely, in the production of the governing causal laws. God does not act as an immanent cause, as the actions of the particulars shaped by the causal laws are not immanently caused by God, but are merely derivative on the causal laws God maintains (Curley 1988: 42 – 50). God is accordingly a distal cause of particulars on Curley’s account; a significant shortfall.

This is internally related to Curley’s second problem, which Nadler (2008: 66) also outlines; his separation of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. For Curley, God is characteristically active in *natura naturans*, in its construction of the immediate infinite modes, but the particulars which result from these nomological complexes (the *natura naturata*) are, as it were, distally caused by God, being derivatively produced by the outcome of the produced *naturans*. Accordingly, the *natura naturata* became strictly divorced from the immanent causal actions which range over the *natura naturans*. This is troubling for the simple reason that Spinoza identifies God with nature, and in in turn claims that nature is constituted by *both natura naturans* and *natura naturata* (E1P29Schol). By transitivity, then, God should be identically causally active across both *naturata* *naturata* and *natura naturans*.

This tightly related family of interpretive problems drives a deep wedge between the series of finite particulars and their causal relations, in which the world consists, and the governing causal laws which are directly and necessarily created by God. Curley maintains our language of particularity and importantly allows for a proper incorporation of the claims of E1P25Dem. But he culpably fails to work in Spinoza’s central commitment to immanent causation, and the identity of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* in God.

What is striking, in looking at the inherence and causal dependence readings, is that quantifiable particularity and immanent causation are both notions which plain-sense exegesis finds occupying an important place in Spinoza. And yet there is no available interpretation of Spinoza which succeeds in holding these commitments jointly. A solution to this problem is available, but requires us to consider a culture of Spinoza interpretation which has had comparably less impact on the Anglophone world.

**3. Structural Causality**

The influence of Spinoza’s thought has been through no end of unexpected and exotic permutations. Perhaps among the most unusual of these is what came to be known as ‘Spinozist Marxism’. As part of a heady mix of interpretations of Lacan, Marx, and Machiavelli, Spinoza was put to work in clarifying certain features both of social epistemology (drawing most obviously on Spinoza’s account of ideology) and, more curiously, social ontology. The key touchstones for this work were Pierre Macherey’s *Hegel ou Spinoza*, published in 1979, Etienne Balibar’s *Spinoza et la politique*, published in 1985, and in particular the work of their colleague Louis Althusser (throughout his career, but particularly *Lire le Capital*, published in 1965).

Althusser’s interest in Spinoza is partial; we are not dealing with a disinterested interpreter. Althusser attempts to use Spinoza to solve structurally homologous problems in his own social ontology. In each case we have determining structures (immediate infinite modes; social structures) and determined particulars (finite modes; social individuals). The question exercising Althusser is how to understand the relationship between determiner and determined, and he sees two chief candidates – what he calls ‘linear’ and ‘structural’ causality.

The first of these, linear causality, is simply a broadly conventional account of causality, on which causes precede their effects, and are ontologically and explanatorily distinct from those effects. Moreover, both the nature of the cause and the nature of the object subject to the cause are seen as making an equal contribution to the resulting effect. (The heat of the flame and the flammability of the oil make an equal contribution to the resulting blaze, for example). Is there a ‘linear causality’ reading of Spinoza, which we could fruitfully play off Althusser’s ‘structural causality’ reading?

The inherence reading of the relationship between the immediate infinite modes and finite modes is not clearly linear. But this is because, as we have seen, it is not clear a causal relationship of any type can cogently existence between attributes and modes on the inherence reading. For the causal dependence reading, by contrast, the relationship between the immediate infinite modes and the finite modes is clearly linear. God creates the infinite immediate modes, which create laws of nature within their respective attributes. The finite modes respond to these nomological structures under their own power, and set up their own causal chains. There is a clear separation (ontological and explanatory) between the nomological structures and the particulars subject to them, and each make an equal and different contribution to the effects which result. Just this model results in Curley’s separation between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* which Nadler so ably criticized. This is because for Curley God is only causally active in the immediate infinite modes; the rest of the causal outcomes are achieved via the innate modal responsivity of the finite particulars. In other words, the particulars subject to the causal laws make an equal contribution to the exhibited effects. Allison, whose interpretation hews close to Curley’s, gives an elegant summary of the linear account –

Within the theological framework in which Spinoza presents his theory of divine causality, one can detect at least the outlines of a thoroughly modern conception of scientific explanation. The basis of this conception is the view that every event or thing in nature must be understood in terms of two intersecting lines of explanation. There must first of all be a set of general principles of universal laws (infinite modes) which the event or thing in question instantiates, and secondly, there must be a set of antecedent conditions (finite modes), which likewise instantiate these principles of laws. (Allison 1975: 80 – 81)

The linearly causal reading of Spinoza has an answering pair in social ontology which Althusser subjects to criticism. Against the idea that social structures and particulars should be understood as exhibiting a linearly causal relationship, Althusser claims that the relationship between social structures and particulars should rather be understood as ‘structurally causal’. Notably, it is claimed in Althusser’s collaboratively authored[[13]](#endnote-13) *Reading Capital* in 1965 that this notion of ‘structural causation’ is derived from Spinoza –

by means of what concept, or what set of concepts, is it possible to think the determination of the elements of a structure, and the structural relations between those elements, and all the effects of those relations, by the effectivity of that structure? … In other words, how is it possible to define the concept of a structural causality? … it is the very form of the interiority of the structure, as a structure, in its effects. This implies therefore that the effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to imprint its mark: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects, in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects. (Althusser 1970: 186)

There is an idea of interest here. Althusser might serve to offer a fresh means of interpreting Spinoza’s account of the relationship between the immediate infinite modes, and finite particulars. To get at this, we must unpack the peculiar idea of the ‘structural cause’.

In discussing linear causality, and Curley’s linearly causal reading of Spinoza, we noted that the cause and that which was subject to the cause made an equal contribution to the effect. In other words, that which was subject to the cause had modal properties of its own, which helped to determine its subsequent behaviour in the resultant effect. This meant, in turn, that Curley’s account divorced *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*; the immediate infinite modes set up a general set of *abstract* laws, which needed to have no *specific* reference to any given particular. Particulars would respond to those causal laws just by virtue of their own nomological and modal make-up. (By analogy, laws of gravitation are universal, with no specific reference to any given particular; particulars respond to the laws of gravitation by virtue of their possessing mass, which invests them with responsivity to those laws). In Allison’s helpful phrase, linear causality sees the ‘intersection of two lines of explanation’. One of these is abstract – a set of abstract causal laws – the other particular.

Structural causality drops the idea that two lines of explanation intersect and contribute equally to the resultant effect; and it also drops the idea that the governing nomological structures can be seen as abstract. Althusser (1970: 186) writes –

the effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to imprint its mark: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects.

Althusser is claiming that objects have no intrinsic nomological or modal content of their own. It is the structural causes applied to them which help elicit effects in them in response to causal laws. Objects, in and of themselves, do not have any intrinsic nomological responsivity. Godelier, although watering down Althusser’s position mildly, as Steven Walt (1986: 198 - 199) notes, gives a helpfully clear gloss of sorts –

This causality of the structure thus operates everywhere without its efficacy being localizable in any particular spot. It always insert itself between one event and another, *so as to give to each of them all the dimensions it can have, conscious or otherwise, that is, its entire effect, intentional or not*. (Godelier 1972: 79, emphasis mine)

As with Althusser, Godelier here is turning his attention to the social explanations which the putatively Spinozist notion of structural causality can explicate – but it serves nonetheless to help clarify Althusser’s key idea. Namely, that particulars are nomologically blank. By ‘nomologically blank’ I mean only that particulars, in themselves, have no modal content (do not necessitate or rule out any outcomes), no nomological responsivity (fail to respond to any causal laws), and are causally inert (have no ability to elicit or sustain causal connections). In structural causality, nomological structures are both responsible for causal laws, and solely responsible for the responsivity of particulars to those laws.

I believe this claim, in its role as an ontological claim about finite modes in Spinoza, has promise and exegetical support. Althusser’s notion of structural causality was given further attention in his essay ‘*Sur la*genèse’ or ‘On Origins’, written in 1966 –

We should, it seems to me, distinguish here between two distinct types of causality: a) an element can be produced as a structural effect. Structural causality is the last [*dernière*] causality of every effect. […]This means, in simple terms, that in order to comprehend the production of effect B, it is not enough to consider cause A (immediately preceding, or visibly related with effect B) in an isolated manner, but cause A instead as an element of a structure in which it assumes a place, therefore as subject to relations, specific structural relations, that define the structure in question. (Althusser 2012: 2)

This contains an important clarification about structural causation and causal connection. Namely, that causal connections between particulars are not effected due to intrinsic properties of particulars, but take place due to the influence of nomological structures, which *lend* these particulars modal content (‘, it is not enough to consider cause A . . . in an isolated manner, but cause A instead as an element of a structure . . . therefore as subject to relations, specific structural relations, that define the structure in question.’).

To elucidate this further, let us consider Curley again. On Curley’s reading, God creates a set of nomological laws (the finite set of infinite causes). Outside of these laws, we have a collection of particulars (the infinite set of finite causes). For Curley, these particulars are responsive to, and governed by, these laws just due to their intrinsic nature. So, (to simplify briefly) we have a picture of the universe as consisting in a direct, transitive relationship between the set of nomological laws (L) and an ontological set (O), where the responsivity of O to L is caused by O’s intrinsic nature.

On Althusser’s reading of Spinoza, by contrast, O is responsive to L *just in case* a structural cause S is applied to O in order to *cause* it to be responsive to L. O has no intrinsic modal responsivity to L. Both L and S are expressions of God’s casual activity, in both creating a set of nomological laws L, and simultaneously nomologically overwriting O so as to induce it to be responsive to L. The ontological units subject to structural causality exhibit causal entailments and modal properties that they would not exhibit should this structural cause be withdrawn. Structural causality erects nomological laws and is simultaneously responsible for the responsivity of the particulars it ranges over to them. It is only insofar as structural causality is operant that extant causal interconnections are exhibited and possible.

What we have explored amounts to the first strand of Althusser’s ‘structural causality’; structure is given primacy over particulars, and serves to determine their causal behaviour. Particulars have no intrinsic nomological responsivity or modal content; this is given to them by the structural cause, in what I have called ‘nomological overwriting’. Just this necessitates the second strand of Althusser’s notion of structural causality, which we now turn to; the non-abstract nature of causal laws.

As we saw earlier, on a linearly causal picture (and on Curley’s reading of Spinoza) causal laws are abstract, applying indiscriminately without specific reference to any given particular. A causal law may specify abstractly a set of conditional laws, and particulars – by virtue of their intrinsic responsivity to these laws – will act on them. If we replace the idea of particulars having intrinsic nomological responsivity with one of particulars having intrinsic nomological blankness, however, abstract causal laws of this type cannot elicit effects; particulars need to have their responsivity to these laws given to each of them. Accordingly, structural causality needs to invest each particular with a nomological content, which gives it the ability both to respond to the causal laws of the immediate infinite modes, and the ability to be causally responsive to other finite particulars. Althusser (2012: 2) goes on to mention this in ‘*Sur la* genèse’ –

[…S]tructural causality defines, as structural, therefore as structural effect, rigorously defined and delimited zones or sequences, where structural causality is carried out in the form of linear causality.

Here Althusser claims that even apparently linear instances of causality (the transitive relationship between my kicking a football and its subsequent movement, for example) are made possible by the more exotic process of structural causality.[[14]](#endnote-14) Structural causality continually invests finite particulars with standing nomological content which makes linear causal relations between those particulars possible.

The reason why structural causality is not abstract is accordingly clear; structural causality not only erects causal laws, but also invest particulars with responsivity to those laws. This cannot be done in the form of an abstract conditional law (‘for every x with mass, give responsivity to gravitational laws’), as structural causality needs to give each particular all of those modal and nomological properties which account for the differentiated causal relations which each particular exhibits both for themselves, and in relation to all other particulars with which they are causally connected. In other words, structural causality sustains all of the causal connections which any given particular enjoys at any given time; as the particular has no intrinsic modal content, and as each particular has radically distinct patterns of modal and causal connection, structural causality acts differently in each case. Accordingly, structural causality has a fine-grained causal role to play in modifying each particular in a differentiated way, investing each with a distinct set of responsivities and modal content.

To summarize, on Althusser’s reading Spinoza’s God immanently, *per particular,* lends each particular nomological and causal structure and responsivity; and, by implication, with the withdrawal of this structural causality the finite particulars subject to it would fail to exhibit any intrinsic nomological tendency or nomological structure of their own. All and any causal connections, on this reading, are present not due to any intrinsic causal features of particulars in isolation, but rather only through the activity of structural causality, which invests those particulars subject to it with differentiated nomological and causal properties and connections.

The structural causality reading can be boiled down to two core strands – an assertion of the nomological blankness of particulars, and of the non-abstract nature of causal laws. In what follows, I will first outline what benefit they might offer in interpreting Spinoza, and then turn to exegetical evidence from across Spinoza’s oeuvre to suggest that this reading has textual support.

**4. The Use of Structural Causality**

The promise of Althusser’s reading is that it provides a means of jointly holding that God is an immanent cause, that God operates equally across natura naturans and natura naturata, and that there is ontological diversity. I will take these points in order.

On a structural causality reading, God is causally active at every point in the causal chain, lending nomological and modal structure to the immediate infinite modes, and per particular to the finite modes. Accordingly, God’s role as an immanent, rather than distal, cause is preserved.

As should be obvious, this also elides Curley’s mistaken division between natura naturans and natura naturata; the entirety of nature is immanently acted on by God, who creates modal and nomological content both in the laws expressed in the infinite immediate modes, and in the finite particulars, which are nomologically overwritten to be responsive to those laws and capable of creating causal relations between themselves.

Finally, ontological diversity is maintained, as the finite modes do not inhere in God, as Bennett et al have claimed. Structural causality is compatible with, and in fact demands, genuine ontological diversity; it requires quantifiable particulars capable of bearing causal relations and modal properties. On the structural causality reading, then, particulars do not inhere in God. But nor do these particulars have any power to maintain their own causal connections, as on Curley’s reading; rather they are continually subject to the structural causality which is a precondition of their existing. Structural causality is responsible for the ability of finite particulars to entertain causal relations at all, including those causal relations responsible for their own perdurance.

Both the inherence and causal dependence respective readings, to my mind, have roughly equal exegetical purchase, and it is a certainty that the further reading I propose cannot obviate what support they have found. My intention here is accordingly constructive rather than destructive. I will show where the two key strands of structural causality – the nomological blankness of particulars and non-abstraction of causal laws – have purchase across Spinoza’s work, and argue that these might be foregrounded to provide a means of recasting our understanding of some of its difficult features. Structural causality relies on the idea that 1) particulars are nomologically blank, having their nomological content given to them by some extrinsic cause and 2) that the relationship between causes and particulars is non-abstract. 1) is the primary moving part in this position, with 2) following directly from it, as has been discussed. In what follows, I will show that there is evidence to suggest Spinoza held both 1) and 2).

**5. 1) Nomological blankness**

In 1665, Spinoza wrote to Henry Oldenburg about a putative ‘worm in the blood’. The worm:

could have no idea as to how all the parts are controlled by the overall nature of the blood and compelled to mutual adaptation as the overall nature of the blood requires, so as to agree with one another in a definite way. For if we imagine that there are no causes external to the blood which would communicate new motions to the blood, nor any space external to the blood, nor any other bodies to which the parts of the blood could transfer their motions, it is beyond doubt that the blood would remain indefinitely in its present state and that its particles would undergo no changes other than those which can be conceived as resulting from the existing relation between the motion of the blood and of the lymph, chyle, etc. Thus the blood would always have to be regarded as a whole, not a part. (Spinoza 1995: 193 – 194)

The blood is ‘regarded as a whole, not a part’ because it is the nature of the blood (its motion; its relational properties) which is responsible for the causal behaviour and entailment relations of the parts within it. This is, of course, an analogy, employed by Spinoza to foreground some salient elements of our own epistemic position. But in the course of elaborating this analogy, we find some evidence that something like 1) appeals to Spinoza. The particles of the blood appear to be undergoing nomological overwriting; the ‘blood and… the lymph, chyle, etc’ which lend and structure the motion of the particles contained in the blood. Crucially, we find Spinoza claiming that without the communication of new motions to the blood, the particles would ‘*undergo no changes* other than those which can be conceived as resulting from the existing relation between the motion of the blood and of the lymph, chyle, etc [i.e. those particles]’. The particles in and of themselves have no power to generate their own motion, but are rather ‘controlled by the overall nature of the blood’. Similarly, structural causality invests particulars with nomological content and responsivity, without which they could not enter into causal relations. As Charlie Huenemann (2008: 86), in interpreting this passage, puts it –

Spinoza believes there are some unseen forces at work in the determination of bodies’ motions . . . As a result, reductionistic laws of impact are simply not enough . . . Spinoza’s universe has the behaviour of its parts resulting at least in part from the nature of the whole.

On my reading, we would remove the qualifier ‘at least in part’ – all of the behaviour of the finite particulars – including those taking place according to ‘linear’ relations of causation – are ultimately explicable through the operation of structural causality. Just as the blood as a whole is responsible for the motion and behaviour of these particulars, so is structural causality responsible for the continual causal behaviour of finite particulars.

For this reading of Spinoza’s analogy to be compelling, we would need more direct evidence that Spinoza took it that particulars, in and of themselves, had no ability to erect or contribute to causal relations. I believe evidence that Spinoza took this view can be found in the Spinoza’s *Short Treatise*.

Whatever the other difficulties presented by the *Short Treatise* and its fragmentary composition, it clearly represents Spinoza working out the characteristic positions which will, in revised and strengthed form, find fuller and powerful expression in his later masterpiece, the *Ethics*. It also finds Spinoza on certain matters using more explicit and suggestive language which clarifies, though is absent in, the *Ethics* proper. (It suffices to note in this connection that the concept of emanation is used in the *Short Treatise[[15]](#endnote-15)*, but appears nowhere explicitly in the *Ethics*). Perhaps relatedly, we find here some hints towards a structural causality picture which are at points more difficult to discern in the *Ethics*. Early in the *Treatise*, Spinoza writes

outside God there is nothing at all, and . . . he is an *Immanent Cause*.. . since substance is the cause and the origin of all its modes, it may with far greater right be called an agent than a patient . . . if body were a thing existing through itself, and had no other attributes than length, breadth, and depth, then, if it really rested there would be in it no cause whereby to begin to move itself. (Spinoza 1910: 30)

Here we find that body (note that a mass term is used) having the attributes of length, breadth, and depth is incapable of initiating any causal chains. This does not directly support a structural causality reading.[[16]](#endnote-16) However, it does demonstrate that particulars – were they to exist ‘through themselves’ – would be incapable of alteration. This is certainly a claim about the intrinsic nomological blankess of particulars, though admittedly a weaker claim which is compatible with a conventional reading of Spinoza. We can build on this weak claim by continuing to trace Spinoza’s assertions on this score – to do so, we turn now to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.

The *Tractatus* *Theologico-Politicus*, being written roughly at the same time as the *Ethics*, replicates much of the evidence adduced below. However, there are notable statements which are compatible with, if not hinting towards, a structural causality reading. Particularly important is the following –

[I]t is solely from the necessity of the divine nature, and not from the necessity of essence and nature of a triangle, that the nature of a triangle is thus contained in the divine nature – or rather, the necessity of the essence and properties of a triangle, in so far as they are also conceived as eternal truths, depends not on the nature of a triangle but solely on the necessity of the divine nature and intellect. (Spinoza 1998: 54)

A deflationary – and accurate – reading of this passage would point out that it is God’s intellect which is the condition of the existence of intelligibles, and hence the condition of those intelligibles is properly attributable to God in the first instance. It may well be the case that this is Spinoza’s claim in this passage. However, note that Spinoza does not deny that the triangle has an essence, and nor – correctly, in order to be consistent with his remarks elsewhere about the causal powers of essences[[17]](#endnote-17) - that the essence of a triangle has a necessity of its own. Accordingly, the question arises of why it is the necessity of God’s infinite intellect, and not at all – even in an attenuated manner – the necessity of the essence of a triangle which accounts for the eternal truth of a triangle’s formal properties. Compatible with the thought that this eternality is dependent on God due to God’s being the eternal condition of all existence, is the thought that the essential interrelationship between the triangle’s formal parts derives not from their existence in thought, but rather from the interconnection which is lent to and created in them by the structurally causal influence of God on the essence of the triangle itself. In other words, God not only lends eternality to the necessary interrelation between the various parts of conceived triangles, but also lends the necessity of this interrelation itself to these parts. This is further supported by Spinoza’s claim in the *Tractatus* *Theologico-Politicus* that it is only the vulgar for whom ‘God is inactive all the while that Nature pursues her normal course’ (Spinoza 1998: 72).

From these sources, then, we might derive the view that God is causally active in maintaining and making possible the course of Nature, which will of necessity include necessary truths about relations between certain intelligibles (including, but not limited to, the necessary formal relationships between the sides of triangles, the internal angles of a triangle, and so on). This does of course rely on the notion – which I have not broached before this point – that God is structurally causally active in maintaining not only physical causal relationships, but also ideational causal relationships including but not limited to tautological truths. But this simply follows directly from the immediate infinite modes as Spinoza conceives them, and the impossibility, via the principle of sufficient of reason, of conceiving God as being causally active in generically different ways in each of these two domains.

Finally, in the *Tractatus* we find what appears to be an oblique restatement of an endorsement of the intrinsic nomological blankness of the finite particular (be it mental or physical) –

By the right and established order of Nature I mean simply the rules governing the nature of every individual thing, according to which we conceive it as naturally determined to exist and to act in a definite way. (Spinoza 1998: 179)

Note that it is according to the rules, and not according to the particular itself, that we conceive the particular to exist and act in a definite way. By implication, the particular in and of itself is incapable of supporting or making intelligible its determinate existence or behaviour.

Turning to the *Ethics* proper, we also find Spinoza adducing claims which can be taken as implying that God causally exerts itself not only to bring about the existence of finite particulars, but also to nomologically overwrite them in a structurally causal fashion. Most notably at E1P26, E1P29 and E1p29Dem –

A thing which has been determined to produce an effect has necessarily been determined in this way by God; and one which has not been determined by God cannot determine itself to produce an effect. (E1P26)

In nature there I 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. Dem.: 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… 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 God, then (by P26) it is impossible, not contingent, that they should determine themselves. (E1P29 & E1P29Dem)

Each mode is incapable of determining ‘itself to produce an effect’, as E1P26 puts it. It is only the determination of God which allows them to produce effects – i.e. to enter into entailment and causal relations. I would suggest that this can be understood as God being active as a structural cause. One might object that God ‘determines’ modes to produce effects only in the sense that he is the originator of causal chains which obtain between the finite modes. On this reading, Spinoza’s God would ‘determine’ the modes to produce effects only in the sense of lending motion and causal structure to the previously immobile members of a now active causal chain. This deflationary reading is not quite compatible with Spinoza’s insistence that God determines the finite modes to produce effects ‘in a certain way’ (on such a reading the ‘in a certain way’ clause would be otiose).

It also does not sit well with Spinoza’s note of caution that ‘God cannot properly be called the remote cause of singular things… For by a remote cause we understand one which is not conjoined in any way with its effect’ (E1P28Schol). This denial of the separability of cause and effect brings us on to Spinoza’s rejection of abstract causation.

**6. 2) Rejection of Abstract Causation**

As I claimed above, structural causation entails a rejection of a conventional, abstract understanding of the operation of causal laws. If Spinoza did hold to 1), we should then expect evidence of his holding 2), a rejection of abstractly understood causal relations. We do in fact find this, in *On the Improvement of the Understanding*. Spinoza writes –

as all things that exist in nature are connected with each other, the ideas of these objects are also connected with each other . . . in order to reproduce nature exactly, [we must] derive all of our ideas from the idea which represents the origin and source of all nature and which is the proper starting point of all other ideas. (Spinoza 1958: 14)

This is a natural rationalist commitment. What exercises us here is that Spinoza correctly links connections between objects (and their ideational essences) with the originative idea from which they derive (namely, God). God must give a guarantee and explanation of the causal and ideational connections which obtain between particulars. This does not, as yet, point us towards the theory of structural causality; it only informs us that God must provide an explanation of nomological content. This is a feature of any cogent reading of Spinoza. However, in *On the Improvement of the Understanding* Spinoza gives cause to believe that these causal laws should be understood in a non-abstract fashion -

There is little danger that our knowledge of the origin of nature will be confused by abstractions. What is conceived abstractly, *as are all universals*, *always extends further in the mind than its particular exemplifications in reality.* . . . But the first principle of nature, as we will see later, can neither be conceived abstractly nor as a universal, nor can it be extended in the mind further than in reality. (Spinoza 1958: 28, emphasis mine)

Note that Spinoza’s specific complaint here is that abstractions ‘overshoot’ the real; by virtue of being extensionally indiscriminate, they apply too broad a brush to the world. Now, the first principle is God; which, Spinoza, claims cannot be extended in the mind further than in reality. Hence, God is in no way abstract, and his causal behaviour (including, by implication, the causal laws he generates) can in no way be conceived of as abstract. As we have seen earlier in our discussion of Althusser, a non-abstract account of causal laws derives naturally from a theory of structural causality, and is not compatible with a linear account of causal laws.

We can also find similar rejections of abstract causation in the *Short Treatise*, where Spinoza discusses immanent causation. He writes –

[Reason, in response to Desire’s claim that the cause is external to its effects] Your assertion, then, is *that the cause (since it is the Originator of the effects*) *must therefore be outside these*. But you say this because you only know of the *transeunt* and not of the *immanent cause* (Spinoza 1910: 34)

[Erasmus, to Theophilus] you have said, *that the effect of the immanent cause remains united with its cause in such a way that together they constitute a whole*. (Spinoza 1910: 34)

5. The freest cause of all, and that which is most appropriate to God, is the immanent: for the effct of this cause depends on it in such a way that it can neither be, nor be understood without it, nor is it subjected to any other cause: it is, moreover, united with it insuch a way that together they form one whole. (Spinoza 1910: 147)

Here we see that the condition of the intelligibility of the cause and effect of immanent causation requires a non-abstract understanding of that relation. The cause must rather be understood as acting specifically on particular objects.

It should be admitted here that immanent causation remains a vexed issue in Spinoza interpretation, and so it is not immediately clear as to whether immanent causation’s being non-abstract strengthens a structurally causal reading in particular. However, recent sophisticated work on immanent causation is itself compatible with a structurally causal reading. At E1P18, Spinoza gives the following gloss on the difference between immanent and transitive causation –

God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things. Dem.: Everything that is, is in God, and must be conceived through God (by P15), and so (by P16C1) God is the cause of [all] things which are in him . . . God, therefore, is the immanent, not the transitive cause of all things. Q.e.d.

Yitzhak Melamed (2006: 44) interprets this passage as showing that *causa immanens* merges the ‘in God’ claim of E1P15 with efficient causation. A puzzle which is introduced here is that Spinoza moves to render efficient causation an internal cause –

Spinoza claims, “I take it that an efficient cause can be internal as well as external” (Ep. 60). Spinoza’s reasons for this expansion of the notion of efficient causality are not quite clear. One may think that this expansion was motivated by the need to make God the efficient cause of the modes (which are *internal* to God). (Melamed 2006: 45)

I think Melamed’s proposed reasoning for Spinoza’s allowing efficient causality to operate as an internal cause is likely correct. But this is equally compatible with the structural causation reading as it is with the inherence reading which Melamed advocates; God is the internally efficient cause of the finite particulars by virtue of efficiently nomologically overwriting these particulars in order to allow them to continue to exist as nomologically responsive, causally ordered collections of causal states. And this, also, would be compatible with 1) and 2).

**7. Conclusion**

The inherence and causal dependence readings of E1P15 both have clear strengths, yet each seem to have a significant drawback with relation to quantifiable individuals and causal relations, and immanent causation and the naturata/naturans relationship respectively. This provides motivation to consider a further means of interpreting Spinoza’s account of the relationship between finite modes and God. I have suggested here that a structural causality reading appears able to obviate the drawbacks of both of the extant readings, as it allows us to jointly maintain ontologically diverse quantifiable individuals, and the collapse of the naturata/ naturans distinction. While Spinoza’s texts cannot directly recommend any of the candidate interpretations of the relationship between particulars and God, they are clearly compatible with the structural causality reading, and at points appear to invite it.

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1. I am grateful to the editorial staff of the *EJP*, and the anonymous referee reports which this paper has received. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I will refer to the *Ethics* by adopting the convention of abbreviating reference to it parts in the following way – the first numeral given picks out the section of the *Ethics*, this numeral then being followed by A (for axiom), P (for proposition), D (for definition), Schol (for scholium) or Dem (for demonstration).For example, E1P28Schol refers to the scholium to proposition 28 of section 1 of the *Ethics*. The edition I am using is Spinoza 1996. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jonathan Schaffer’s priority monism, for example, has a great deal in common with this reading of Spinoza. Schaffer is more than aware of this parallel with Spinoza – see, for example, Schaffer 2010: 68 – 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘[T]he thing extended and the thing thinking are either attributes of God or (Ax. 1) affections of the attributes of God’ (E1P14CorII); ‘Apart from God no substance can be or be conceived . . . Now modes cannot be or conceived without substance; therefore, they can be only in the divine nature and can be conceived only through the divine nature’ (E1P15Dem). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See further Nadler 2008: 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In what follows, I will use Bennett and Curley as stand-ins for the inherence and causal dependence readings respectively in order to give an efficient thumb-nail of the interpretive landscape with regards to E1P15. There are of course other important writers who fall into each of these camps, although I take them to be sufficiently similar as to fall under the descriptive and critical remarks I address to these two interpretations. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It is a measure of the inconclusiveness of Bennett’s reading that it is at least in part bolstered by claims about the ‘boldness’ of Spinoza’s character, and his being prone to ‘a kind of recklessness’, the grounds for which are not clear (Bennett 2001:145). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. # Judah Abravanel and Abraham Cohen Herrera were two highly influential Neo-Platonists of Spinoza’s time. The former’s *Dialogies of Love* was present in Spinoza’s library. Contact with the latter is more difficult to fix, but see further, Beltrán2016*.*

   [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Though this is far from beyond dispute; for arguments against this position with relation to the Sefer Yetzirah, for example, see Scholem 1974: 26, and for arguments in favour see Baeck 1926 & 1934, and Scholem’s own later Scholem 1987: 29n.46. As John C. Poirer (2010: 149n.7) points out, the controversy over Proclus does little to dislodge the general neo-Platonic tenor of much of the Kabbalah. Indeed, Scholem (1996: 114) himself concedes neo-platonic influence more broadly in the Kabbalah. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This system is of course developed throughout his *Elements of Theology*, but Proclus 1987: 82 serves as a quick thumbnail of his account. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. A question raised here is why God’s attributes and immediate infinite modes necessarily produce finite particulars; it is prima facie logically possible for immediate infinite modes to exist without finite particular modes. Indeed, Caird (1888: 142 – 151) takes this to be a deep problem for Spinoza. For a response to this problem, see Melamed 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Nadler (2008: 60) argues that Spinoza’s claim ‘all of God’s attributes are immutable’ (E1P20C), “does not mean that there is and can be no change in God; rather, it is a claim about the permanence and the nature of each attribute”. However, recall that Bennett identifies each attribute with its existence as an unbounded region. Given this – per E1P25 – God would have to cause each particular adjectival modification to each attribute via the nature or essence of that attribute; and so this would involve a mutability of the essences of these attributes (as their expression would embrace temporal variation in adjectival modification). And so Nadler’s argument, even if we accept it, does not aid Bennett, here. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. It was collaboratively authored by Althusser, Balibar, Macherey and Jacques Ranciere. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Again, I should note that Althusser is here considering social ontology; but I am here transposing his discussion back into the Spinozist metaphysical framework from which it is drawn. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. # Specifically, Spinoza refers to God as an ‘emanative cause’ (Spinoza 1910: 41, 91). This use of the term is likely derived from Suarez, rather than Neo-Platonist sources. On this, see Freudenthal 1887 and Lennon 2005: 27.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. As Spinoza might equally well be referring simply to the immediate infinite mode’s role in generating motion and rest. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. E.g. EIIIP6 & EIII7. For a fuller account of Spinoza’s theory of essences, see Martin 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)